

“Joy Robbers”
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Scriptural Text: Philippians 3:1-7, ESV

In this study we will be discussing rejoicing in the Lord. It is so vital for us to keep our focus on who our great God is and when we do we find ourselves rejoicing in all circumstances. The primary focus will be on the first verse and we will consider the remaining verses in our next study. Let us consider this great encouragement and command God gives to us regarding our attitude and our heart toward Him.

Righteousness Through Faith in Christ

¹ Finally, my brothers, rejoice in the Lord. To write the same things to you is no trouble to me and is safe for you.

² Look out for the dogs, look out for the evildoers, look out for those who mutilate the flesh. ³ For we are the circumcision, who worship by the Spirit of God and glory in Christ Jesus and put no confidence in the flesh—⁴ though I myself have reason for confidence in the flesh also. If anyone else thinks he has reason for confidence in the flesh, I have more: ⁵ circumcised on the eighth day, of the people of Israel, of the tribe of Benjamin, a Hebrew of Hebrews; as to the law, a Pharisee; ⁶ as to zeal, a persecutor of the church; as to righteousness under the law, blameless. ⁷ But whatever gain I had, I counted as loss for the sake of Christ.

Joy in the soul of the Christian is not an added accessory. It comes as a standard feature in our salvation. The Christian who does not possess joy is living below their privilege as a child of the living God, yet, sadly, many believers fail to enjoy the full benefit of God's rich salvation. The principle we will learn in this study, as we are challenged by this command in Verse 1 is: joy is a central component of God's gift of salvation and it is available to each one of us. There is not one of believer who will say, "Joy is just beyond my reach. The circumstances of my life keep me from joy." When God imparts His life in the soul of the believer, He imparts access to unassailable joy. Joy is our birthright as believers and it is supplied to us by God's Holy Spirit who indwells us. It is supernatural.

I love the testimony of a man in the 3rd Century, before Christianity was legal. He was dying from an illness and he wrote a friend a parting letter. He writes these words, "It is bad world, an incredibly bad world." Has much changed from the 3rd Century? "But, I have discovered, in the midst of it, a quiet and holy people who have learned a great secret. They have found a joy which is a thousand times better than any pleasure of our sinful life. They are despised and persecuted, but they care not. They are masters of their soul. They have overcome the world. These people are the Christians and I am one of them." It is a great letter.

The normal Christian life is a life of abiding joy. This truth was demonstrated to me in practice before it was taught to me in precept. As a child, God gave me the gift of being raised in a joyful Christian family. My dad and my mom deeply loved us children, but their love for God was first and foremost in our home. As my parents lived the Gospel in front of me each day, I learned a Christian was a person who experienced real, lasting joy in God. My parents were not perfect and they acknowledged that. They were flesh and blood illustrations, though, of Romans 14,

¹⁷ For the kingdom of God is not a matter of eating and drinking but of righteousness and peace and joy in the Holy Spirit.

The externals of the Christian faith took a far back seat to the internals: righteousness, peace, and joy.

For instance, my dad read us the Bible, but not as a cold commitment of religious discipline in the home, but with a purpose: to see God and enjoy Him. My mom played hymns on the piano and we sang praises to God as a family, not as a religious ritual, but with hearts full of hope.

I remember gladness in my heart, sitting next to my mom on her piano bench, as we sang of Jesus sacrificed upon the cross, of His resurrection, of His victory over sin and death. We had a little box on the dining room table with slips of paper printed with God's promises. Perhaps you had one, also, because they were popular in that day. We would often

take one before the meal and we would read that promise. Those promises reminded us God was good and sovereign and faithful. Then I would hear my parents pray, pray with us and for us. These were not rote, religious words coming out of their mouths, but they were with a love for God and a love for others. There was joy in their prayers.

My family was not immune to the pain of brokenness and heartache in this world, but God gave us joy in the midst of trials. When my dad lost his job, we prayed and hoped for God's provision and God provided. When my sweet friend and cousin died of hepatitis at the age of four, and I was five, we talked about Heaven and of our hope there and God gave me comfort.

My parent's faith was far more than a series of religious or ethical commitments. It was filled with joy. While my parents did have many religious commitments, we went to church every Sunday morning and Sunday night and most Wednesday nights as a family, despite my many protests, it was clear church-going was not the end goal. We went to church to enjoy God together. While my parents lived according to a very strict, moral law and they applied the moral law to our family, it was clear moral obedience was not the end goal, but obedience to God's Law was for the purpose of pursuing joy in Him. And, disobedience would cause us to forfeit our joy.

Joy is not peripheral in the Christian life, it is central and that is what the Apostle Paul is driving at in our text,

^{1a} Finally, my brothers, rejoice in the Lord.

"Finally...", Paul writes, and he does not write this for two more chapters.¹

There is the story of a little boy who asked his dad one day in church, "Dad, what does it mean when the pastor says, 'In conclusion...'", the dad looked at him and said, "It does not mean anything, son."

Paul is really saying, "And so...", "More over...", "Let me continue my thought..." He is not wrapping things up so much as he is saying, "I am adding a new thought and I am introducing a new idea." He is continuing the theme he has been developing from Chapter 1,

^{27a} Only let your manner of life be worthy of the gospel of Christ...

That is the theme of this entire letter. What kind of life is worthy of the Gospel? It is the kind of life that stands firm, together, in one Spirit. It is the kind of life that strives side-by-side for the sake of the Gospel. It is the kind of life that is courageous when persecution threatens,

²⁸ and not frightened in anything by your opponents. This is a clear sign to them of their destruction, but of your salvation, and that from God.

It is the kind of life that would say,

^{2:3} Do nothing from selfish ambition or conceit, but in humility count others more significant than yourselves.

^{2:12} Therefore, my beloved, as you have always obeyed, so now, not only as in my presence but much more in my absence, work out your own salvation with fear and trembling...

^{2:14} Do all things without grumbling or disputing...

^{3:1a} Finally, my brothers, rejoice in the Lord.

This is what it means to walk in a manner worthy of the Gospel. One aspect of that is that we would rejoice in the Lord and this is an application of the Gospel itself.

We first consider, **Joy is commanded: Joy in the life of a Christian is a priority to God.** He cares.

¹ Philippians 4:8

Paul is very gentle with this command and he does not have a mad face as he writes this, but he does, indeed, give to us a command to rejoice. Joy is not only a treasure to pursue, but it is a command to obey and we need to think about that. If we are not rejoicing in the Lord we are not obedient as disciples.

This subject of joy, this theme, has been a recurring one for the Apostle Paul, particularly in this letter. He has referenced joy eleven times already in the first two chapters and he will do so again,

^{4:4} Rejoice in the Lord always; again I will say, rejoice.

What exactly does it mean to rejoice? First, it does not mean we have an emotionally light-hearted spirit and we go around singing, “The hills are alive with the sound of music,”² every moment of every day. It is great when we feel that way and it is awesome when God gives to us that kind of emotional uplift, that we are perky and playful, but the painful trials of life call for a joy made of weightier stuff.

The Eeyores³ in the church can have Christian joy just as surely as the Tiggers⁴ in the church. The Eeyores may express joy differently, but obeying this command does not mean we alter our personalities or that we make light of all circumstances.

What does it mean to rejoice in the Lord? To rejoice in the Lord means we delight in God and in His goodness through all circumstances, through the power of the Holy Spirit. In all circumstances we are delighting in God and His goodness. We do that not by self-determination to have joy, but we do that by the power of the Holy Spirit at work within us. No one can rejoice through all circumstances apart from the omnipotent power of God’s Spirit working in us. Joy is the fruit of the Spirit and not the fruit of a positive outlook on life or the fruit of positive thinking.

Furthermore, Christian joy satisfies our soul by placing our focus upon God’s sovereign and faithful love for us. Our rejoicing does not hinge upon our happenings. Our rejoicing rests upon God’s wise providence and His unchanging character.

To help us to gain a clearer picture of the meaning of rejoicing, consider what the opposite of rejoicing is: it is grumbling and we have discussed previously from Philippians 2:14. The opposite of rejoicing is disputing, fighting, fretting, fuming, getting frustrated. We cannot rejoice in the Lord and then complain, argue, worry, or vent anger at the same time. These are mutually exclusive of each other. One is sin and one is an of obedience and righteousness. Complaining, arguing, worrying, and venting anger excludes joy from our soul; they push it out.

So, why is joy in our life such a priority for God that He would command us to rejoice? There are three reasons, from this letter, that stand out to me. First, a joyful faith is attractive to the world. God has already revealed His heart for the church in this letter and God longs for the church to be,

^{2:15} that you may be blameless and innocent, children of God without blemish in the midst of a crooked and twisted generation, among whom you shine as lights in the world...

Spirit-produced joy shines Gospel light into a dark world. The German philosopher and an enemy of Christianity, Friedrich Nietzsche,⁵ once said of Christians, “I would believe in their salvation if they looked a little more like people who had been saved.” I do not believe he is telling the truth, that he would not have believed regardless, but this is an interesting observation. Christianity was not attractive to him because when he was around believers they did not look a people who had been saved.

Oliver Wendell Holmes, Jr. was a member of the United States Supreme Court for thirty years. He wrote, at one point, “I might have entered the ministry if certain clergymen I knew had not looked and acted so much like undertakers.” That is not word against undertakers so much as it is a word that clergy need have a little bit more joy in their life.

² Theme from “The Sound of Music”. Richard Rodgers and Oscar Hammerstein II, 1959.

³ A character in the *Winnie-the-Pooh* books by A. A. Milne. He is generally characterized as a pessimistic, gloomy, depressed, anhedonic, old grey stuffed donkey who is a friend of the title character, Winnie-the-Pooh.

⁴ A fictional tiger character originally introduced in A. A. Milne's book *The House at Pooh Corner*.

⁵ Friedrich Wilhelm Nietzsche, 1844-1900.

How sad it is to negate our witness to the world through joyless lives. Parents, your children are watching you and they are watching you regarding this issue of joy. If they see more joy in the people of this world than they do in their home, guess which road they will choose when they are making choices? We, by nature, pursue the path we believe leads to joy and Satan loves to deceive us into which path that is. But, we cannot communicate clearly the Gospel to our children if our home is joyless. It is so valuable for us to have homes which pursue joy for the glory of God and as a witness to the little ones growing up in our family.

Joyful faith is also contagious within the church. Remember, the call for spiritual unity is a central theme of this letter. It is Paul's central concern and we cannot have spiritual unity in the church amongst us if we do not have spiritual joy within us. One of the reasons joy is such a priority to God is because joy spreads health throughout the whole church; it is infectious.

Paul knows discontentment is certainly infectious and discontent within one person tends to feed discontentment in others. Grumbling on one side echoes over other parts of the church, but he also knows joy does the same thing. One person's joy in the Lord presents a testimony of God's love and faithfulness in all circumstances and the church takes notice of that, "This person maintains their joy in spite of what is happening in their life. How is that? I need more of that!" And, we are drawn to the God who gives joy in that. The testimony of joy works powerfully in church members lives.

I, for one, as a pastor, have been incredibly impacted by the testimony of joy within Christ's church. It has been my privilege for the past twenty years to visit the sick and the grieving in this church family. Many times I went with the purpose of ministering grace and hoping to offer some of God's peace and some of His joy in the midst of very miserable circumstances, only to find myself leaving such an event with a greater joy another person had given to me. I recognized they were the one's going through it, but they had such hope and peace and there is such joy in their heart.

I can tell you story after story, which would fill an entire afternoon and into the next week, but let me share one with you. There was one Sunday evening I received a phone call, right before evening service. It was from a relative of Mary Carlson. This relative told me Mary's son, Norman, had suddenly passed away that afternoon. She said Mary did not know anything about this and I was asked if I would tell her. I went to the sanctuary and Mary was sitting there talking and rejoicing in the Lord, as she often does, and I asked her to come and talk with me. As we were going back, there was talk of encouragement and as I sat her down, I said, "Mary, I just received a phone call about your son, Norman." She looked at me and her eyes got sad and she said, "He is in Heaven now isn't he?" She could tell by the tone of my voice, but then we began to talk. Here is this dear woman who just found out her son unexpectedly had been translated from this world to the next and here she was talking about her hope.

How does a person do that? They have the joy of the Lord as their strength. This leads us to the third reason why joy in our life is such a priority to God: a joyful faith is strengthening to each believer. Spirit-produced joy is a witness to the world and is contagious to the church and it is strengthening to the soul of the individual. Joy and strength are tied together. Nehemiah would write,

8:10b "And do not be grieved, for the joy of the LORD is your strength."

We, also, read,

¹ Chronicles 16:27 Splendor and majesty are before him; strength and joy are in his place.

Strength and joy are tied together and without joy we lose our strength. I believe Paul is speaking about this particular benefit of joy in Verse 1,

¹ Finally, my brothers, rejoice in the Lord. To write the same things to you is no trouble to me and is safe for you.

The Amplified version of the Bible reads this way,

¹ For the rest, my brethren, delight yourselves in the Lord *and* continue to rejoice that you are in Him. To keep writing to you [over and over] of the same things is not irksome to me, and it is [a precaution] for your safety.⁶

Paul is telling them it is a safeguard to their soul and he realizes they might tire of his talking to them about joy in the Lord, but he does not ever tire about writing about it. His writing about it, and reminding them of these things, it keeps them safe and it is a safeguard for their soul and for the Philippian church. When the church loses joy it becomes open to all kinds of threat from the enemy. When the individual loses joy in their life they become vulnerable, spiritually, to all sorts of temptations. Rejoicing in the Lord acts as a safeguard for the soul.

The principle we learn is: Satan loves to keep us from our joy in God. He knows his temptations lose their flavor when we are delighting in God and His goodness. He works to make us forget the goodness of God. He works to make us discontented, unthankful, self-pitying creatures. If he can get us into a mode of self-pity, “Woe is me!”, then he has made us vulnerable to every other of his temptations.

Consider what Satan did with Adam and Eve. Those two lived in a perfect world. There was no sorrow, no sin, no brokenness. Everything needed was right in front of them, but the Devil whispered, “God knows when you eat of this fruit, your eyes will be open and you will be like Him, knowing good from evil.” He whispered, “God does not desire your joy. If He desired your joy He would let you eat of this fruit. If you eat this fruit then you will really find joy and you will find happiness. You will know good and evil. God is holding back joy from you. If you disobey Him, then you will find real joy.”⁷ Think of the magnitude of that deception.

Here are these two living a perfect life. They had a perfect relationship. They had a perfect joy. They had a perfect communion with God. There was no sickness, no sorrow, no guilt and Satan whispers, “You do not have it good enough!” and they believed him. Satan whispered, “You need something that only disobedience to God can bring you,” and they believed him.

Adam and Eve lost their joy in the Lord before they ate the fruit and not after. It is because they lost their joy in the Lord they ate and open to Satan’s deception. If they had continued to rejoice in the Lord, that temptation would not have even been a temptation to them. They would have focused upon, “God has given us this Garden and all these trees. He told us we could eat of any tree in the Garden. We have it made here. We are going to rejoice in the Lord,” and they would not have listened to Satan’s voice.

Matthew Henry writes, “The joy of the Lord will arm us against the assaults of our spiritual enemies and put our mouths out of taste for those pleasures with which the tempter baits his hooks.” The flavor of God’s joy makes the world’s food taste bland and sour to our soul. The way to push ourselves away from the food our flesh feeds us is to feast on the joy God offers to us. So, let us resolve, “I will rejoice in the Lord.”

Secondly, **joy is located: Joy is discovered only in the Lord.** Every person, by nature, pursues joy. The question is: Where do you believe you will find it? Paul tells us we will find it in the Lord.

Yesterday I had an eye appointment at the Illinois Eye Clinic. On Friday I had a cataract surgery. The one great joy I had in that whole process is that Dr. Fitch, my optometrist, when he diagnosed me, said, “Why you have ‘young man’s cataracts.’” I rejoiced because to have a young man’s anything is a really great thing. (Laughter) So, I have a new eye. The only problem is, whenever I use it I hear this ding, ding, ding, ding sound. That is for those of you who watched “The Bionic Man” as you were growing up. (Laughter) As I was waiting, my wife was reading the latest Ladies Home Journal. There was an article that caught my eye entitled *Ten Minute Guide to Joy*. I wondered what they were saying about joy and how they find joy in life. Here are some of their suggestions:

- Do the ten-second happy dance when someone cancels a meeting or plans;

⁶ *The Amplified New Testament*. Zondervan Bible Publishers, Grand Rapids, Michigan. Copyright The Lockman Foundation, 1958.

⁷ Genesis 3

- Have five minutes, you can be in Bali by now. Just pop on the pictures and search for your dream destination. You will instantly get hundreds of gorgeous pictures to browse for mini-mental vacations;
- Let your kids eat donuts for dinner and watch them stare at you in confusion and then in total delight.

This does not tell you what will happen an hour later when they are screaming and running through the house!

- Break out the fancy china;
- Blow the gift cards you have been hoarding;
- Open that bottle of spendy wine;
- Wear the dress you have been saving for a special occasion. You deserve to feel good every day. Your life is now!

You could try finding joy in those places and you might feel a happy buzz for a few minutes, but are these things really weighty enough to keep you rejoicing when your life is hit so hard by pain and trials? It is the best thing the world has to offer and that is why they offer it. People read it and people buy the magazine. They are looking for a place for joy. Joy that is dependant upon the things of this world is a joy which is fragile and passing away.

Beloved, we believers have an eternal, secure source of joy and that is the risen Lord in Jesus Christ. When God calls us to rejoice in the Lord He invites us to root our lives in the One who is the Alpha and the Omega, the Beginning and the End, the Author of Eternal Salvation, the Lamb of God who has come to take away the sins of the world, the Great Shepherd of the Sheep, the One who is faithful and true, the Eternal Creator, the Sufficient Redeemer, the Wonderful Savior, the Prince of Peace, the Light of the World, the King of kings, and the Lord of lords. He is someone who gives reason for joy in every circumstance in this broken world. He is the One who said, "Be of good cheer for I have overcome the world."⁸

Beloved, Jesus is the only sufficient location of joy. If you look for joy anywhere else you will find counterfeits of joy which, for a time, seem to be effective, but then whither and fade with the afternoon sun.

Where is real joy found? The answer is simple: in Christ alone. But, how do we rejoice in the Lord when our circumstances pull us downward into fear and worry, into despair and frustration. There is a two-step answer. First, we must embrace Jesus and our Savior and Lord. The joy of the Lord is supernatural and it is given only to those who have committed their lives to Christ Jesus and who have become children of God through faith. The joy of the Lord is not about positive thinking or a right mental attitude. It is about Christ indwelling the heart.

Let me take a moment to explain this as clearly as I possibly can what it means to embrace Jesus as Lord and Savior. The Bible teaches us everyone has sinned against God and have fallen short of His righteous standard. We are lost and condemned by God. We are separated from Him. We are cut off from God and alienated from God Himself. So, we, as sinners, come to God and we come to God with our good works and our religious acts. The Bible tells us we find ourselves rejected by God. If all we have when we come to Him are our righteous acts, our good works, and our religious performance, our good works and our religious acts do not cancel the sins we have committed against God. In order to come to God we actually have to lay aside our good works and religious acts as any basis for God's acceptance of us. Those, in and of themselves, become self-righteous, a sin God hates.

As we come to God we must come to God as humble sinners, as beggars, as people dead in sin in need of a resurrection.

At my son, Alexander's, wedding this summer, they sang a song. It has such an incredible impact with great words which describe the kind of heart we must have in order to come to Christ. Have you come to Christ with this heart? Here is the invitation of God,

Come, ye sinners, poor and needy,
Weak and wounded, sick and sore;
Jesus ready stands to save you,
Full of pity, love and power...

⁸ John 16:33

Come, ye weary, heavy laden,
Lost and ruined by the fall;
If you tarry till you're better,
You will never come at all...

Let not conscience make you linger,
Not of fitness fondly dream;
All the fitness He requireth
Is to feel your need of Him.⁹

That song tells us not to dream of being fit to stand before God, before you come to Christ as Savior. The only fitness we need is the fitness of recognizing, "I need Christ!" Where does this joy in the Lord begin? It begins with finding Christ and embracing Jesus as your Savior and your Lord. If we rejoice in the Lord, we must come to Christ as a sinner in need of grace. Have you? He is a Sufficient Savior.

The second step I would encourage you toward, as a believer set your mind on Jesus and then set your heart on Jesus. Inform you mind as to why Jesus brings joy in every circumstance and then cling to those truths by faith. As we read the Bible we will find, over and over, God teaches us our joy is connected to a developed knowledge concerning what the Bible says about God and His plan for us.

For instance, in Psalm 1, we read,

³ Blessed is the man... (whose) ² ...delight is in the law of the LORD, and on his law he meditates day and night. ³ He is like a tree planted by streams of water that yields its fruit in its season...

That is a picture of joy. That is a person who delights in the Law because a growing, maturing understanding of God through His Word is a foundation,

Psalm 19:8 the precepts of the LORD are right, rejoicing the heart...

John 15:11 *"These things I have spoken to you, that my joy may be in you, and that your joy may be full."*

Jesus is telling His Disciples, "If you have listened to the words I have just taught you (John Chapters 13, 14, and the beginning of 15), I have spoken these words and given to you this teaching so that my joy might be in you and your joy might be full." If we are to pursue joy, we must pursue a growing, mature knowledge of God's Word. That is why it is so valuable and important for us to spend time in the Word, so that we can rejoice in the Lord.

As we open our Bibles, we ask, "What do I learn in the Bible to help me to rejoice in the Lord?" We learn the Lord protects our life so that, even if we die, we live. We learn the Lord walks with us in all circumstances, in death and darkness, so we need never fear evil. We learn the Lord makes us holy through our suffering so that we might have greater treasure forever. We learn the Lord adopts us into His family so we are never left as orphans. We learn the Lord gives us strength when we are weak so we are never overcome and never overwhelmed. We learn the Lord provides us with daily bread and everything we need so we do not have to worry about tomorrow. We learn the Lord sacrificed Himself upon the cross so as to forgive us our sins so that one day we will stand before God absolutely clean and forgiven. We learn the Lord loves us even when we stray so that He welcomes us home when we return to Him. We learn the Lord is exalted above the world and His name is given above every name so His enemies never, ever triumph. We learn the Lord reconciles a relationship with Himself so that we can know Him and commune with Him as a friend. Rejoice in the Lord!

Joy is the Christian's birthright. In our next study we will discuss the remainder of this text and a bit further into Verse 12. We will discuss **joy threatened: Our joy is endanger of being stolen from us**. The Apostle Paul is so gentle and mild in Verse 1, but then he says,

² Look out for the dogs, look out for the evildoers, look out for those who mutilate the flesh.

⁹ Joseph Hart, 1712-1768, *Come Ye Sinners, Poor and Needy*, Hymns Composed on Various Subjects, with the Author's Experience, 1759.

Let me say one thing about this. False doctrine, if it is believed, will rob the Christian of joy and it will rob the church of joy. That is why these are tied together.

There were the Judaizers who said, “Trust in Jesus, but also, here is what you must do in order to be accepted by God.” They were building a performance-based view of the Gospel. Paul tells us to watch out for the “dogs”. I do not believe Paul had a pet dog at home which did not seem to like him.

Joy is threatened and our joy is in danger of being stolen from us and one of the joy-robbers Satan uses to keep us from rejoicing in the Lord is false doctrine.

The other point we will discuss next is **joy energized: Joy thrives when Christ becomes our treasure**. How do we deepen our joy? We must delight more in Christ,

³ For we are the circumcision, (we are a people) who worship by the Spirit of God and (who) glory in Christ Jesus and (who) put no confidence in the flesh...

Beloved, joy is our birthright. It is our joy that makes the Gospel contagious. It can make the Gospel attractive to the world. It is joy which breeds joy among other members in the church. It is joy that strengthens our soul. Brothers and sisters in Christ, let us focus all the more on Christ and let us rejoice in the Lord. He is good.