July 24, 2022

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THE PUPPY DOG PALS ARE RIGHT

Romans 12:11-13

I recently came across one of those bucket list posts on the Internet about 100 things everyone should do before they die. As is inevitably true with such things it was highly subjective. It included activities to do and places to visit. I found that it included a number of activities I have no interest in and left out some I would like to do. For instance, it included snow boarding, but not surfing. Same with places to see. What I found interesting was that I have done 35 of the items on the list, including things like, fall in love, get married, raise a child, learn a foreign language, write a book and so on, and 35 of the things on this particular list are of no interest to me. I could care less about riding a camel or seeing Victoria Falls. There were 18 items on this particular list that I would pay good money to avoid. I want no part of sky diving, swimming with sharks, bungee jumping or getting a tattoo. There were 12 items on the list that I would like to do some day, but if I never do any of the 12 my life will still have been full. There are several things not on that list that I would put on mine, like see a rocket launch at Cape Canaveral, catch a foul ball at a Major League Baseball game and go to Bora Bora, but again, my life will be just fine if I never get to do them.

The bucket list thinking raises an important question. What makes a life full and fulfilling? The whole bucket list approach to life is actually fundamentally flawed. It says that what is going to make life exciting and fulfilling is seeing fascinating places and doing exciting activities. The problem with that is a person can do all of the things on a bucket list, enjoy them, but still find that life is lacking something, maybe even kind of empty. It is also true that all those things give no help and no strength for dealing with the reality of what life can be like.

Pastor Bryan Wilkerson relates that one Sunday after church a woman talked to him about the worship service she had just attended at his church. She said the people were very nice, the music was beautiful and the sermon was very good. However, she said that as wonderful as it all was, it had nothing at to do with her real world. Her real world has involved years of a painful relationship, of dealing with terrible financial pressure, of the possibility of losing her home, of serious health problems, years of loneliness and a lot of disappointment with God. Doing all the things on a bucket list won’t help that woman at all. But that also makes me think that our worship of God should. It should help us deal with life’s challenges, and enable us to experience fullness and joy in life.

The Gospel of Christ is intended to save us and give us the life of God. That life should flow in all circumstances, good and bad. We saw in Romans 8:37 that in Christ we are “more than conquerors.” Paul wrote that after mentioning the trouble, hardship, persecution, famine and danger that filled his life. This was a reality in the face of some of the worst life can throw at us. Today we will look at the kind of things we need to truly live no matter what may come our way, and think about how we can have them. We will see these things in Romans 12:11-13.

PASSION

Paul tells us to “never be lacking in zeal, but keep your spiritual fervor, serving the Lord.” Literally that first phrase is “in zeal, not idle.” The word translated “zeal” originally meant “haste” or “speed.” It came to signify urgency. That word brought our grandson, Wesley, to mind. He has two modes of operation. One is sleeping, the other is moving. He almost never stops for more than a couple of minutes. He loves to run. I’ve told you before one of his favorite things is to say, “Bapaw, fast!” This week he pulled a new one on me. He said, “Bapaw go fast, Wesley will watch.”

Wesley runs fast just for the joy of it. But usually when we go fast it is for a reason. For instance, I don’t usually run in airports. But on our honeymoon when we flew home from Honolulu we were caught by surprise when we got to the airport to learn Hawaii requires your luggage to go through an agricultural inspection. That made no sense to me, but it was the rule, and the lines for the inspection were long. I’m talking Disneyland long. Long enough that by the time we were through it looked like we might miss our flight. We went fast. We sprinted all the way out to the gate. We went fast because it was urgent, important. We just got through before they closed the door. This verse is telling us to live with that kind of urgency each day. Paul used this to give us a picture of having hearts beating with passion.

Paul fleshed out that image with a second phrase. The NIV translation puts that next phrase, “Keep your spiritual fervor.” That’s all right, but it feels sort of academic. What Paul actually wrote is more vivid. He said we should be “boiling in the Spirit.” The word I would translate boiling was used in ancient Greek to describe a raging, storm driven ocean. This word depicts that churning, moving water. You’ve seen water boiling in a pan, bubbling violently. Paul said that’s what he wants our hearts to be like. The word was most often associated with heat. Paul is saying he wants us to have great passion, hearts burning with flame.

This is a theme you can find throughout the Bible. Paul tells us he wants our lives to be characterized more than anything with serving the Lord. But he was not interested in us dabbling in serving the Lord or giving it a half-hearted effort. He wanted us to be ablaze with passion for God. In Mark 12:28 a man asked Jesus what the most important command is. What is the greatest priority of all? Jesus answered in verse 30, “Love the Lord your God with all your heart and with all your soul and with all your mind and with all your strength.” God wants us to love him and serve him with everything we have, heart, soul, mind and strength.” He wants us boiling with love for him.

In John 2 there was the well known incident when Jesus confronted the people who were making money off religion in the Temple in Jerusalem. He flipped over their tables, drove out the animals they were selling at a huge markup, and kicked the businessmen out. This was a dangerous thing to do. The powerful leaders of Israel had a cut of this business and saw nothing wrong with it. In other words, when he did this Jesus made some powerful people really angry. Verse 17 says, “His disciples remembered that it is written, ‘Zeal for your house consumed me.’” They saw Jesus’ burning passion for the glory of his Father in heaven acted out before their eyes. Here’s the thing. What is God doing in our lives according to Romans 8:29? He has destined us to be conformed to the image of his Son. In other words, he is making us like Jesus. He wants us to be consumed with a burning passion for the glory of God.

In Colossians 3:23 Paul instructed us, “Whatever you do, work at it with all your heart, as working for the Lord.” Whatever we do, in all that we do, God wants us to do it with all our heart. He wants us to attack life with passion.

This is a very good thing for us. Living with passion and enthusiasm turns life into an adventure. It is the only way for life to be full. In his novel, *Dear John*, Nicholas Sparks has one of his characters say, “The saddest people I’ve ever met in life are the ones who don’t care deeply about anything. Passion and satisfaction go hand in hand.” Former Supreme Court Justice, Oliver Wendell Holmes, said, “It’s faith in something and enthusiasm for something that makes life worth living.” We know that’s true. We are most alive when we are fully present and giving our all.

But inertia and entropy tend to get involved. Over time our passion tends to wane. In his commentary on Romans Trinity Seminary professor Douglas Moo wrote, “The temptation to ‘lose steam’ in our lifelong responsibility to reverence God in every aspect of our lives…is a natural one.”

Unfortunately it is a natural one. A couple of weeks ago our two oldest granddaughters, Ella and Cara, had a busy weekend. On Saturday their parents had a birthday party for Cara, who turned 5 years old. They had more than 20 kids at the party. It was a bit chaotic. The following day the girls went to church with Mom and Dad and in the afternoon wen to a birthday party for one of their friends. It was at a home near us, so Anna asked us if we could pick them up when it was over and take them home. Late that afternoon we picked them up. I was a bit overwhelmed by what we encountered. This family that had the party had gone all out. They had an inflatable water slide, and they had a Hello Kitty explosion in their back yard. The noise level was ear-splitting and the candy wall and jewelry wall were kind of over the top. It took us a while to corral the girls and herd them to the car. We got them buckled into the car and as we drove away Ella sighed and said, “I need a vacation.”

Yeah, that’s understandable. Being 6 years old and having all the responsibility that comes with that, having to go to blow out birthday party after blowout birthday party would wear on anyone, right? Ella reminds us that no matter what you do, it is easy to get worn out, to decide you need a break, to cut back.

Everyone is familiar with the fact that new is exciting, often full of enthusiasm, but the newness wears off and is replaced by routine. Routine seems dull and boring. It is easy for the routine to grind us down. It gets old and passion wanes, enthusiasm disappears. It is the normal course of things in life. Given this reality, how do we maintain passion for serving the Lord? There are two things that are necessary for having passion and keeping it.

Passion and motivation are very similar. So, the first thing is to have an inspiring goal that is compelling enough to provoke passion, to give us motivation. I mentioned Wesley’s proclivity for movement. As active as he is I would think that he would have a ravenous appetite. Burn as many calories as he does and surely you will be super hungry. It mystifies me that it is difficult to get him to eat much of the time. He pretty much has reduced his menu of acceptable foods to bread, macaroni and cheese, applesauce and dino buddies, a sort of breaded chicken strip. It is not unusual for him to not even be interested in those foods at dinner time. However, there is a food that he is always interested in. This is a food that has been a favorite in our family for at least 4 generations. It is doughnuts. He loves doughnuts. He always wants doughnuts. His parents have found that while they don’t want to do this at every meal, they can get him to eat his food every time by offering him a doughnut if he will eat his dino buddies or his mac and cheese. For him, that is an inspiring goal, it is worth pursuing with passion, even when he’s not interested in whatever might be on the plate in front of him. It gives him the motivation to do what he needs to do.

In Philippians 3:13-14 Paul wrote, “One thing I do: Forgetting what is behind and straining toward what is ahead, I press on toward the goal to win the prize for which God has called me heavenward in Christ Jesus.” The word “straining” meant “stretching out.” It involved maximum effort. Paul had been through years of hardship, poverty, opposition, persecution, unjust imprisonment, but it didn’t beat him down. He was as passionate as ever because his heart was inflamed with the goal, the mission God had given him.

Passion comes from a mission, a great goal. But what mission? Laurie pointed out this morning that our milk carton says on it, “We are on a mission.” I’m not on the mission that company is on. This verse tells us our mission. It is serving the Lord. Our mission is to reveal and bring honor to the God of all grace. He is glorious beyond human comprehension or description. The passion that can fill our hearts and give us motivation every day is to reveal him, to make him known. He is the one who has made us and who has loved us with an everlasting, unstoppable, unconditional love.

There is a second thing we are going to need. How are we to keep going when life is tiring, when we fail, when we encounter one obstacle after another, when discouragement tells us to just give up and take it easy for a while? In the old Calvin and Hobbs cartoon there was one strip that showed young Calvin on a swing. Calvin’s nemesis, the bully, Mo, shows up and demands that Calvin get off and let him have the swing. Calvin refuses in his inimitable way. The next frame shows Mo, blasting him off the swing with a powerful punch to the face. In the final frame Calvin is sitting on the ground with a bruised face and says, “Sometimes it’s hard to be religious when certain people are never incinerated by lightning.” He’s right. It can be hard to keep going when God doesn’t steer life as we might like it to go.

Remember that Paul said we should be “boiling in the Spirit.” For Paul, living in the Spirit is synonymous with living in the Gospel of grace. As we trust God’s grace, knowing we are loved and accepted because of what Christ has done for us, we will be able to keep going. This is why God told Paul what we see in 2 Corinthians 12:9, “My grace is sufficient for you.”

I read a statement that caught my eye last week. “Legalism kills the spirit, but knowing Christ sets us free.” If we think we have to perform, it will grind us down. It saps us of strength and energy. But as we trust in God’s grace we will have the ability and strength to keep going day after day, no matter what else may happen.

There is one other factor that comes up in the next point.

PERSEVERANCE IN JOY

In verse 12 Paul tells us to be patient in affliction. In other words, keep going even when it is hard. But how do we do that? The other phrases give us a clue. Be joyful in hope. Being joyful is crucial to bearing up during hard times, to being able to keep going through the inevitable low spots and disasters of life. If we are joyful we will be able to continue.

Joy will make all the difference for us. I find that if I am really joyful I can do almost anything. I can keep going no matter what. But does it make sense for Paul to command us to be joyful? Isn’t joy an emotion that we don’t control? We either have it or we don’t, but we can’t manufacture joy. So how does this make sense?

Actually we have more control over joy than we typically think. Author Rick Howe wrote, “We are active participants and contributors to our own emotional states…Wisely or foolishly, in healthy or unhealthy ways, we all manage our emotions.” The late Henry Nouwen said, “Joy does not simply happen to us. We have to choose joy and keep choosing it every day.” We can actually choose to focus on what brings joy. We can opt for joy.

This is not about us pretending to be joyful, just pasting a smile on our faces. It’s about actually having joy. Throughout my years of ministry on a number of occasions I’ve had believers tell me that it is not possible to always be joyful. But Paul commands us to be joyful here. Would it make sense for him to command us to do something that’s impossible? In 1 Thessalonians 5:16 he commanded that we “rejoice always.” Literally, be joyful always. In Philippians 4:4 he said, “Rejoice in the Lord always.” Just in case you didn’t get that he then said, “I will say it again. Rejoice!” Be joyful always. In Romans 12:12 he gave us the key. He said we should be joyful “in hope.”

We should be joyful because we have hope. Hope is the engine of our joy, the source of it. But what sort of hope are we talking about? Is it hope that everything is always going to get better, that the thing that is hard for us right now is going to go away and be replaced by something much better?

Do you remember the story of when an angel showed up in front of some shepherds in Israel when Jesus was born? Do you remember what he said to them? “I bring you good news that will cause great joy for all the people.” Good news of great joy. What was his source of mega joy? It was that the Savior had been born. The angel said, “He is the Messiah, the Lord.” Why was that such joyful news?

In his prophecy in Isaiah 51:11 Isaiah wrote, “Everlasting joy will crown their heads. Gladness and joy will overtake them, and sorrow and sighing will flee away.” This was a description of a time when the kingdom of God would come. The kingdom of God exists where God rules completely. It is a place of joy because God is the source of joy, where he goes joy goes. He is pure good. If you are in a kingdom where there is only good, there will be no sorrow or sadness, there will be unending joy. That is what it will be like to live in the kingdom of God. Gladness and joy will overtake us.

The angel said he had news of great joy because he was announcing the coming of the Lord, the king of that kingdom, into the world. The ancient Jews thought there were two ages. One was the age of this world, the other was the age of God’s kingdom. They assumed that the coming of the King meant the kingdom had come. In a sense it had, but what they did not know was there is another age. It is this age where the king has opened the door to the kingdom for all people, but the full kingdom of God has not taken over this world. This is the age we live in. It is the world where those who believe in the King have one foot in the Kingdom of God that is still to come, and one foot in this world, this age.

Joy is a response. It is always a result of something. We feel joyful because of something wonderful that has happened. Michael and Carissa asked Laurie and me if we would be interested in going on a vacation with them. They wanted to go to the Aulani, the Disney resort at Ko ‘Olina in Hawaii so that we could enjoy Hawaii but also take care of Wesley and let them actually have a vacation. They had found a terrific deal they had at the resort for this past May. We thought that was a tremendous idea. In fact, we were overjoyed. We looked forward to that trip with great anticipation. The trip never happened. That was because a couple of months later it was learned that Carissa was pregnant. They had done a trip to Hawaii when Carissa was pregnant with Wesley and said, “Never again.” Carissa was miserable. So the Aulani trip was canceled. But that was not sad. When we learned Carissa was pregnant we rejoiced. We were so happy. We had been concerned it might not be possible. We had so much joy, joy so great it totally eclipsed the disappointment of the trip. That joy increased when little Hunter was born 3 months ago.

Joy is a result of great things happening. But the problem is that joy over something wonderful happening tends to fade as our circumstances change. For life to be truly full, for us to persevere with joy, our joy has to be in something that doesn’t fade. That’s why Paul says our joy is joy in hope. It is not joy rooted in this world. It is rooted in the kingdom of God. That hope never fades even a little, so the joy of it is always with us. To the degree that we focus on our state of being in the kingdom of God we will have joy. To the degree that we try to find our joy in this world we will actually find joy somehow always slipping away from us.

Being in the kingdom of God is a huge deal. If one does not have that one is in a dark and joyless place. Let me give you an example. There is a poet and Christian intellectual by the name of Christian Wiman who teaches at Yale. He is a highly awarded poet, but there are people who criticize him because his poems sometimes have form and coherence. In his book, *Ambition and Survival: Becoming A Poet*, he discusses the argument against form and coherence in art. The argument goes, because our experience of the world is chaotic and fragmented, and because we have lost faith in the abstractions by which people in the past ordered their lives, and because we have lost faith in language itself, it would be naïve to think we could have order in our art. Thus a poet who persists in imposing order on our uncertainty is either being ironic, is unconscious or is irrelevant.

This is why it is called art when Italian artist Piero Manzoni put his feces in 90 tin cans and labeled them. They sold for between $100,000 and $150,000 each. Or there is English artist Cy Twombly created a work that was a piece of paper filled with scribbles made with a blue pencil. It sold for $2.3 million.

Listen to the thinking there, which is the generally accept position today. Life is chaotic and fragmented, there are no truths that can order our world, and we can’t even use language in a meaningful way anymore. To try to use language to bring order is foolish. This is where the world ends up without the King ruling in their lives. It is dark, chaotic, meaningless and hopeless. Need I add it is joyless? There is no joy in such a world. If you don’t live in the kingdom of God with the King ruling in your life, that is your world. You may not have figured it out yet, but that is where it is going.

We have hope, because the king has come. Life isn’t meaningless and hopeless. It has order and direction and meaning. Because we are in God’s kingdom we can be like Paul, who, in 2 Corinthians 6:4-10 described his life full of troubles, hardships, distresses, beatings, imprisonments, riots, hard work, sleepless nights and hunger, but said in verse 10 he was “sorrowful, yet always rejoicing.” Yes there was sorrow and pain and hardship for him, but in the middle of it he was rejoicing. He had much to rejoice about that was far more important than the difficult things in his life.

PURSUIT OF PEOPLE

Paul tells us in verse 13 that we should share with the Lord’s people who are in need and we should practice hospitality. Literally that last phrase is “pursuing the love of strangers.” In other words, Paul says the way to experience real life is to focus on caring for other people, both those who are in the kingdom of God, and those who are not. Jesus said the two most important things to do in life are to love God and love other people. We start with loving God, but if we are going to love him, Jesus said that means loving other people too.

It also happens to be true that caring about other people, loving them, is what brings real life. Harvard University conducted a remarkable study focused on happiness. They followed 724 diverse men beginning in 1938, tracking their health, surveying them every 2 years all the way until the present. One of the men was President John F. Kennedy. There are still 60 of them alive, all in their 90’s. One of the findings of that study has been that one of the most crucial components of happiness is relationships. We shouldn’t be surprised. Jesus told us that long ago.

The point is that getting our eyes off of ourselves and focusing on loving other people is crucial to having truly full lives. In his book, *Leaders Eat Last*, Simon Simek, the author and motivational speaker, says he has been amazed by the people in our country’s military. He says in dealing with them he kept arriving at the conclusion, “These are just a special class of people. They’re better than the rest of us.” But he had a change of opinion when he was on a trip to Afghanistan. He said everything on the trip went wrong, but especially when the base he was on came under rocket attack. Through that experience he said he found out what service means. “Service means giving to others with no expectation of anything in return. Fulfillment, calm, security, peace of mind, confidence, all come from a willingness to serve others…Only when I decided to look after others…did I find calm security and peace of mind.” The kind of life we are looking for is one that is driven by service to others.

APPLICATION

Here are some practical steps to take to begin experiencing passion and joy. In Philippians 4:4 Paul told us to rejoice always. In the following verses he gave us steps for doing that.

LIVE IN GOD’S PRESENCE

In Philippians 4:6 Paul said we should pray about everything. That reminds us we can live in the reality that God is with us in all we face. Recently covid, which we kind of thought we were over, has suddenly become more of a reality than ever. Laurie and I have felt surrounded by people who have it or have recently had it. The current variant, they say, is wildly contagious. This is an infection that you catch from contact with someone else. C. S. Lewis had an apt analogy for us. He says this is also true of joy and even passion. He says we catch both good and bad from others. The desire here is that we would be infected by joy. How does that happen? By living in close proximity to a joyful person. Dallas Willard said that God is the most joyful person in existence. We can catch joy by living in his presence. David wrote to God in Psalm 16:11, “You fill me with joy in your presence.”

Lewis uses the image of a fire or a spray of water. How do you get warm? By standing near the fire. How do you get wet? By standing near the spray. How do you get joy? By living in the presence of the God of grace, but being with him every day, knowing he is always with you.

Henri Nouwen said, “I have a friend who radiates joy, not because his life is easy, but because he habitually recognizes God’s presence in the midst of all human suffering, his own as well as others.” That’s what we want. We want to radiate joy. We do it by living in God’s presence.

GIVE THANKS

In verse 6 he told us to not get anxious but to pray about everything “with thanksgiving.” There is a strange thing about life in this world. It is easier to see the negative than to see the positive. It’s much easier and seems more natural to find out what’s wrong and to even complain about it, than it is to see what is good and to be thankful for it.

Evolutionary biologists claim the first humans lived on the plains of Africa. Their survival depended on scanning the horizon for threats. The idea is that our brains, as a result, are hardwired to look for the negative. The brain thinks it is a matter of survival. Neuroscientists have identified an odd fact. They say it takes just 3 seconds for a negative memory to imprint on the brain, but it takes 14 seconds for a positive memory to imprint. They say our brains are like flypaper for the negative, and Teflon for the positive. I can see that. It seems like the negative is what captures our attention. Add to that the reality that life is essentially tragic because it ends in death for all of us, and it’s not surprising that we tend to have a rather discouraging and dark view of life.

Do you think these realities create joy and passion? Definitely not. This is why in 1 Thessalonians 5:18 Paul commanded that we give thanks in all circumstances, then said, “this is God’s will for you in Christ Jesus.” Here is what I suggest. Start your day by talking about what you are grateful for. And end your day giving thanks to God. I also suggest you observe the discipline of giving thanks. When you start thinking about how frustrating life is, how hard or disappointing it is, when you feel like complaining, when you are criticizing, focusing on the negative, change your mind and start thinking about what you are grateful for.

This past week I’ve been dealing with a strange headache that has refused to go away. It was determined that it might be caused by a sinus infection. I was prescribed Amoxicillin. A very frustrating thing happened. The pharmacy informed me they were out, and none of the other pharmacies had any either. Are you kidding me? This is not a rare drug. It is the most basic of antibiotics. It reminded me that nothing is working. We were also dealing with the city switching our waste disposal company. The new company has been unable to deliver a recycling bin to us for more than a month. Laurie called them. They didn’t give us a bin. They gave us 2, which we don’t need. Nothing is working in our society. I started complaining. Then it occurred to me that I was complaining that I couldn’t immediately get a drug that people throughout history couldn’t have imagined having, and I take it for granted. I was complaining that I didn’t have a bin to recycle stuff so I don’t have to deal with it. Time to give thanks for the amazing things God has given us.

DIRECT YOUR MIND

In Philippians 4:8 Paul wrote, “Whatever is true, whatever is noble, whatever is right, whatever is pure, whatever is lovely, whatever is admirable, if anything is excellent or praiseworthy, think about such things.” He’s telling us we need to think about things that are good. We need to direct our own thoughts.

In his classic, *Paradise Lost*, John Milton wrote, “The mind is its own place, and in itself can make a heaven of hell, a hell of heaven.” Much of the battle for passion and joy in life occurs in our brains. British commentator Michael Wilcock said, “The human mind is incurably centrifugal, forever flying off at a tangent. It must be brought back to the great central truths of the gospel over and over.” That’s exactly right. Keep bringing your mind back to the truth. Keep putting your thoughts on the character of God, on his grace and love for you, on your real identity, on the goodness of God and the infinity of ways you experience it every day.

One way especially to direct your thoughts is to focus on your mission. Passion is always related to mission. So the more you can focus on the mission, the more full your life will be. One result of being grandparents is Laurie and I have gotten familiar with children’s TV shows. We’ve watched Mickey Mouse Clubhouse, Mickey Roadster Racers, Miles of Tomorrowland, PJ Masks, Curious George, Trash Truck, Bluey, Paw Patrol and many more. One that we have seen is Puppy Dog Pals, which features two animated puppies named Bingo and Rolly. They are both eager and enthusiastic, because on each episode they set out on a mission. Every episode they sing their theme song, “Going on a mission, going on a mission.” They do it with joy and enthusiasm. They have it right. Our zest for life, our passion, even our joy to some extent, will derive from living to fulfill a mission. As you start your day, sing, “Going on a mission, going on a mission,” because this day, you are. You are on a mighty quest, the eternally glorious mission of making God known, of honoring him, of bringing his grace, his love and his kindness to everyone and everything.