

Do you enjoy being a Christian? It's a deceptively simple question, but it's an important one. I'm not asking if you are *happy to be a Christian*, that is, if there is something you find useful or helpful about following Jesus; I'm asking if you actually enjoy your day-in, day-out experience of trusting and following God. Here's the difference: it's quite possible to *endure* the Christian life for the sake of some good you see in the future, such as being spared eternal hell on the Great Day of judgment, while not actually *enjoying* daily life as a Christian. It's one thing to have the attitude "Being a Christian is miserable and hard, but one day it will all be worth it."; It's another thing entirely to go through life with an *abiding* joy that grows out of a deep friendship with Jesus.

I hope you can see that one of these ways of life is much better than the other, but even when we recognize *that*, we can still fall short of actually living a joyful Christian life. When I ask, "Do you enjoy being a Christian?" it's not enough to answer, "I know that it would be better to enjoy being a Christian." If I ask, "Isn't loving Jesus great?" You can correctly answer that *yes, loving Jesus is great*, but at the same time you might get a lump in your throat; your eyes might start to tear up, because while you understand in your mind that the salvation story found in God's Word is objectively wonderful and good, you aren't *experiencing* the joy of salvation.

If I switched over to another topic, it might make things clearer. If I asked you, "Is marriage good? Is parenting good? Is having a job good?" I'd expect you all to say *yes, yes, yes*. But if I ask you "How's *your* marriage?" We might find that you are *not enjoying* what you know to be a good thing. It might be the case that right now, parenting a difficult child is the hardest part of your life, as you try to restrain a self-willed child, or motivate an apathetic child, or grieve over the rebellion of a prodigal child. You might be thankful to *have* a job, and at the same time hate every minute of *working at that job*. Both can be true.

So is that the case in your Christian life? Are you thankful to be a Christian, but having a hard time enjoying it when following God causes a rift in your family or when issues arise at Church? It's okay to be honest with yourself about this. In fact, you *need* to be honest with yourself and before God about this. Here's why: Neh. 8:10 tells us that "the joy of the Lord is your strength." If you're not abiding in joy, then *your heart is growing hard, your faith is getting faint, and your witness is weak*.

Here's how your heart is growing hard: if you are doggedly slogging on with God while not enjoying what He calls you to do, who He calls you to be, and the life circumstances that He's placed you in, then you are spending your Christian *endurance* on the wrong things! Endurance is for *trials*; joy is for the Christian life! And yes, the Christian life includes trials, but it is a life of joy with trials in it, not a life of trials with some occasional joy sprinkled in. Loving and serving God should be a joy, and the joy of loving God is what strengthens you to face the trials! But if your experience of the Christian life feels like *constant drudgery*, then this is going to affect your view of God. You'll start to think that your God is a God who gives a life of drudgery to His children.

This is what we see in the older brother in Jesus' parable of the prodigal son. The older brother did everything right, out of a sheer sense of duty. He wished he could go party with his friends, and so he grew to resent his father even while outwardly obeying. When he saw radical love and utter joy at work in his brother's restoration, he turned away. He had lost his capacity for joy by allowing himself to live a life of dutiful drudgery, and he ended up with a hard heart.

Here's how your faith is getting faint: if you aren't enjoying God and His ways, then when an alternative arises, you'll be much more likely to give up your faith. The world, the flesh, and the devil promise enjoyment, and often outwardly deliver on that promise. It takes eyes of faith to spot the lie, but if your faith is not being fed by Jesus' joy, then you won't see how Jesus is better.

We see an example of this in 2 Tim. 4:10, where Demas fell in love with this present world and deserted the Apostle Paul. We see it today when people fall away from the faith because Christianity is exclusive, or judgmental, or repressive. It's very hard to draw people away from the faith who are abiding in God's love and are filled with the joy of Jesus! It's far easier to attack the faith of those who think that God is a hard master, and who don't really like following Him all that much, even if for a time they think they ought to so that they can go to heaven when they die.

And here's where your witness is weak: think about trying to tell your neighbor how wonderful and good Jesus is when you barely believe it yourself. "Come be a miserable Christian along with me." isn't much of an advertisement! Now, the reason why your neighbor should love and trust Jesus is because the gospel is true and Jesus is Lord. Not *liking* Jesus' Lordship really doesn't change the *fact* of Jesus' Lordship. But because the gospel is not just news but *good news*,

and because Jesus isn't just Lord, but a good, gracious, loving, kind, strong, faithful, and true Lord, then if the goodness of the gospel and the joy of Jesus aren't bringing joy into your life, then something is wrong! And the problem isn't with the gospel, and it isn't with Jesus – it's with you!

So think about the contrast between the rich young ruler, who went away sad when he heard what the call of discipleship involved, and the woman at the well, who ran to tell everyone in her village how wonderful Jesus was. Which of these two had an effective witness for Jesus?

And what it crucial for us to see is the difference in their circumstances: the rich young ruler had three things going for him: he was rich, he was young, and he was a ruler! The Samaritan woman, on the other hand, didn't have much going for her. She was a heretical half-breed in the eyes of the Jews. She was also apparently coming to the well *by herself*, rather than in the company of other women, and what we learn about her marital status or lack thereof may have had something to do with it. She'd had five husbands, and wasn't married to the man she was with. Whether this was a series of divorces or deaths, she'd clearly had a hard time of it.

The reason I call attention to this is because we often make the mistake of looking for joy in our *circumstances* instead of in our *relationship with Jesus*. This is the main reason why we stop enjoying the Christian life – not because joy isn't available, not because our circumstances won't allow for joy, but because we are *looking for joy in all the wrong places*. We are depending on and leaning on the wrong things to produce joy in the Christian life, and we are putting our joy in the wrong place, where it can be stolen by circumstances!

The call to sell everything sucked the joy out of the rich young ruler who had seemed so eager to follow Jesus, because his joy was in his possessions. But even though her time with Jesus didn't fix her messy marriage history, the woman at the well was filled with joy because she had met the Messiah. Joy doesn't come from life circumstances; it comes from being loved by Jesus!

In a mysterious and wonderful way, Christians can endure real, painful hardships and sorrows, while at the same time maintain their joy in the Lord. Jesus' joy that He speaks of in John 15:11 ("my joy"), the joy that fills us as believers, does not *ignore* or *brush off* the pain and heartache of this life, but it does run deeper, so that even when life is hard, the joy of Jesus sustains us. You remember how Paul describes servants of God as *sorrowful*, yet always *rejoicing*!

Sorrow and joy aren't opposites like *hot and cold* or *tall and short*. They don't *naturally* go together, and one day sorrow and sighing will flee away leaving nothing but utter joy behind, but for now, they can exist together in the same heart. It's *possible* to allow your sadness to swallow up your joy, but *it doesn't have to be that way*. You can be sad, and still know the joy of the Lord!

So if you are going through a time when you are not enjoying your Christian life, I want you to hear this good news and have hope. Take heart! Jesus has joy for you! Joy that your circumstances cannot take away! Not necessarily the joy that looks happy and chipper and cheerful, but the deep solemn joy that knows that whatever happens, you have a friend in Jesus who will never leave you or forsake you, who will never condemn you or betray you, who is always ready to hear your cries and count your tears, and who is also not only able and willing to save, but who has *promised* to work all things for your good, so that whatever you experience will lead you further down the path to a joyous salvation and everlasting life.

And notice *how* Jesus gives you this joy: He gives you His joy through His Word. "These things I have *spoken* to you, that my joy may be in you, and your joy may be full." If you are not enjoying God, here is where that joy can be found: by receiving and resting in the Word that Jesus speaks to you.

And here is that Word: Jesus loves you with the same love that God the Father has for Jesus the Son. The love that God had for Jesus sent Jesus through the darkest and most painful life and death that anyone has ever lived and died, and that same love overcame the very worst that sin and death could possibly do. That love raised Jesus from the dead, and that love belongs to you as you abide in Christ.

And the reason Jesus speaks this Word to you is so that His joy will be in you, and your joy may be full; not the *someday* joy that things will eventually get better, but the *today* joy that comes from abiding in the love of God. Christian, hear what Jesus says, and receive His joy, because whatever else is happening in your life, *Jesus loves you*. Abide in that love, and know the joy of Jesus,

- *In the name of the Father, and of the Son, and of the Holy Spirit.*