

TACOS AS ADVERTISED
1 THESSALONIANS 5:16

I encountered some pictures that were interesting in one way and irritating in another. The guy who took the pictures was frustrated by the fact that the food he got at several fast food chains didn't measure up to what he saw in their ads. So he bought food items from several chains, then photographed them in the best possible light and compared the pictures of what he actually received with the pictures in the ads. The difference was literally laughable. The Burger King Whopper was less than half the size pictured in ads. Taco Bell tacos were way less impressive than the ads. But from my perspective the Jack-In-The-Box tacos were the winners. They were so skinny they look like a quesadilla instead of a taco. They didn't look anything like the tacos in the ads.

It made me think about my Christian life. Jesus said I am the salt of the earth, the light of the world. We've been thinking about what that means these past few weeks and about the fact that we are to make a difference in this world. I find that the world might easily think I'm like those tacos. I don't look anything like what they've been promised the salt of the earth would be like. In particular I want you to think with me about one aspect of those of us who are the light of the world. Galatians 5:22-23 tells us the kind of traits we should be known for if the Spirit of Jesus is actually at work in us. One of those traits is joy. And it's a big one. That's what we're going to look at today in 1 Thessalonians 5:16.

JOY IS NOT OPTIONAL

Paul is summing up his letter at this point. In a final flurry of staccato instructions he says, "**be joyful always.**" The verb translated "be joyful" means to be glad, to rejoice. This was one of Paul's earliest letters. Isn't it interesting that in one of his last letters in Philippians 4:4 he said essentially the same thing. "**Rejoice in the Lord always. I will say it again: rejoice.**" At the beginning of his ministry and toward the end he was saying "be joyful all the time." Sounds like he's saying "be happy always."

Typically we see joy and happiness as different. Happiness as a conditional thing dependent on circumstance. When all is good, then we are happy. When Dean Spanos announced after the season that the Chargers coach next year would once again be Norv Turner, the local villagers were not happy. If by some miraculous

turn of events the Chargers win the Super Bowl next year (which I don't predict), suddenly everyone will be super happy and they will say they knew all along that Norv could do it. But is it possible in the meantime for the villagers to be joyful though unhappy about the Chargers? Yes, they might not rejoice about the Chargers, but over all in life they can still be joyful. So we say joy is independent of circumstance. It is something we can have even when we are in pain or discouragement.

This clearly must be true because in 2 Corinthians 6:10 Paul described himself as “**sorrowful, yet always rejoicing**.” To be “sorrowful yet rejoicing” certainly would indicate that there is a difference between joy and happiness. It says it is possible to be in painful or frightening circumstances, to be heavy of heart, yet still be rejoicing.

However, Christians sometimes grab onto this loophole and use it as an excuse to be down, pessimistic and generally unhappy, even grumpy. We use it as an excuse to be defeated by our situation when life goes sideways on us. There is that sense of “I have a right to be depressed. Look at what has happened to me.” After all, Job wasn't exactly jolly, nor did anyone expect him to be. He had every reason to be bitter. So it is common to find Christians who are in bitter circumstance and their attitude reflects their situation. It is down, discouraged and even a little bitter. Somehow, though, this down, bitter, discouraged attitude ends up being not very appealing. Hey, put your faith in Jesus and you can be like me. Um, no thanks.

New Testament Greek didn't have a word that directly corresponds to the English word “happy.” The closest to it is the word Paul used in this verse. “Rejoice always” gets pretty close to “be happy.” We are used to hearing reggae musicians say “don't worry, be happy,” but we have a little more difficulty being told this by God. My point is that while there is a difference between being happy because things are good and being joyful even in unhappy times, a person full of the life of God and full of his hope should reflect that by being able to rejoice continually. Columba Marmion put it this way, “*joy is the echo of God's life in us.*”

This does not mean that we're supposed to deny our hurts or hardships and pretend we're always happy. But it does say that there ought to be a radiance, a joyfulness to our lives in Christ because, as we learned last week, we have something of greater value than anything else in the world. No matter what happens to us, what is in us is a relationship with our loving Father and all that comes with that, the hope, the strength, the peace, and yes, the joy.

Note two things in this verse. First it is not conditional and second it is a command. That it is not conditional is evident from the fact that it is a present tense imperative in Greek. That means it is a command to “keep on” rejoicing. This thought is affirmed by the addition of the word “always.” When are we supposed to be rejoicing, joyful, glad? When something good, something worthy of being happy about happens? No, we are to be joyful always. That means every single day of our lives! What about when something awful happens? What about when whatever that terrible thing is it just won’t go away but just keeps on making life miserable? Are times like that included in always? Yes. Then even in times like that we are to rejoice! Our joy should transcend our circumstances.

Is one really supposed to rejoice even if a loved one has died or one has just been diagnosed with cancer? Is one supposed to rejoice when after being laid off one has been unable to find work for 2 years, has lost his house and now found out he needs expensive medical treatments? Rejoice always would seem to say yes, as difficult as that is to both believe and do.

The second important thing about this verse is that it is a command. It is not a suggestion that we try being being joyful because maybe it will make us feel better. It is a *command*. With a command you can do one of two things. You can do as ordered, or you can disobey. It is your choice. *Being joyful is a choice of our will*. We have the ability to obey or disobey. It is within our power to decide whether we will be glad and rejoicing or will not. Barry Neil Kaufman has written a best selling book titled *Happiness Is a Choice*. The title acknowledges what this little command says. We can choose to be joyful and rejoice.

I must give a caveat here. There is such a thing as clinical depression. There are cases where for whatever reason the emotional down has become a physical thing. The brain’s chemistry has gotten fouled up. A person in that position hearing a sermon about being joyful just spirals deeper into the pit of despair because in addition to being down that individual can now feel guilty, feel like a failure as a Christian because he or she is so depressed. There are times when a key to getting out of that hole is going to require getting the physical problem resolved and getting the brain’s chemistry back in balance.

The instruction to be joyful is a command from God. When we are lacking in joy we are disobeying God’s direct command! In one of my favorite movies, *Apollo 13*, there is a dramatic moment that produced the tag line for the movie. In case

you're not familiar with the story it is about the ill-fated Apollo 13 moon landing mission that suffered an explosion on board the spacecraft putting the lives of the 3 astronauts on board in grave peril. The engineers at Mission Control in Houston go to work trying to find a way to get the astronauts safely home. At one point two NASA executives are discussing how they are going to handle it if they can't bring them back alive. Gene Krantz, one of the flight directors overhears them and says, "Failure is not an option!" These brief words from the pen of the apostle Paul tell us that when it comes to joy we are in a similar situation as followers of Jesus. The message is *"joylessness is not an option."*

OUR JOY MATTERS TO GOD

God thinks joy is a big deal. He emphasizes it. It is important to God that we be full of joy. We know that because of how often that idea is repeated in the Bible. In Deuteronomy 16:14 God was giving instruction about the feasts the ancient Jewish people were to have to worship him. The first words of that verse are *"be joyful at your feasts."* Church isn't supposed to be this melancholy affair with no smiling allowed. It should be full of joy!

Psalm 16:11 says to God *"you fill me with joy in your presence."* Psalm 28:7 says of God, *"my heart leaps for joy and I will give thanks to him in song."* Psalm 33:1 says *"Sing joyfully to the Lord, you righteous"* then verse 3 adds *"Sing to him a new song; play skillfully, and shout for joy."* Psalm 68:3 says, *"May the righteous be glad and rejoice before God; may they be happy and joyful!"* Get the picture?

In John 15:11 Jesus said that the reason he instructed his disciples was so that *"my joy may be in you and that your joy may be complete."* He wanted them, and us, to be completely joyful. When the angels announced the arrival of the promised child in Bethlehem, the Messiah and the launching of God's mission to rescue human beings from hopelessness and death, they said, "we have an announcement that may be of some interest to you." No, they didn't. Nor did they say, "We hate to tell you this, but we've got bad news." You know what they said. Luke 2:10 tells us the angel said, *"I bring you good news of great joy that will be for all the people."*

Why is joy important to God? Our joy matters to God because it is a manifestation of our love for him. Imagine this scenario. Laurie experiences a hurt or a disappointment. Maybe it is a friend who says something hurtful to her or one of her music students parents says, "we want a better teacher" to her. She feels the pain of that. I try to comfort her and be a support for her. But after expressing her pain she gets over it quickly and is her usual effervescent self. I say to her, "Wow,

you got over that awfully quickly.” Then imagine she says to me, “What that person said hurt, I admit that, and I didn’t like it. But I’m still married to you, and that makes everything all right. I get to be with you today, so that disappointment isn’t really all that big of a deal because I am so happy being loved by you.” What do you think that says to me? It says I’m what matters most in her life, and my being there is way better and more important than that other stuff. On the flip side, what would it say to me if while she’s in the midst of the discouragement I said, “I know it hurts, but remember, I love you with all my heart,” and she said, “Yeah, like that matters”? Wouldn’t that say I may be an okay addition to her life, but she doesn’t value me much? Isn’t it the same with God? When we experience disappointment and say, “That felt bad and I really don’t like it, but God loves me, he’s with me, and that’s way more important so I’ve got a lot to be happy about” it tells God how much we love and value him. And when we are in that bad situation, remember that God loves us and say, “Yeah, like that matters,” it says exactly the opposite.

Our joy also matters to God because he’s a loving Father and wants the best for us. We want to be happy. Scientist and philosopher Blaise Pascal wrote in his *Pensees*, “All men seek happiness. This is without exception. Whatever different means they employ, they all tend to this end... This is the motive of every action of every man.” We pursue happiness. In fact we are doing that at every moment in everything we do. If we don’t find it in God, we’ll look for it in something else. The problem is that pursuit will lead us only to dead ends. We’ll never find what we’re looking for there. We’ll make bad choices that injure us and we’ll spend our lives in a futile pursuit. That’s why God wants us to find joy in him. Our joy matters to God because he’s a loving Father who is delighted when his children are happy. When my kids are happy, my heart is light. Do you think I’m a better father than God is? I am not. And that means that he wants us to have joy. It makes him happy!

Our joy matters to God because it is essential for us to have impact. Remember what Pascal said about how all people are looking for happiness. Studies show that most people are aware of an unhappiness in their lives. People are looking for joy! In a postmodern society arguments for truth will fall mostly on deaf ears. What will have impact is reality. When people encounter others who are full of joy, they know this is what they want. If we are truly going to be able to make a difference in this world one of the big things we’ll have to offer people is real joy.

So the question is, how can we be more full of joy?

EXPERIENCE KNOWING GOD

Walk with God. This goes back to what I said last week. In fact, it kind of sums up everything. If we truly know God there will be joy. The closer and better you know God the more joy you will experience. Galatians 5:22 tells us joy is a product of walking in the Spirit of Christ, so if we do that on an on-going basis joy will assuredly be the result.

Ask God to increase your joy. It is his will for you. 1 John 5:14-15 says, “**This is the confidence we have in approaching God: that if we ask anything according to his will, he hears us. And if we know that he hears us—whatever we ask—we know that we have what we have asked of him.**” Ask God to fill you with joy because of him. I believe he’ll do it.

AVOID ASSASSINS

I know that telling you to avoid assassins seems silly because it is obvious and also because you probably think you’ve never encountered an assassin in your life. Au contraire! The truth is you’ve had many encounters with them and you’ll encounter them today. But I refer to a particular kind of assassin. I mean those who kill your joy. That’s right, I’m talking about killjoys, only I don’t mean people. There are a number of things absolutely guaranteed to destroy joy in your life. You need to know them, recognize them, and have nothing to do with them.

One of them is **guilt**. Experts tell us that guilt is a huge problem. Most of us are dragging around a big load of guilt every moment of our lives. The reason is, we’re guilty. We know what we should be like and we know that we’re not what we should be. So we feel guilty. Well how are we to deal with guilt? One really good way to avoid guilt is to not be guilty. Don’t do things that you know are disobedient to God, things you know you’ll feel guilt and shame for.

However, you’ll find that even if you avoid the obvious things you will still stumble and you will still find that guilt dogs you. The thing to do there is to thank God for forgiveness in Jesus Christ. It is to remember that when Jesus paid for whatever your failures may be, he completely covered the bill. We once were in a restaurant and had finished our meal. We were expecting our waitress to bring us the bill. She came to our table and said, “there were some people over there on the other side of the restaurant who said they know you. They wanted to pay your bill, so it’s all covered, tip and all.” So I said, “But we ate all this food. Don’t I have to do something to pay for it?” I could feel like I owed the restaurant something, but the truth was I didn’t. The whole thing, everything I owed, was paid for. In fact the

waitress got a lot of joy out of telling us this great news. The only thing left for us to do was to be grateful and to rejoice in the free meal we had.

How much of your bill do you think Jesus paid for when he died on the cross? What I read in the Bible is that Jesus paid the whole thing. All that is left for you to do is to be grateful and to rejoice in what you've been given.

Whenever you feel guilt, whether it is because you're guilty of something or because of that vague sense that you just don't measure up, thank God that Jesus paid the bill. The best way to do it is to tell him verbally how grateful you are that you do not have to bear the cost of that failure because Jesus already has. Thank him for it and go on your way rejoicing.

Another joy killer is *fear*. Many years ago I went through a period in which I experienced some very unsettling physical problems. I had tingling and numbness in several parts of my body and it was clear that something was wrong with my nervous system. I went through many medical tests as the doctors tried to figure out what was happening. They never really did and eventually it got better. But I remember during that time when the concerns were things like multiple sclerosis or Lou Gehrig's disease or something equally ominous that it was frightening. I remember lying awake late at night thinking about what this might mean for my wife and young children. I can tell you that during those nights joy was completely absent. Fear and joy are like dark and light. Where there is one you will not find the other. Is it possible for joy to vanquish fear? I believe it is. The key is faith. The key is believing that though fearful things may well happen, God is still with us, still loves us, still at work and still will bring good for us in everything that happens.

In his commentary on Thessalonians (p. 200) scholar Charles Wannamaker wrote, "to rejoice is always to see the hand of God in whatever is happening." What crucial words those are. For years in our ministry we had a teammate named Dave Friese who worked with students. Dave was an exceedingly competent guy. He was organized and did not get rattled in pressure situations. One time he was taking some high school students to Mexico, my son among them. A few days before the trip someone vandalized the church bus and broke the windows in it so the bus was not available. It just so happened that another church had donated a bus to the ministry in Mexico our group would be working with, so they said we could take the bus down to them. By the time our group would be returning home our bus would be fixed and could be driven down to pick them up. I remember the day they

boarded that bus. It was an old, very sketchy looking vehicle. As they pulled out I could see that on the back someone had painted a name for the bus, “Chariot of Fire.” I said, “I hope that’s not prophetic.”

It was. At the border, the bus caught on fire and they had to evacuate it. Now we had a bus load of high school students stranded at the border. By the time I got word about the situation Dave Friese already had it under control. Everyone was safe and he had arranged transportation for the kids. It was one manifestation of his calm competence. I tell you this story because when Dave took the group on trips I never worried. I had such confidence in him I knew he would be able to handle any problems that might come up.

Our Almighty God is infinitely more competent to deal with whatever comes up in our lives than Dave Friese. So we can put away fear, knowing that God is there and that he is able and willing to bring good to us in all that happens. Here’s where faith makes all the difference. Though I cannot always see it in my circumstances, that ruling everything in this world is a loving heavenly Father who has good in mind for me at every moment and he is at work in all that happens. In the Old Testament Joseph understood this. The victim of inconceivable abuse from his own brothers Joseph would later say, “you meant it for evil, but God meant it for good.” God had a plan even in the evil you were doing. In Acts 2:23 Peter, speaking to the people who called for killing Jesus Christ, said of him, “**this man was handed over to you by God’s set purpose and foreknowledge.**” God had a set purpose in it.

Psalms 139:15-16 says, “**My frame was not hidden from you when I was made in the secret place. When I was woven together in the depths of the earth, your eyes saw my unformed body. All the days ordained for me were written in your book before one of them came to be.**” God has written it all in his book. He is at work. I can have joy because though I rarely understand the plan, I know that he has one, and that he cares about me. He is always working for my good.

One thing guaranteed to make life cold and joyless is if it is simply a random series of events with no direction and no coherence whatsoever, an often harsh collection of incidents in which we are victims, nearly powerless before the onslaught. People know this and try to convince themselves there’s a reason for everything as a way of consoling themselves and trying to hang onto some sort of hope. Laurie has a friend that is not a follower of Jesus that she talks to on a periodic basis. Laurie inquired about the woman’s boyfriend and she said that essentially the man had

ended their relationship. Laurie expressed sympathy knowing that had to hurt. The woman said, “I guess the universe just didn’t want us to be together.”

Boy is that cold comfort. My perception of the universe is that it is inanimate and not sentient. The rocks and the trees show no interest in me and my problems whatsoever. They show no interest in anything because they have no ability to have interest. Yet this person is so desperate to have life make sense that she chooses to assign to a cold and distant universe the ability to think, plan and care. We have reason, however, to be at peace, because there is a Father in heaven who loves us and is ever working for our good. In Psalm 28 David wrote of the wicked who were doing evil work. But then he wrote in verse 7 “**my heart trusts in him (the Lord) and I am helped; my heart leaps for joy.**”

One more joy assassin is *bitterness*. Whole books have been written about this topic, but one of the best ways to destroy joy is to hold on to bitterness. Psychologists tell us that usually depression has its roots in anger. We are angry at someone, we hold that inside and it just obliterates joy. It sours everything within us. One of the most important things you can do is choose to let go of bitterness. Forgive. Yes, others may have doing you real harm and they may not deserve to be forgiven, but when you choose not to let go of anger it is you who will suffer for it.

DON’T MAKE LIFE ABOUT YOU

There are a couple of things we do that just kill our joy. One is have lots of expectations for what life ought to give us, the other is to compare. We build up this expectation of what our lives should be like and when we don’t get it we are disappointed, even resentful. Then we compound the problem by comparing our lives with others. Inevitably when we go down the comparison road we always seem to compare ourselves with those on the upslope. We compare with those who have more, have it better than we do. We don’t spend much time comparing ourselves with those who would think they’d gone to heaven if they were in our shoes.

What do I really deserve? I’ve said it before, if you follow the theology carefully what I deserve is judgment, quick and severe. If I get anything but that, I should be thankful. I wish God would have made me taller, better looking, more hair, smarter, more talented, more charismatic, wittier, and surely wealthier. But all of that is about me, and it comes from comparing with people who are all of those things. What a difference it will make when I let go of expectations and comparisons and am just thankful for what God has given me.

One of the best ways to do that is to quit focusing on self and start thinking about how I can bless and serve other people. In Acts 20:35 Paul quoted Jesus as saying, “It is more blessed to give than receive.” Jesus not only taught that, he exemplified it. He said his whole purpose in life was to serve, to give his life as a ransom for many. At every moment Jesus was trying to give his life for others. I think Jesus gave to people joyfully. I think it is true that it is better to give than to receive. When I was young I loved Christmas because of the presents I was going to receive. Today I enjoy receiving presents, but the real thrill of Christmas for me is the chance to give. It’s way more fun. Do you suppose that principle might be one we should live by? Is it just possible that we will find more joy when we quit being focused on ourselves and pursue passionately giving to other people?

George Bernard Shaw wrote, “This is true joy in life, being used for a purpose recognized by yourself as a mighty one...being a force of nature instead of a feverish little clod complaining that the world will not devote itself to making you happy.”

CHOOSE JOY

I’m going to return to a point already made. God commands rejoicing. We can *choose* it. We find that hard to believe at times. We feel like we’re controlled by emotions, we don’t control them. We can’t help what we feel. In a way that’s true. We feel what we feel. But we do not have to be controlled by those feelings. In his book, *Blink*, Malcolm Gladwell wrote about some amazing research. The researchers were studying facial expressions, how we form them and what their variations mean. They were working on expressions of anger. They would study pictures of various expressions of anger and would try to form them to understand how the muscles of their faces worked. After a time they began to notice a strange thing. They were feeling depressed, almost oppressed. They were not angry at anyone, but the simple act of repeatedly forming expressions of anger created feelings of anger and depression in them!

This suggests that while we cannot choose to feel happy we can choose to rejoice. We can choose to rejoice in the blessings that God has given to us. If we make this a habit, if we concentrate on rejoicing in our God, rejoicing in the Lord, is it just possible that it will eventually affect the way we feel? I believe it will. If we consistently choose to rejoice, we will begin to feel some joy.

Laurie and I were on vacation with our kids at Disney World in Florida, fulfilling a dream we had for years. We had an incredible time. We stayed in one of the Disney hotels in the resort. Our hotel had an area in the middle where there was a food court and a store where they stock some groceries and, of course, the ubiquitous Disney merchandise. One day I went there to buy some groceries for breakfast and observed a family, mom, dad and two young kids. The daughter, probably around 4, wanted a big Mickey Mouse sucker. The parents said no because they didn't want her to spoil a meal that was next on their agenda. But she insisted she really wanted the sucker. The parents stood their ground. Storm clouds began gathering, the sky darkened, and finally the storm hit. The little girl ramped up quickly from whining to a full on no-holds-barred tantrum. It was spectacular. I felt like saying to the little girl who was wearing a Mickey Mouse shirt, a hat with mouse ears, and a Disney necklace, "Would you just think about where you are? You're at Disney World! DISNEY WORLD! You're parents have brought you here so you can enjoy this amazing hotel and this incredible amusement park, they've bought you clothes and souvenirs, they're feeding you Disney food! You should fall on the floor and kiss their feet!" She had so much to be joyous about and thankful for, yet there she was throwing a tantrum over a sucker!

I'm afraid I'm a lot like that little girl. I have been forgiven. I have peace with God. I have the Spirit of Jesus in me. I have hope that God is at work to bring good in all my circumstances. I have eternal life. I have God's Word to guide me. I have brothers and sisters in Christ to stand with me. I have food to eat. I have eyes to see and ears to hear. I'm not the manager of the San Diego Padres. I have so much reason to rejoice, no matter what may happen in my life.

As you start seeing all that God has given you and thanking him for it, rejoicing in it, you might find your heart filling with joy. Robert Louis Stevenson said, "To miss the joy is to miss everything."