

Enjoying Right Now: *Spiritual Growth for Normal People*

Rev. Scott McGinnis - First Presb. Church of Newton, KS - June 13, 2021

My sermon today has one theme. You don't need to defer joy in your life! It does not matter what the schedule says, your sister says, your circumstances say, what Satan says... you can enjoy right now.

You might push back and say, *"If you knew what my right now is, you would not be talking to me about enjoying it."* I don't deny that you might have some difficulty or maybe even some extreme difficulty. Yet that is why we are going to look at Philippians today.

In this short book of Philippians we see a person, Paul, who has lost his health, his wealth, his freedom and some of his friends, yet he talks sixteen times in Philippians about the joy he has in his life. There is a sense that his inward dynamics have an immunity of sorts to these outward dynamics.

As we will learn from this book, we see this joy doesn't come without intention and effort, so we hold this confidence as we seek joy. Paul writes, **"Being confident of this, that he who began a good work in you will carry it on to completion until the day of Christ Jesus."** Philippians 1:6 (NIV)

How does Paul get this confidence about the good in his life even amidst so much difficulty?

Key Question - How Does this happen?

Growing up to maturity in Jesus is not determined by age – you can be old and wise or old and foolish. And it is not just actions – you can be compelled to do things, but the question can be asked, *where do the actions that spring from?* There is a theme in Philippians we see again and again, **Further, my brothers and sisters, rejoice in the Lord!** Philippians 3:1 (NIV)

God promises us joy through Him and in Him. Although God never promises to give us all we think we want, God does say...

“I will never leave you or forsake you....”

“I have come that you have life and have it abundantly...”

And **“God did not come into the world to condemn the world, but to save the world through him...”**

These are some of God’s promises. They speak of the larger story that brings us joy.

Still we need to live our faith with intention and effort, but that can lead to a danger. It’s a faith that says, **“Follow Rituals and Rules”**. When we think of someone who is spiritually mature, who is living their faith intentionally, sometimes we have images of people who are rigid and rule-bound. That is not spiritually mature.

In the Philippians' church there was a big discussion of what cultural practices from the Jews that needed to be continued and followed by Greeks who were joining Jesus' Church as fellow Christians. Paul refers to this when he writes, **Watch out for those dos, those evildoers, those mutilators of the flesh.** Philippians 3:2 (NIV) Paul was warning of those promoting the Jewish practice of circumcision. Paul says, *"Following Jesus is not about rituals or religious rules."* He continues, **If someone else thinks they have reasons to put confidence in the flesh, I have more.** Philippians 3:4 (NIV).

He is saying he has done all the religious requirements and they're a dead end. That's good news! This faith in Jesus, this Christian life, this growing to maturity in Jesus, this having internal joy amidst the harshness of life, this doesn't require us to follow religious rituals or rules. Thank you, Jesus!

So what is our other option? **Follow Jesus.** This means that I am intentional about developing a relationship with Jesus. The Apostle Paul put it this way, **I consider everything a loss because of the surpassing worth of knowing Christ Jesus my Lord,** Philippians 3:9 (NIV).

I think we're all here for that relationship with Jesus that gives us hope and joy. We want that. We've tasted that joy in this God journey. We want it more and more consistently. I love in the Good Neighbor Experiment we

did two years ago that one of the lessons was about fostering joy in our lives. I had never thought that there are practices we can do that foster and grow the fruit of the Spirit joy in our lives. Of all things, it was a surprise to me that choosing to celebrate fosters joy. The humorous example was, “*choose to celebrate Lumpy Rug Day,*” which was May 3rd.

The instruction from the lesson was to choose to celebrate. So completing the lesson, I asked my family one day to name one thing they wanted to thank God for that day and that we were going to celebrate with dessert. Choosing to celebrate brought us joy. The meal went from an all too common effort to get the kids to eat their green vegetables to a meal of joy and excitement that *we were celebrating!* Choosing to celebrate is one way to foster joy in our lives. Hundreds of churches that have completed the Good Neighbor Experiment can give testimony to that choice.

But then I don't know about you, but I'd still want even more joy in my life than at celebrations. How do we enjoy the joy of the Lord more and more consistently? In the next verses we find out how to make the kind of spiritual progress that is real, joy releasing and lasting in our lives.

As the Scripture does, let me get very practical about...

FIVE ENDURING PRINCIPLES OF AUTHENTIC SPIRITUAL GROWTH

Principle...

1. As Long as I am Alive, I have not arrived.

You know what it is to know God, but be stuck. You can know Jesus ...

But still be dealing with bitterness

But still be making decisions through pride

But still be looking at yourself through the lens of insecurity

We read, “**Not that I have already obtained all this, or have already arrived at my goal...**” Philippians 3:12 (NIV)

This is when knowing we’ve not yet arrived at our goal, we choose to take our next right step. Not a giant leap to the finish line, which might not be doable any way, but simply taking our next right step. One step in the right direction. “Baby Steps” as *What About Bob?* says.

Paul is talking about a holy dissatisfaction. He wants to mature in Jesus, but has not arrived yet. Yet this is not a guilt driven life, he’s writing about growth.

This leads to another principle and this one is a bit more nuanced...

2. Examples Create Growth, Not Comparison.

Examples are about affirming something in another person's life and saying, *I want that to be part of my story as well.*

That is why the apostle Paul could say, **Join together in following my example, brothers and sisters, and just as you have us as a model, keep your eyes on those who live as we do.** Philippians 3:17 (NIV)

The Message paraphrase says it this way, **Keep track of those you see running this same course, headed for this same goal.** Philippians 3:17 MSG

In that it is important to remember....

3. Success is not Forever and Failure is Not Final.

To be honest, sometimes the Christian life feels like three steps forward and two steps back. We're not yet the way we want to be. Yet here is the truth, no matter how good it was or how bad it was, we cannot live in the past. The Apostle Paul says, **Forgetting what is behind and straining toward what is ahead.** Philippians 3:13 (NIV)

Past successes can be our greatest roadblock. Past failures can keep us trapped. We need to make sure our windshield is larger than our rearview mirror.

In the Scripture it says that Satan loves to remind us of our past.

When the apostle Paul says “*he forgets his past,*” he is not just talking about his successes, he is talking about his failures as well. When Paul became a Christian, he was so bad that no one believed him when he said he had changed. The Christians thought he was still after them. But he did change.

I think this helps us to not count ourselves out where God hasn't. Still know that salvation, a relationship with God is a gift from Him, yet spiritual progress takes some determination which is our fourth principle of enduring spiritual growth.

4. The right path is seldom the path of least resistance

There was a famous marshmallow experiment that was done with children by researchers at Stanford University and it was about delayed gratification.

The kids were shown a small treat and told, “*If you wait, something better will be given to you.*” Then they left the kids in the room with the treat. Can you guess what happened? Some just went right over and ate the treat. They didn't wait for “something better.” Some would not go near the food, but sort of looked at it, but then many of them gave in and ate it. They had to wait 15 minutes to get either a marshmallow or a pretzel stick, depending on their preference.

Then the study tracked these kids for 40 years and the kids who practiced delayed gratification had better life outcomes. They did better on their SAT's, etc. While those that didn't wait, they all went to prison. Just kidding!

The whole idea though is, can you trust the best is yet to come and will you orient your actions around that reality? The apostle Paul had this defiant joy, despite adversity, because of how he viewed his life. He wrote, **I press on toward the goal to win the prize for which God has called me heavenward in Christ Jesus.** Philippians 3:14 (NIV)

Some of you are doing that right now, pressing on, not giving up, finding hope, and know this, no one else may see it, but God does. That's ok. He sees it.

Finally remember this...

5. Grace Trumps Shame for Lasting Change

Do you want to be changed, do you want to stretch yourself to serve, to become more generous, to share your hope in Jesus' Kingdom. Then consider that grace that God has shown you through Jesus Christ. The apostle Paul put it this way, **Only let us live up to what we have already attained.** Philippians 3:16 (NIV)

We have to remind ourselves that in Jesus, we have arrived. We are the glorious new creation. We are the

apple of God's eye. God the Father, Son, and Holy Spirit delights in you.

John Eldredge writes in *Waking the Dead*,

Certainly, you will admit that God is glorious. Is there anyone more kind? Is there anyone more creative? Is there anyone more valiant? Is there anyone more true? Is there anyone more daring? Is there anyone more beautiful? Is there anyone more wise? Is there anyone more generous? You are his offspring. His child. His reflection. His likeness. You bear his image. Do remember that though he made the heavens and the earth in all their glory, the desert and the open sea, the meadow and the Milky Way, and said, "It is good," it was only after he made you that he said, "It is very good" (Gen. 1:31). Think of it: your original glory was greater than anything that's ever taken your breath away in nature.

Psalm 16:3 says, As for the saints who are in the land, they are the glorious ones in whom is all my delight.

God endowed you with a glory when he created you, a glory so deep and mythic that all creation pales in comparison. A glory unique to you, just as your fingerprints are unique to you, just as the way you laugh is unique to you. Somewhere down deep inside we've been looking for that glory ever since.

It is true, you are glorious. God made you that way. We must remember that the Christian life is about progress, not perfection. The Christian life is about direction: we know where we're headed is good.

And so, as always, the best way to follow Jesus is one step at a time. It's the same for you and for me. Enjoying right now is about know that what God is asking you to do, is not what you can't do, but what you can do today, not in your wisdom or strength, but in His. One next right step. I might find ten things in the mirror that need to be fixed, and you know, I can't do all things, but I can start. I can say, "What is my next right step?"