

Living a Life of Joy: Accepting What Life Throws At You
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Galatians 5:22-23a

22 By contrast, the fruit of the Spirit is love, joy, peace, patience, kindness, generosity, faithfulness, 23 gentleness, and self-control.

Luke 19:1-10 (NRSV)

19 He entered Jericho and was passing through it. 2 A man was there named Zacchaeus; he was a chief tax collector and was rich. 3 He was trying to see who Jesus was, but on account of the crowd he could not, because he was short in stature. 4 So he ran ahead and climbed a sycamore tree to see him, because he was going to pass that way. 5 When Jesus came to the place, he looked up and said to him, "Zacchaeus, hurry and come down; for I must stay at your house today." 6 So he hurried down and was happy to welcome him. 7 All who saw it began to grumble and said, "He has gone to be the guest of one who is a sinner." 8 Zacchaeus stood there and said to the Lord, "Look, half of my possessions, Lord, I will give to the poor; and if I have defrauded anyone of anything, I will pay back four times as much." 9 Then Jesus said to him, "Today salvation has come to this house, because he too is a son of Abraham. 10 For the Son of Man came to seek out and to save the lost."

When I go out for my run in the morning, instead of listening to music, I listen to Podcasts.

Recently, a couple of the talks have had a direct relationship to this series that Matt and I am starting.

One was a Ted talk about how we are wired. What I enjoy about the TED Hour is that it combines a number of sometimes conflicting views on the same subject.

This particular podcast featured Robert Sapolsky who is a primatologist and a professor of neuroscience at Stanford University. He suggested that we have very little agency -- very little choice in what we do. We do the things we do --- because we have been wired that way. Sapolsky said:

My personal bias is we've got no agency at all. I don't think there's a shred of free will out there. From spending my decades thinking about behavior and the biological influences on it, I'm convinced by now free will is what we call the biology that hasn't been discovered yet. It's just another way of stating that we're biological organisms determined by the physical laws of the universe.

In that same TED Hour Brian Little, a research professor in psychology at the University of Cambridge offered a very different opinion. He suggested that we have more choice than we often realize.

But it was a Fresh Air Podcast that really intrigued me. It was from early August with Robert Wright sharing about his new book: *Why Buddhism is True*.

Listening to Wright discuss the power of "mindful meditation" really spoke to me. When I was in college I used to practice meditation, but I really haven't done it since and if I could, I would love to go on a retreat and learn more about meditation.

What I found so interesting is that he really touched on the first pillar of Happiness that Desmond Tutu and the Dalai Lama suggest.

And I have come to believe that mediation may be the Key to help us unlock joy.

Archbishop Desmond Tutu and the Dalai Lama open their book by saying:

No dark fate determines the future. We do. Each day and each moment, we are able to create and re-create our lives and the very quality of human life on our planet. This is the power we yield.

Lasting happiness cannot be found in pursuit of any goal or achievement. It does not reside in fortune or fame. It resides only in the human mind and heart, and it is here that we hope that you will find it.

I don't want to spend a great deal of time defining JOY because I think that over the next two months, as we share the eight pillars of joy --- exactly what joy is will be evident.

But I do want to distinguish between JOY and happiness. Desmond Tutu stated:

"Joy is much bigger than happiness. While happiness is often seen as being dependent of external circumstances, joy is not." The Archbishop continues: "what we want is not actually happiness. It is not actually what I would speak of. I would speak of joy. Joy is the far greater thing."

But the funny thing about JOY is that it is not something you can set out to achieve. I say that because JOY is found when we "look away" from ourselves.

Quoting from a 12th century Buddhist text the Dalai Lama shared:

When we focus on ourselves we are destined to be unhappy: "Contemplate that, as long as you are too focused on your self-importance and too caught up in thinking about how you are good or bad, you will experience suffering. Obsessing about getting what you want and avoiding what you don't want does not result in happiness."

The text goes on:

Always maintain only a joyful mind.

And I think we all know (at least on a gut level) that JOY is not found in seeking pleasure. Joy is so much more.

There is a Buddhist saying that "trying to seek happiness through sensory gratification is like trying to quench your thirst by drinking saltwater."

So if Joy is not found internally or in physical pleasure --- what is JOY?

Joy is a way of seeing the world.

And it is found in how we relate to other people.

It is found in the concept that both Matt and I have talked about in the past --- Ubuntu.

Ubuntu says: "A person is a person through other people." or put another way: "the belief in a universal bond of sharing that connects all humanity"

In many ways the idea of Ubuntu can also be summarized in our passage from Galatians.

The fruit of the Spirit is love, joy, peace, patience, kindness, generosity, faithfulness, gentleness, and self-control.

Those, it seems to me, are the key --- or hallmarks of JOY

Psychiatrist Howard Cutler reminds us:

"In fact, survey after survey has shown that it is unhappy people who tend to be most self-focused and are socially withdrawn, brooding, and even antagonistic. Happy people, in contrast, are generally found to be more sociable, flexible, and creative, and are able to tolerate life's daily frustrations more easily than unhappy people. And, most important, they are found to be more loving and forgiving than unhappy people."

One final thought before looking at our first pillar.

They close the first part of the book reminding us that without tolerance for each other --- one will struggle to find real Joy.

I am not going to talk about the second part of the book --- which they call: "Obstacles to Joy" -- not because they are not important, they are --- but because I want us to focus instead on the pillars that make joy possible.

I want to remind you of where I started --- Desmond Tutu stated:

Joy is a by-product, if you set out and say, I want to be happy, clenching your teeth with determination, this is the quickest way of missing the bus.

The first four pillars are all qualities of the mind.

The first pillar is PERSPECTIVE

A healthy perspective really is the foundation of joy --- because the way that we see the world is the way that we experience the world.

Changing the way that we see the world will change the way that we feel and the way that we act --- and ultimately --- it can change the world itself!

Every situation in life can be looked at in multiple ways

Do we see possibility?

Or do we see only a dead end?

We all have known people who live their lives with a black cloud hanging over their head. Wherever they go they seem to bring only thunder, lightning and rain

Others seem only to see opportunities --- it is as if the sun is perpetually shining on them.

Edith Eva Eger tells the story of visiting two soldiers on the same day at William Beaumont Army Medical Center at Fort Bliss.

Both were paraplegics who had lost the use of their legs in combat. They had the same diagnosis and the same prognosis.

The first veteran, Tom, was lying on his bed knotted into a fetal position, railing against life and decrying his fate.

The second, Chuck, was out of bed in his wheelchair, explaining that he felt as if he had been given a second chance in life. As he was wheeled through the garden, he had realized that he was closer to the flowers and could look right into his children's eyes.

Eger was an inmate at Auschwitz and she explained that our perspective literally has the power to keep us alive or to cause our death.

One of her fellow inmates at Auschwitz was terribly ill and weak, and others in her bunk asked her how she was holding on to life. The prisoner said that she had heard that they were going to be liberated by Christmas. The woman lived against all odds, but she died on Christmas Day.

Viktor Frankl has reminded us that our perspective toward life is our final and ultimate freedom.

The Dalai Lama has explained:

We must look at any given situation or problem from the front and from the back, from the sides, and from the top and the bottom, so from at least six different angles. This allows us to take a more complete and holistic view of reality, and if we do, our response will be more constructive

Archbishop Tutu challenges us to learn to get a "God's-eye perspective" of any situation that we find ourselves in. That if we shift our thinking from being totally focused on ME --- we can see our life with a new perspective.

This phenomenon is something that astronauts have often reported after having seen earth from space.

Seeing our small blue planet floating in the vast expanse of the universe.

From space there are no borders --- there are no religious distinctions. The world and our problems have a whole new perspective from space.

It is what Martin Buber referred to when he wrote his seminal book *I and Thou*

It is learning to shift our perspective from focusing on I, me and mine to we, us and ours.

As the Dalai Lama and the Archbishop explained, the wider perspective leads to serenity and equanimity. It does not mean we don't have the strength to confront a problem, but we can confront it with creativity and compassion rather than rigidity and reactivity. When we take the perspective of others, we can empathize with them. One starts to see the interdependence that envelops us all, which reveals that how we treat others is ultimately how we treat ourselves. We also are able to recognize that we do not control all aspects of any situation.

I think this concept of changing one's perspective is illustrated well in the story of Jesus and Zacchaeus.

Jesus is on his way to Jerusalem and he passes through the town of Jericho.

Luke implies that as Jesus enters Jericho that large crowds have come to see him.

It helps if you are tall if you want to catch a view of somebody in a crowd.

However, as the children's song reminds us all --- "Zacchaeus was a wee little man."

There was no way he was going to be able to see Jesus --- so what does he do? He climbs a sycamore tree --- and if you visit Jericho today; they will be glad to show you the tree.

As Jesus passes by the tree he calls out to Zacchaeus:

“Zacchaeus, hurry and come down; for I must stay at your house today.”

As far as we know, Jesus and Zacchaeus have never met.

Yet Jesus invites himself over.

Does that seem weird to you?

It did to everybody who witnessed it.

Do you remember who Zacchaeus is?

Zacchaeus was a tax collector.

Does anyone really enjoy paying taxes?

Tax collectors generally aren't very popular people.

But it was even worse in the first century.

Tax collectors worked for the enemy --- they collected taxes for Rome.

But that wasn't even the worst of it . . .

They had a fairly well deserved reputation for being dishonest, for overcharging, for skimming money off the top to line their own pockets.

Zacchaeus, the story tells us --- had become very wealthy cheating his fellow Jews

What in the world was Jesus thinking?

But, maybe the more important question is ---- what was Zacchaeus thinking?

Zacchaeus saw the opportunity to change his life.

Instead of becoming defensive --- trying to justify his way of life --- Zacchaeus admitted that he had been a cheat and a liar and offered to change.

Zacchaeus, we are told received Jesus joyfully.

What causes this joy for Zacchaeus?

Zacchaeus apparently had been a typical tax collector of that time, ripping people off, making himself rich by cheating people.

But now he says: “Look, half of my possessions, Lord, I will give to the poor; and if I have defrauded anyone of anything, I will pay back four times as much.”

Jesus' coming to him has caused a big change in the little man.

This is repentance happening here.

A new way to look at the world and his fellow human.

Zacchaeus has come to grips with his sins, he's acknowledged them and is turning away from them.

Even though repentance in this case may end up costing Zacchaeus a bundle of money, he's glad to part with any ill-gotten gain and also to repurpose his wealth to help the poor.

But that's OK. What Zacchaeus is receiving from Jesus is worth far more than all the money in the world

Because the Joy he finds is worth more than anything.

How do you look at the world? --- Is it constantly half empty --- or has God enabled you to have a new perspective and to see the possibilities?

Perspective is the first pillar to experiencing JOY in your life.

Without a God sized perspective --- Joy may be hard to come by.