

Living with a Sense of Joy, Galatians 2:19b-20 "I have been crucified with Christ"

Adapted from: "Christmas Joy" by T. Michael Crews @ SermonCentral.Com

The other day I came across a collection of letters that children had written to Santa Claus. Some of them were pretty good. One said, "*Dear Santa, you did not bring me anything good last year. You did not bring me anything good the year before that. This is your last chance. Signed, Alfred.*"

My favorite went like this: "*Dear Santa, there are three little boys who live at our house. There is Jeffrey; he is 2. There is David; he is 4. And there is Norman; he is 7. Jeffrey is good some of the time. David is good some of the time. But Norman is good all of the time. I am Norman.*"

The Christmas season does come with so many sometimes unfulfilled expectations doesn't it. If you could use one word to describe Christmas, what word would it be?

Some folks would use words like headache, busyness, expensive, bothersome or even depressing to describe the day we are supposedly celebrating the birth of our Lord and Savior. How sad that an event that brought so much joy in Heaven should bring so little joy here on earth.



On this third Sunday of Advent having lit the candle of JOY, I would like to suggest that this Christmas season can be a time of JOY, no matter how broke or how busy or how alone you feel.

Because JOY is like love, it is not merely an emotion but a decision that we have to make. Happiness may be a momentary response to good events, but JOY only comes with intention regardless of whether the events are good or bad.

I believe you can be as JOYFUL as you want to be, regardless of your circumstances; it's all in where you choose to put your focus. If you really want to have joy this Christmas season, let me suggest 3 places to focus your heart and mind.

First we need to FOCUS ON JESUS (Gal. 2:20)

Let's let Linus remind us of what Christmas is all about.

(In the Peanuts Christmas TV special, Charlie Brown asks if anyone knows what Christmas is really about. So Linus recites to him the story of Christ's birth from Luke 2.) https://www.youtube.com/watch?v=Wp5AGte_4Q

Have we forgotten that Christmas is not primarily about us -- our family, friends, church, presents -- but about Jesus?

One Christmas afternoon a visitor asked five-year-old Ruth, "Did you get everything you wanted for Christmas?" After a moment's hesitation, she answered, "No, but then it's not my birthday!"

It is so easy to get wrapped up in the hectic pace of this season we forget it is not our birthday; that we are supposed to be celebrating the birth of Jesus? For reasons of its own, the world intentionally tries very hard to obscure this birthday celebration for God's Son. But even without buying into the world's ways, we can also forget what Christmas is all about by forgetting why Jesus had to be born.

If you are a Christian, focusing on Jesus means that you not only remember our Savior in the manger, but also our Savior on the Cross, and our Savior now living in your heart. Remember that this baby grew up and went to the Cross to pay for your sins, that He rose again to assure you of a new life, and that **He lives in your heart today to give you joy!**

**I am crucified with Christ
it is no longer I who live,
but it is Christ who lives in me.**

And the life I now live in the flesh
I live by faith in the Son of God,
who loved me and gave himself for me.

Galatians 2:20

Today's scripture describes the surprising spiritual reality in which we now live because Jesus was born into our world. First that in a real spiritual sense we both died and then were restored to life with Christ's death in our behalf and his subsequent return to life. But as this scripture goes on to recount, Jesus is not just living in heaven but he is also through the indwelling Holy Spirit now living within us – not only to guarantee our salvation but to encourage, strengthen, and give us JOY in this life.

Paul calls this new spiritual reality that Christ has come to live within us - **our hope for glory** (Colossians 1:27). One of Jesus' prophetically given names was "**Emanuel**" meaning "God with us." Now we Christians know that "God is with us" because God lives in us – with all the present and future hope that HE now gives us. Knowing that nothing that this life throws at us can separate us from God's love, This should fill us with joy!

II. So in order to experience this sense of Joy not just at Christmas but all year long, we need first to focus on Jesus, but second we need to **FOCUS ON OTHERS** (Acts 20:35)

When we focus on Jesus we will quickly learn that He expects us – as our act of worship – to be focusing our lives on serving others in His name; this is the secret to living joyfully! As Paul wrote to one of his young church plants in the book of Acts...

I have given you an example
that by such work we must support the weak,
remembering the words of the Lord Jesus, for he himself said,
"It is more blessed to give than to receive." '
Acts 20:35

Paul quotes Jesus here to point out the JOY of generosity. Christmas is the time we celebrate the most wonderful gift God has generously given us - Jesus. God's focus in giving Christ to the world was His love for others, and He gave this example for us to now follow. **Joy does not come from getting all we can get from others, but in giving all we can give to others. It is this focus on others that will bring us joy.** If you want to know joy at Christmas, then discover the joy of giving.

Jesus said whatever you do to the least of these, you do for Him. So, if you want joy this Christmas, find someone in need, and in the name of Christ, give to them of your time and your treasures. There are plenty of lonely, needy people, and the Holy Spirit will show them to you, if you are willing to look for them. The Bible says that you will find joy there by focusing on others instead of yourself.

1. So to develop this sense of JOY that can last us all year, we first focus on what Christ has both done for us -- obtaining our forgiveness and rebirth into God's family -- and what he promises yet to do for us – to bring us home to live in God's family forever.
2. Next as Ambassadors for Christ, we focus on what we can do for others. Finding the last, the least, the lost and becoming Christ for them.
3. And finally, third, **FOCUSING ON YOURSELF**

Yes, after focusing on Christ and others, there is then the need to focus on yourself. Your own attitudes determine whether or not you will experience joy this year.

You can let worry, stress, unforgiveness, or discouragement rob you of this sense of JOY that Jesus would give you.

Everyone struggles sometimes, but please understand - attitude is not automatic. You choose to allow whatever attitudes are currently ruling your life. How do I know? Because the Bible both commands us not to allow certain ATTITUDES to rule our lives, but to cultivate other ATTITUDES that will do soand God would not command us to do what we cannot (in His strength) do.

Do you struggle with Worry?

Do not worry about anything,
but in everything by prayer
and supplication with thanksgiving
let your requests be made known to God.
Philippians 4:6

Unforgiveness?

be kind to one another,
tender-hearted, forgiving one another,
as God in Christ has forgiven you.
Ephesians 4:32

Discouragement?

Now may our Lord Jesus Christ himself
and God our Father, who loved us
and through grace gave us eternal comfort and good hope,
comfort your hearts and **strengthen them
in every good work and word.**
2 Thessalonians 2:16,17

Did you notice the condition required for our comfort and strength?
The path out of discouragement is found in doing good for someone else. Yes this
seems like *pulling yourself up by your own bootstraps*, but never forget that Jesus will
be pulling with you.

Depression?

whatever is true, whatever is honorable,
whatever is just, whatever is pure,
whatever is pleasing, whatever is commendable,
if there is any excellence and
if there is anything worthy of praise,
think about these things.
Keep on doing the things that you have learned
and received and heard and seen in me,
and the God of peace will be with you.
Philippians 4:8-9

In all these verses, did you notice the emphasis on **your thinking & doing** in order to experience God's peace, comfort, joy?

The fact is, you can be full of faith, or full of doubt.
Full of the Spirit's joy or full of the world's woe.
Its largely your choice.

Consider your thoughts -- listen to your words -- watch your actions -- and ask yourself-
do I have the joy of the Lord, or am I wallowing in the mud hole of my own tears?

And If I don't have the joy of the Lord, what can I be doing to help me get it back?

A small boy in the pew in front of you suddenly turns around and gives you a huge smile. He looks from person to person, his smile stretching all the way back to those in the back pew. He isn't gurgling, spitting, humming, tearing apart the hymnbooks, or rummaging through his mother's purse. He is just smiling.

Suddenly, his mother jerks him around, and with a stage whisper that everyone can hear, she says, "*Stop grinning. You're in church.*" With that she gives him a slap on his backside, and as the tears roll down his cheeks she adds, "*That's better.*"

While humorous... I fear the honesty behind this story. Church is not always thought of as a place where we can smile, Christians these days are not considered JOYOUS people. Rather we are thought of as being rule bound, legalistic, and unloving. And the only way we can now show ourselves as being otherwise ... is by being otherwise.

Nehemiah told the people

Do not mourn or weep ... For the Joy of the Lord is your strength Nehemiah 8:8-9
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God has a gift for you this Christmas -- it is the joy that you unwrap by focusing on Jesus, others, and then yourself. You are the only person who can decide to be joyful this year! Don't wait until December 25 to unwrap this gift- open it now and enjoy it!