

# JOYFUL

KNOWING  
THE  
CONTENT  
LIFE

May 10, 2020

## Joy Together – Philippians 2:12-30

Q: How does focusing on others rather than yourself bring joy?

### TALKING POINT

We can find joy in shining the light of Christ to the world.

Q: What does it mean to “work out your own salvation with fear and trembling”?

Q: How does that relate to, “It is God who is working in you”?

Q: Why do followers of Jesus shine like stars in a dark world?

When Paul says that Christians are lights to the world, he isn't saying that Christians simply show the world an alternative way of living. Paul wants Christians to see that it's not merely about conduct, it's about hope. It's about life. The way to true life, to receive rescue from sin and death, is through Jesus. Jesus is the way to security, hope, rescue, and eternal life. Because Jesus is the hope of the world, Christians use their lives to show the observing world where hope and life are found.

When Paul talks about obedience, it's not just about following rules. Obedience is not defined in legal terms but in *relational* terms. It's about following Jesus, following in His footsteps, being like Him in His humility and self-sacrificial love. Paul describes this obedience as “working out your own salvation with fear and trembling” (v. 12). Many have pointed to this verse as evidence for a works-based righteousness, but in the very next verse, Paul says, “It is God who is working in you” (v. 13). As Christians work out their salvation, they are not *achieving* it but rather *displaying* the proof of it as God works in them. Paul's point here is that once grace saves us, grace continues to work in us. This is the truth from John 15. When we abide in the vine, we bear fruit. What is inwardly true produces outward manifestations of that truth.<sup>1</sup>

This “working out” that takes place happens with fear and trembling. Paul is not saying to be afraid of God, always unsure of where you stand with Him as you seek His approval. This phrase describes someone who stands in awe of God and approaches Him with great reverence, as the priests approached God throughout the Old Testament (Exodus 3:5; 1 Samuel 12:24; Hebrews 12:28). The rituals surrounding entering the temple, where God's presence dwelled, were extensive. Now that God's Spirit dwells in His children, we know that God's Spirit works and moves in and through the life of the Christian. This should make us live *our whole lives* in reverent awe.

This is how the gospel shines through us. Believers don't shine the light of the gospel by depending on their own efforts to live good lives. But when we are humbled by the fact that His Spirit works in us, our lives point to His grace, not our works. The more deeply we know God and know He is at work in us, the more we shine the light of the gospel.

Hebrews 12 explains that it was for joy that Christ endured the cross and the shame that came with it. The writer also described Jesus as the author and perfecter of our faith. This is the example that Paul exhorts Christians toward

<sup>1</sup> Richard R. Melick, Philippians, Colossians, Philemon, *The New American Commentary* vol. 32 (Nashville: Broadman Press, 1991), 110.

in verses 14–16, “Do everything without grumbling and arguing.” Jesus went to the cross without complaining or even defending Himself against the scorn and mockery (1 Peter 2:22–23). How will the church show unity if we are constantly bickering and complaining? Relational disputes and complaining don’t shine the light of the gospel. They project a negative image to the world.

“Be blameless and pure, children of God who are faultless in a crooked and perverted generation” (v. 15). Don’t let the ways of the world taint the body of Christ. When we live like Jesus in the midst of this crooked and twisted generation, we will shine like stars. When we live differently than the world around us, people will take notice. But remember, this purity and innocence doesn’t come from our own strength; it comes from the Holy Spirit working in us. The life of the Christian shines a light to the world because it points to Christ, not the Christian.

“Holding firm to the word of life.” We must hold fast to the gospel, to the truth of God’s Word. Not just knowing it and teaching it but living it out. Paul exhorts these Philippian Christians to live a life of joy, a life of holiness, a life that proclaims the hope of the gospel. A life that stands on God’s Word.

Then Paul describes the joy he has found in offering his own life to the Lord. Just as Jesus offered His life for others, Paul offered his as well. Just as Jesus “emptied himself,” Paul was “poured out as a drink offering.” He wrote in chapter one, “To live is Christ and to die is gain” (Philippians 1:21). Paul understood that the Christian calling is one of sacrifice and service in love (John 13:35). This is how the life of a Christians shines as a gospel light in and for the world. The church shines when it seeks to serve the world like Christ.

Paul encouraged the believers to be glad and rejoice with him, because serving others with Christlike sacrifice is evidence of the gospel that cannot be ignored. Selfless, sacrificial love is so different from the selfish ambition of the world that the world takes notice when people lay down their lives in service to others. Paul found joy in his suffering because it brought glory to Christ—because his life wasn’t about himself, it was about Christ, about loving God and loving others. Because he had a mindset of humility and a heart completely focused on the mission above his own personal comfort or success, Paul found joy in anything that brought people to Jesus, anything that built the kingdom of God, even his own suffering.

In a world where most people are discontent and thinking about their own needs first, Paul challenges us to think differently through his own example and the example of Christ. He challenges us to live in contentment and joy, no matter our circumstances, and to live in unity and joy by putting others’ needs ahead of our own. The mission God has called all His children to is not easy, but it is possible through His indwelling presence and totally worth it. True joy comes through seeking the kingdom of God first, above all else (Matthew 6:33), and serving others in humility (Luke 22:26).

Q: What are some common ways people try to achieve their own salvation?

Q: How can we rely on God’s Spirit to work in us?

Q: How do the example of Christ and of Paul act as an antidote for the temptation to grumble and complain?

Q: Looking around at what is going on in the world right now, how can the church shine the light of Jesus? How can we “look different” from the world in a way that reflects Him, His love, and His humility?

Q: How is it possible for believers to experience joy in the midst of sacrifice?

Read Philippians 2:19–30.

## TALKING POINT

We can find joy in giving our lives for the gospel.

Q: What was so special about how Timothy and Epaphroditus served the mission? How does Paul's description of them connect to his earlier description of how the Philippians should live?

Q: Why do we rejoice in the ministries of those who have risked a lot for the gospel?

Q: What does their willingness to risk it all teach us about our faith?

When Paul mentions joy in this section, it is in the context of welcoming Timothy and Epaphroditus, whom Paul was sending to help lead them in the faith. Paul offered them up to the Philippians as two great examples of Christlikeness. These are two men who truly shined the light of the gospel. They were faithful servants of Christ who were fully devoted to advancing the gospel, willing to risk it all for the mission. Timothy faithfully cared for the Christians at Philippi, and Epaphroditus faithfully suffered for the gospel, almost to the point of death. Their lives serve as confirmation of all Paul has been saying. We can find ultimate joy in suffering and in giving our all for the gospel. We can find ultimate joy in living completely and fully for Jesus, in humbly giving our lives for others, whether in the way we live or even the way we die.

This passage begins what is known as Paul's "travelogue."<sup>2</sup> While away, Paul intended to send Timothy—his dear companion and co-worker in ministry, his "true child in the faith" (1 Timothy 1:2)—to the church in Philippi. The words used for "proven character" mean character that is formed through suffering and trial. Though the Philippians already knew Timothy, Paul held him up as an example of faithfulness and as one who would excel in caring for the believers in this church. Paul said Timothy would "genuinely care" for their welfare. The word "genuinely" in Greek implies a familial kind of love. The word used for "care" describes a level of concern that went deep into his soul. Timothy yearned for their growth and faithfulness in Christlikeness like a father in the faith, like a true shepherd of the flock.

Timothy was not like Paul's opponents, who were motivated by selfish ambition. His concern for the Philippians was not a ploy to gain money or fame. He was motivated completely by his depth of character, devotion to Christ, and true pastoral love for them. The Philippians could rejoice in Timothy's care for them and also see him as a model for how to treat one another with selfless love and humility. When we have pastors and ministry leaders who love us like this, we can rejoice too. Throughout the Bible and through all of church history there have been bad leaders of God's people, who have used the flock for their own gain instead of loving and caring for them as a good shepherd (Ezekiel 34). In Jesus's ministry, He railed against the Pharisees for treating His people that way (Matthew 23). Paul was commending Timothy to the Philippians as a good shepherd, a faithful leader of God's people.

Then Paul commended his messenger, Epaphroditus, for two things, his faithful companionship to Paul and his faithful service to the gospel. Paul addressed him as a brother, a coworker, a fellow soldier, a messenger, and a minister. "Brother" is a common reference Paul makes in his letters to fellow believers (more than 130 times), but it is usually in the plural or in a general way, "our brother." Here, Paul made a unique use, saying, "my brother." The words Paul used to commend Epaphroditus show a deep friendship and faithful service to one another and to the gospel of Jesus.

Again, the Philippians knew Epaphroditus well, as they did Timothy. He had a special, dear relationship with the Philippian church, perhaps as a native to the city (vv. 26–27). Paul described how, in his sickness, Epaphroditus was concerned for the Philippian church. Even in suffering, he was not primarily worried about himself but was concerned about his fellow believers. This word for "distressed" is an intense word. Its only other use in the New

Testament is when Jesus was in the garden of Gethsemane, so troubled that he sweated blood (Matthew 26:37;

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<sup>2</sup> Richard R. Melick, *Philippians, Colossians, Philemon, The New American Commentary vol. 32* (Nashville: Broadman Press, 1991), 116.

Mark 14:33; Luke 22:44).<sup>3</sup> As Paul called the Philippians to bear one another's burdens, sharing the weight of ministry and hardships in the Christian life, Epaphroditus remained committed to this calling above all else.

Paul used the struggle of Epaphroditus as an example of faithful service for the gospel. Epaphroditus had been ill and nearly died. His selfless service embodied the words of Christ when He exhorted His listeners, "If anyone wants to follow after me, let him deny himself, take up his cross, and follow me. For whoever wants to save his life will lose it, but whoever loses his life because of me and the gospel will save it" (Mark 8:35). Epaphroditus courageously risked everything, even his own life, to pursue the mission of building the kingdom of God.<sup>4</sup> For Paul, true honor was deserved when people followed in the footsteps of Jesus. The Philippians could rejoice in welcoming and honoring Epaphroditus because he was a true follower of Jesus, willing to risk everything for the gospel.

Timothy and Epaphroditus both gave their lives for the gospel, but in different ways. Timothy offered his life as a *living* sacrifice by giving his all as a pastor and apostle for the flocks in his care. Epaphroditus also offered his life for the gospel, almost dying for it. The call to give your life for the gospel is not necessarily a call to be a martyr, to die for your faith. It may be for some of us, but for most of it is a call to offer our bodies as a living sacrifice to God (Romans 12:1–2), to offer all we are and all we have in service to the Lord for the advancement of the gospel. This is how we find true joy, not in pursuing selfish ambition but in giving our lives away. For, as Jesus said, "Whoever wants to save his life will lose it, but whoever loses his life because of me will find it" (Matthew 16:25).

Q: Why is it hard to want to offer ourselves? Why don't we want to risk it all?

Q: Do you think you could risk it all for the gospel? Why or why not?

Q: Why is offering ourselves as living sacrifices the way to find true joy?

Q: In what ways is God calling you to offer your life as a living sacrifice for Him? What would your life look like if you were to give yourself completely to God, as a living sacrifice to Him?

## APPLICATION

- That you would follow in Jesus's footsteps in every way.
- That your life would shine the love of Jesus like a light in the darkness.
- That God would show you how to live for Him right now, in this moment.
- For God to fill you with true joy that lasts forever, no matter your circumstances.

## ACT

**Find Joy with others.** Think of a way you can experience joy with others this coming week. Be creative!

<sup>3</sup> Tony Merida and Francis Chan, *Exalting Jesus in Philippians, Christ-Centered Exposition Commentary* (Holman Reference, 2016), 125.

<sup>4</sup> G. Walter Hansen, *The Letter to the Philippians, The Pillar New Testament Commentary* (Grand Rapids, MI: Zondervan, 2009), 209.