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THE ALIEN LIFE

John 17:13-19

In his book, *The Tipping Point*, Malcolm Gladwell reported on a very interesting psychological study. A large group of students was recruited for what they were told was a market research study on behalf of a company that makes high tech headphones. They were told the company wanted to find out how well the headphones worked while the user was moving. Wearing the headphones the students all listened to the same group of songs as well as a radio editorial arguing that the tuition at their university should be raised by nearly 28%. They were divided into 3 groups. One group was told to keep their heads still as they listened. They were the control group. A second group was told to move their heads from side to side while listening. The third group was told to move their heads up and down while listening. Those two groups were told they were simulating various movements. After their session using the headphones they were given a questionnaire that asked a number of questions about the quality of the sound in the headphones. Then there was a seemingly unrelated question at the end. The last question asked what they thought the tuition should be at their university. The study wasn’t market research at all. It had nothing to do with the headphones. The last question was all the researchers were interested in. What they found was that the control group, those who listened without moving their heads, were totally unmoved by the editorial they’d heard and they thought on average the tuition should stay right about where it was. Those who shook their heads from side to side strongly disagreed with the editorial about tuition and felt the tuition should not be raised, but lowered an average of about 20%. The group that nodded their heads agreed that the tuition should be raised, on average about 10%. The simple act of either shaking or nodding their heads affected their thinking and caused them to hear the message of the editorial negatively or positively depending on how they were moving!

The surprising conclusion from that study was that actions we take can influence what we think and feel. Simply nodding one’s head can cause one to be more positive about something the person is listening to. This is significant because in Philippians 4:4 Paul instructed believers to rejoice in the Lord always. That is a command, meaning we have a choice about whether we rejoice. We can choose to be joyful. That study makes me think maybe there are some things we can chose to do that will help us be joyful. I suppose we could go around continually nodding our heads to make us more positive, but that’s not very practical, and maybe there are some other things that would be more effective. In John 17:13-19 we will see that there are indeed some things that can enable us to be more joyful.

JESUS DESIRES THAT WE HAVE GREAT JOY

Joy has been a significant theme in Jesus’ comments to his disciples that last night of his life. In John 15:11 he taught them so that his joy would be in them and their joy would be complete. In 16:22 he said they were going to have joy and no one would be able to take their joy away. In 16:24 he spoke again of joy being complete. In 17:13 he prayed that “they may have the full measure of my joy within them.”

We’ve spent considerable time on the idea of joy in studying these words of Jesus, but we should observe how great an emphasis he put on joy in his final words to his followers. It is easy to forget that Jesus taught that joy was crucial characteristic for his disciples. It is a big deal. Unfortunately, in the pressure of life we easily lose track of it. I suspect most people don’t associate Jesus with joy, and they don’t think of the result of believing in him as joy. Yet Jesus put a big emphasis on us having his joy in us, and that joy being totally full.

Verse 13 translates the joy being to the “full measure.” That is a translation of a word that derives from the Greek noun *pleres*. It meant overflowing, rich fullness, complete filling to satisfaction. You have to be very old to remember Howard Cosell. He was a famous broadcaster back 50 years ago who had a pompous manner. He played a key role in making Monday Night Football wildly popular. I remember him for using the term “a veritable plethora.” In his accented, arrogant, staccato manner he would say things like, “They lost this game because of a veritable plethora of foolish mistakes.” The word plethora is derived from the Greek word used in this verse. It means a superabundance of something, an overflowing amount. Jesus wanted his followers, including us, to have a veritable plethora of joy, an overflowing superabundance of it. He didn’t want us to have a little joy. He wanted us to be flooded with it, not just on occasion, but as a characteristic trait.

The late Leander Keck, a New Testament scholar who served as the dean of Yale Divinity School, said, “A joyless Christianity is a sure sign that something is amiss.” Novelist N. D. Wilson says Christians should be the proclaimers of joy. He says, “We speak in this world on behalf of the one who made lightning and snowflakes and eggs…Not to be harsh, but if we did really mean it, we would be having a lot more fun than we are…A dolphin flipping through the sun beyond the surf, a falcon in a dive, a mutt in the back of a truck, flying his tongue like a flag of joy. These all reflect the Maker more wholly than many of our endorsed thinkers, theologians and churchgoers.”

Recall what James said about facing trials. What is to be our attitude? When you encounter various trials he said in James 1:1, “Consider it all joy.” That is not the natural instinct. My natural reaction to trials is stress, frustration, annoyance. But James said for a follower of Jesus it should be joy.

Former Governor Mike Huckabee told about a friend of his who is a pastor who does an unusual thing when he faces some daunting difficulty. He invites friends over to his house for a “count it all joy” party. His friend says, “I know this difficulty is going to bring something of special value to my life.” He goes on to say he doesn’t usually know what it will be, but he knows God will make something good out of it, so he celebrates and counts it all joy. That is how much joy should be a constant aspect of our character in Christ.

Unfortunately we easily forget where joy comes from. David wrote in Psalm 16:11 that fullness of joy is found in God’s presence. Noted 20th century British priest, Bernard Vaughn said, “Happiness of heart can no more be attained without God than light and sunshine can be had without the sun.”

God is the creator and source of joy and is more characterized by joy than anyone or anything else in existence. If we are going to live with joy, as Vaughn said, we will have to tap into him. C. S. Lewis said a car is designed to be run on gasoline. Of course, he lived before Tesla came along and popularized the electric vehicle. But let’s update his analogy. Suppose you have an electric car and you run out of charge. What is going to happen if you try to pump some gas into it to get it going again? It is not going to work. Gas can never power an electric car. Lewis said just so, we were designed to find peace and joy in God. Whatever else we stick in our system is not going to provide what we need. As only an electric charge can provide the power a Tesla needs to run, so only God can provide the plethora of lasting joy we need.

It’s easy for me to understand how knowing a person can produce joy. I just look at the effect of Laurie on our grandchildren. Last week Laurie helped take care of our grandsons, Wesley and Hunter for a couple of days. I saw the reaction as soon as she walked in the door of their house. Everybody got happy. There were cries of “Nana, Nana!” and big smiles. I also saw what happened at the end of the day when Laurie left. Hunter fell down on the floor wailing in abject misery because Nana was leaving. The joy had gone out of life for him. So it is for us. David was right, joy is found in the presence of God, for there we have his joy, his love, his peace, his care and guidance for us every moment of every day. There we have acceptance, value, grace, meaning and that brings joy to our souls.

But there are some other things that Jesus proceeds to say in these verses that help us to experience that joy.

JESUS DESIRES THAT WE BE OTHER WORLDLY

Speaking of his followers, in verse 14 Jesus said, “The world has hated them, for *they are not of this world* anymore than I am of the world.” In verse 16 he repeated that statement, “They are not of this world even as I am not of it.” Jesus claimed that he was not of this world and that his followers are not either.

Wait, what? Not of this world? Jesus claimed his followers are extra terrestrials? Where did they come from, the planet Munimula? Did they get here on those UFO’s that we hear about? Are they dangerous? Is this like the invasion of the body snatchers? Or maybe it’s the day the earth stood still, or the war of the worlds.

We have a problem with that statement. My problem is, that’s not true of me. I am very much of this world. This world is the only one we have ever known. It is a physical world, and we are physical people. We hurt in this world when we get sick or injured or we suffer some painful loss. We have hopes in this world, hopes for love and acceptance and fulfillment right here in this life. Yes, we know that we have hope in the next life, but honestly, that is a pretty much intellectual thing because that life is not tangible to us, not accessible to our senses, so we only have faith to go by. When in this world we don’t have power, love, possessions, health, it becomes difficult for us. Most of our hopes and dreams are tied to this world. So it seems as though we are very much of this world.

If we were truly not of this world we’d be quite different, wouldn’t we? We have a friend who is a reminder of what this means. Our friend was the son of missionaries to Pakistan. He grew up living in Pakistan and only came back to the USA to go to college. He was not really of this country. He had no experience of high school dances and prom. Those things meant nothing to him. Where he lived they didn’t play baseball, football or hockey. He had never gotten up on New Year’s Day and watched the Rose Parade. He had no particular love for Mexican food or for hamburgers and apple pie. He was aware of Major League Baseball, the NFL and the National Hockey League, but he didn’t follow any of them at all. He had no interest whatsoever in what the various teams in those leagues were doing. For him, the Super Bowl was a Super Bore that he wouldn’t bother watching, even for the commercials. He was not of this culture. Over time he assimilated some. How could you not like Mexican food, hamburgers and apple pie? But to this day he has little to no interest in many of the trappings of our culture.

Think about Jesus. He was as human, as physically a part of this world as all of us are. But his *culture* was from another world, from the kingdom of God. In the next chapter in John, after Jesus was arrested, he was taken to be tried by the Roman governor, Pilate. In John 18:33 Pilate asked him, “Are you the king of the Jews?” This was a crucial question. If Jesus claimed to be the king of the Jewish people the Romans would consider him to be guilty of rebellion, for they retained the power to declare who was king and who wasn’t, and he was not their choice. Jesus asked him essentially, “Did you come up with that on your own or did you hear it from somebody else?” Pilate answered, “Am I a Jew?” In other words, why would I come up with that idea? Then Jesus said some crucial words in verse 35, “My kingdom is not of this world. If it were, my servants would fight to prevent my arrest by the Jewish leaders. But now my kingdom is from another place.”

Romans cared only about this world right now, and in their minds there was only one thing that mattered. Power. Having the power to control was paramount. They had to be on top and that meant squashing anyone they deemed to be a threat to that power. Because of that, Romans like Pilate were completely unable to understand Jesus. Yes, Jesus is a king, not just of the Jewish people, but of everything. But he was utterly uninterested in having political power in this world. It meant nothing to him. That’s the key. What meant everything to the Romans meant absolutely nothing to him. It was as uninteresting to him as the World Series was to my friend who grew up in Pakistan. He did not live for power in this world, which made him a complete mystery to Romans. He lived for another kingdom, the kingdom of God, which is ruled by love, grace, peace and joy, which has absolutely nothing to do with the power structures of this world.

We are to be, like Jesus, not of this world. This year is an election year, and there are going to be a lot of people, including Christians, who are going to get tied up in knots about politics. But we are not of this world. Our hearts, our lives, are not bound up with politics. Yes, as responsible citizens we play our role here, but this is not what our lives are about. This is all about this world, and we are about a different kingdom, a different world altogether, where politics means almost nothing.

Harry Blamires, the brilliant British thinker and writer, said in his book, *The Christian Mind*, that all too often Christians have assimilated our culture’s thinking, meaning we have become way too much of this world. He wrote, “Except over a very narrow field of thinking, chiefly touching questions of strictly personal conduct, we Christians in the modern world accept…a frame of reference constructed by the secular mind.”

How will we be different if we are not of this world? We can get an idea by considering what some of the characteristics of our world are. It leaves God out. God is considered irrelevant to what really matters in life, if he even exists at all. In fact, the whole idea of the supernatural, apart from entertainment, is not considered real. Blamires asks us what kind of world we see presented in our culture. Is it, “A world fashioned by God, sustained by God, worried over by God, died for by God?” He says no, what we see depicted is “A self sufficient world. It is a world whose temporality is conclusive and final, whose comprehensiveness of experience embraces all that is and that will ever be. It is a world run by men, possessed by men, dominated by men, its course determined by men.” He’s right. You can notice most of the time at Christmas shows and movies about Christmas have no mention of God. That would be like having a show about aviation without mentioning airplanes.

A second trait of our culture is it only cares about the earthly. The only things that matter are the things that happen right now in this world, the things that have to do with the stuff of this world. In particular, since this life in this world is all there is, the only thing that matters is that we be happy right now in this world. And happiness is derived only from things in this world. Another cultural trait is our society believes there is no truth. Truth becomes whatever you want it to be. It is relative, malleable, something we construct rather than something we only discover. It is not some objective, solid thing that is real and true regardless of how we feel about it. This vacuum of truth leaves us in a place not far different from ancient Rome. If there is no truth, then all that is left is power. Whose version of truth will win? The one with the most power, so power is all.

For us to be not of this world has nothing to do with how we look or dress. Jesus looked like everybody else in his culture, but he was not of this world. Being not of this world means we live for a different kingdom that has different values as Jesus did. It means we see the world through a very different grid, one that is centered on God, that sees him as the ultimate reality, one that sees the spiritual world as very real and the eternal as that which matters most. One which believes in objective truth It is about what we see as most important, what we value, about what we hope for and how we treat other people.

We must tie this idea back to joy, because it turns out to be essential. Ask the question, is the world as dominated by the world’s culture filled with joy? Does it produce joy? It does not. It produces fear, greed, conflict, anxiety, hopelessness and ultimately a terrible emptiness, for nothing means anything. The whole thing is, as Shakespeare said, “A tale told by an idiot, full of sound and fury, signifying nothing.” Joy does not come from being of this world. It comes from being not of this world, for God is with us. He loves us. He created us with meaning. Our lives are going somewhere and mean something. They have purpose and fullness, and we have hope. There is joy in his presence and in his work in our lives and our world because we experience his goodness, love and grace.

When we try to derive joy from this world two things will happen. First we will never find the fullness of joy we are created for and desire. And second, whatever joy we get will be short lived. If we are of this world we will be controlled by the inevitable ups and downs, the wins and losses that are continual in the world. We might have a brief flare of joy, but it will be quickly snuffed out by a tragedy or it will just fade as all circumstantially derived joy does. Last fall Laurie and I were so happy when I was done with cancer treatments. We were ready to celebrate. We had great joy in going to Hawaii for a celebration of no more treatments. It lasted a day. Then we got covid and were sick the entire time we were there. Welcome to the joys of this world.

I do have one word of caution for you though. Living not of this world is joyful, living of this world will not be. However, living not of this world has a consequence. Jesus said the world hated his disciples. It did so because it hated him first, so it naturally hated those who followed him.

This world has what you might think of as an immune system. Our bodies, as we know, have an immune system. That is a complex marvel that identifies threats to the body’s well being and attacks them. Unfortunately, sometimes immune systems go haywire. I have lived throughout my life with an overly sensitive immune system. It sees things that are no danger to my body and misidentifies them as threatening invaders, then sets about destroying them. It sees an innocuous pollen that a normal immune system would completely ignore, but mine thinks it’s some potentially fatal enemy and goes into attack mode, causing symptoms like I’m sick. When the world system encounters people who are not of this world, it responds like that immune system. It sees them as a threat and attacks them. You should not be surprised if you live not of this world that it sees you as a threatening alien invader and goes after you.

That means we have a choice. Option A for us is to be of this world, to be like everyone else. That will be easier because the world won’t see us as a threat. But it also means we won’t have true joy because the world can’t give us joy. Option B is to be not of this world but of the Kingdom of God. That is where we will find real joy. But it has the downside of being attacked by the world’s immune system which will always go after that which is not of this world.

JESUS DESIRES THAT WE BE SPECIAL

In verses 16-17 there is a word that is conspicuous. It is the word “sanctify.” Jesus prayed that the Father would sanctify his followers, us included, and then said that on our behalf he had sanctified himself. I’ve said often before that sanctify is a word that’s a lot more fun to say if you do it with a southern accent and sound like an old time preacher. But it’s not exactly a 21st century Southern California word, although I could see it catching on as surfer lingo. Dude, those waves were sanctified.

There are a number of words used in the Bible that all derive from the same root as the word “sanctify.” Holy, consecrate, sanctuary and others all come from this root. The central idea of the word is to set apart or to make special. When Jesus said he had sanctified himself he meant he had set himself apart from the pursuits that most people go after, and instead he pursued his one great mission in his life. He was reserved for a special purpose. For us to be sanctified means to be set apart, to be special because we are reserved for a mission like Jesus was.

Years ago humorist Dave Barry wrote a column in the newspaper in which, without intending to do so, he illustrated the idea of sanctifying something. He had received a letter from a reader named Dick who had gone with his wife for a visit at her sister’s home. During their stay Dick had taken a shower in the guest bathroom then dried himself off. He said his wife was horrified at what he had done. She said, “You used the Good Towels!” He had made a mistake men often make. He assumed when he got out of the shower the towels hanging in the bathroom were to be used as towels. In fact, Dick’s wife pointed out to him in no uncertain terms that the towels they were supposed to use were not in the bathroom, but in the bedroom. Of course. Why would you think the appropriate towels would be in the bathroom next to the shower? The towel Dick used was intended purely for decoration. Barry advised Dick that he should remember the point of etiquette, which has a basic, underlying principle that men are scum. He said, “I urge you to apologize to your wife’s sister and henceforth show proper respect for her good towels by not treating them as if they were towels.” All of which to say, those good towels in the bathroom were sanctified. They are set apart for a special purpose, not some mundane, ordinary use like drying someone off.

If you are a believer in Jesus you have been sanctified. You have been set apart for a special and noble purpose. This is a purpose that touches and informs everything you are and do. John 1:18 says, “No one has ever seen God. But the one and only son, who is himself God and in closest relationship with the Father, has made him known.” Jesus showed us what God is really like, that he is a God of incredible wisdom, goodness, love, grace, justice, kindness and power.

We are called by Jesus to become like him. That means we are called to that same mission, making God known. Pastor and author Ray Stedman wrote, “What purpose did God have in mind when he made you and me? He made us to be miniature manifestations of his character.” He made us to live so that people could catch a glimpse of what God is like by looking at us!

This is a noble, eternally significant purpose. It doesn’t mean there is some job or career we must pursue. It doesn’t mean there are certain actions we have to do. It is a purpose that exists no matter what job, what career we have. It is a purpose we pursue no matter what actions we are taking. The purpose exists in everything we do. This past week I did work as a pastor, but I also mowed the lawn, helped take care of two of our granddaughters, made initial steps in working on our taxes, got a CT scan, went to a birthday party for a couple of little girls in our neighborhood, and did many other things. In all of those things I was set apart, sanctified. I did many of the same things as people who aren’t sanctified, but I did them for a different reason and with a different attitude and purpose.

Going to the birthday party was interesting because our neighborhood these days is mostly populated by younger families. The party was overrun by little kids. The parents are all gracious to us and friendly, but they are the age of our children, and it is clear that we are a bit of an oddity for them. But that’s all right. Because we know we are special. We have a purpose they aren’t even aware of. We can be there and live out that purpose in their midst in the most simple and mundane of circumstances.

No matter what we do, no matter what our circumstances, we should remember that we are sanctified. We are special, set apart for a mission. This has direct bearing on joy in our lives. All of us want to believe we are special. Even when we know objectively that there is nothing special about us, we feel like we are. Most of us kind of feel like we deserve special treatment because we are, well, special, even though we can’t identify exactly in what way we’re special. When we get the message that there is nothing special about us, even when we already know that’s true, it hurts. It hurts because we were born with the sense that we should be special. We should be the decorative towels, not the regular old towels that are used for drying.

What infuses our lives with meaning, purpose, passion and enthusiasm is when we know that we are special because we have been set apart for an enormously important mission. We can carry out this mission in everything we do, from driving a car, to mowing the lawn, to caring for a hurting person to praying and everything in between. When we remember we have been sanctified, set apart, made special, there is great joy we will experience in everything we do. Here’s the cool thing about this mission. The only thing that can stop us from carrying it out, is us. No one can keep you from being special and making God known, being that miniature manifestation of the character of God. You can do it no matter what is happening or what people do. I guarantee you, being the sanctified people we are, carrying out this monumental mission, we will experience joy. The only other option is being ordinary, living out empty lives that have no real significance, and there’s no joy in that.