

## **2. The Practice of Celebration** **(Phil.4:4-13 & John 10:1-10)**

### **Recap on Series**

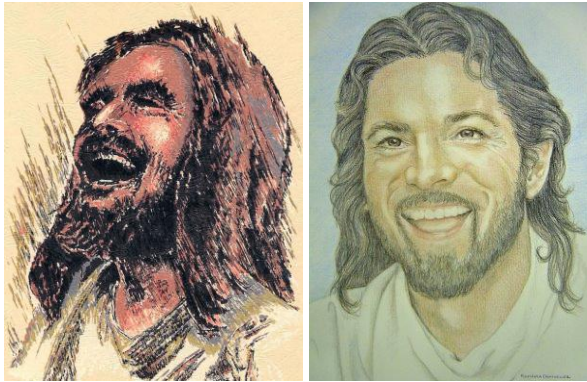
Last week we started our sermon series from John Ortberg's book, "The Life You've always Wanted" on changing and developing our spiritual life. Remember, if we are not changing physically we are dead – and if we are not changing spiritually we are spiritually dead or at least stagnant. These next few weeks are about helping us to '*train for change*' and today's training session is about practicing the art (and the pleasure) of celebration.

### **Introduction**

A few years ago The Telegraph Online started very long discussion with an article entitled 'Is this the is the funniest joke ever?' and then loads of contributors offered their jokes. One was this.

A local squire and his gamekeeper were out in his woods with their shotguns, when the squire collapsed. He didn't seem to be breathing and his eyes were glazed. The gamekeeper quickly called 999 on his mobile. He gasped, "My employer's dead! What can I do?" The operator replied, "Calm down, I can help. First, we need to make sure he's dead". There was silence, then two shots were heard. Back on the phone the game keeper said, "OK, now what?"

Life needs laughter; don't you always feel better after a good laugh? We don't read much in the Bible about Jesus laughing but you can bet he did. Look at the following pictures.



C.S. Lewis once said, “Joy is the serious business of heaven”.

## **1. Our God is a joyful God**

Yes, joy is at the very heart of God’s plan for human beings because joy is at the very heart of God himself. In the earliest chapters of the Bible, as God creates the world he is filled with joy. At the end of every day God looks at his creation and sees that ‘it was good’. As the week of creation progresses you can almost hear the joy in our Father God’s voice as he states after six days ‘it’s *very good*’ (Genesis 1:31) and then declares a holiday, a holy day, to rest and to celebrate.

In our Gospel we hear Jesus saying that he has come to give us life, life in all its fullness. It’s one of my favourite verses in the Bible (I have it as my screen saver on my pc). You might well be thinking, “Joy! Well, he doesn’t know my life, how boring it is or how difficult it is.”

In “The Life You’ve always Wanted” John Ortberg says “We will never understand the significance of joy in human life until we understand its importance to God.” He quotes G.K. Chesterton, who says:

*Because children have abounding vitality, because they are in spirit fierce and free, they want things repeated and unchanged. They always say, "Do it again"; and the grown-up person does it again until he is nearly dead. Grown-up people are not strong enough to exult in monotony. But perhaps God is strong enough to exult in monotony. It is possible that God says every morning, "Do it again" to the sun; and every evening, "Do it again" to the moon. It may not be automatic necessity that makes all daisies alike; it may be that God makes every daisy separately, but has never got tired of making them. It may be that He has the eternal appetite of infancy; for we have sinned and grown old, and our Father is younger than we.*

Truthfully I am easily bored but how amazing that God finds joy in the smallest, most boring things. If God can do that, can't you and I find a sense of joy in boring, monotonous things too? Like driving to work or waiting at the bus stop? Or queuing in line at the supermarket? Or cooking the tea? Cleaning the house? Doing the ironing?

C.S. Lewis said, "Joy is the serious business of heaven". The apostle Paul wrote, "Rejoice in the Lord always, again I say rejoice" (Phil. 4:4) The Bible puts joy in the 'non-optional' category – it is a command.

Joylessness is a serious sin and one which Christians can be prone to and it is often part of the stereo-type of religious people put together by outside world. Christian characters on TV are very often joyless and dull – in short they are killjoys.

You and I are invited to rejoice in every moment of life because every moment of life is a gift. When we unexpectedly experience joy in our life – or when we deliberately seek to find some joy – we find an enormous strength. Of course that's precisely what we read in Scripture. "The joy of the Lord is my strength." (Nehemiah 8:10). Nehemiah wrote this to a people who had lost their joy and were finding life incredibly hard. And if joy is strength then the absence of joy in our lives is weakness.

## **2. The Practice of celebration**

One of the TV programmes I particularly enjoy is ‘Supernanny’. Jo Frost is an experienced nanny and childcare professional who visits families in crisis to try to bring back a bit of joy and order into often chaotic and stressful homes. No two families are quite alike but Jo’s approach and technique is the same in all cases; she re-trains the family. She helps them to recognise bad habits and she then recommends good habits to replace the bad. Instead of trying hard not to do bad, parents are trained to do good. Remember ‘training not trying’ from last week?

If we are finding life (and even church) rather joyless then we need some training in injecting some joy into it. John Ortberg says, “People who want to pursue joy especially need to practice the disciple of celebration. Celebration generally involves activities we find pleasurable (gathering with people we love, eating, drinking, treating ourselves, discovering a new place or a new experience –and if there is to be truly *spiritual* celebration we do these whilst being mindful of the wonderful God who has given us such wonderful gifts.

True celebration is not just about having a good time for its own sake, or for personal indulgence; when we truly celebrate we can see and feel goodness in the simplest gifts of God. So, how do we pursue this joy? Some practical suggestions.

### **1. Begin Now**

The psalmist says, ‘*This* is the day that the Lord has made; let us rejoice and be glad in it.’ *Psalms 118:24*. Not yesterday or tomorrow but now. We can convince ourselves that joy will come if only ...

- if only I change job
- if only I get married
- if only the children leave home
- if only my body feels like it did when I was twenty ... etc.

If we don't rejoice today we will not rejoice at all. We need to seize the day and begin to celebrate today. Don't think you can't find joy because your life is hard at the moment – even in the midst of terrible suffering we can experience the joy of the Lord. One of the English officers imprisoned at Flossenburg Concentration Camp with German Christian minister Dietrich Bonhoeffer said of him, *“Bonhoeffer always seemed to me to spread an atmosphere of happiness and joy over the least incident and profound gratitude for the mere fact that he was alive.”*

True joy comes only to those who have devoted their lives to something greater than personal happiness. You can obviously see this in extraordinary lives, as in the saints or martyrs like Bonhoeffer. But it is also true for ordinary people like you and me. Make a resolution now to make this day a joyful one; begin now.

## **2. Find ‘Joy Mentors’**

I love the sign which you can find on Brian's office door. It says, “All bring joy to this office – some when they enter, some when they leave!” I suspect the same is true for the people in our lives. Some people are absolute life-givers; when we're around them they energise us and breathe life into us. (Ortberg called these ‘joy-mentors’) but some people seem to suck the life from us. I have an aunt who hasn't had a bad life but at times has decided that she is a victim. My dad used to say of her (perhaps unkindly but with more than an element of truth) that ‘she's only happy when she's miserable!’.

I bet we all know people like that. People who are joyless and would like us to be joyless too. I'm not suggesting that we only see joyful people - there are certainly people who need our love, our help and support in very difficult times and we ought to be there for them - but we may need to balance this up so that their troubles don't also shape us. We need to spend regular time with people who who are life-enhancing and joy producing. Proverbs 15:30 (GNB) says, “Smiling faces make you happy, and good news makes you feel better.”

If someone has been a ‘joy mentor’ to you why don’t you encourage them and write to say thanks – you’ll find yourself becoming a joy mentor to them.

### **3. Set aside a day a week**

If joy doesn’t come easily to us then we might need to ‘up the ante’ and set aside a day a week when we do some things which will bring us pleasure. Some of these may be trivial yet can be significant.

Bonhoeffer wrote that his meals in prison made an opportunity to exercise the discipline of joy. *“God cannot endure that unfestive, mirthless attitude of ours, in which we eat our bread in sorrow, with pretentious, busy haste, or even with shame. Through our daily meals He is calling us to rejoice, to keep holiday in the midst of our working day.”*

If we begin to seek joy and perhaps devote a specific day to acts of celebration we’ll find that eventually joy will naturally infuse our entire life.

One day a week eat foods you love to eat, listen to music that moves you, wear clothes that make you happy, watch only TV which inspires you (that means avoiding ‘Eastenders’!) and as you do these things, give thanks to God for his wonderful goodness. Nothing is too small if it produces true joy in us and causes us to turn towards God in gratitude and delight.

### **Conclusion**

Someone once said, “Joy does not simply happen to use. We have to choose joy and keep choosing it every day” (Henri Nouwen). Joy basically comes out of our mindset. If we are somehow determined to be the victim, preferring to see the bad in life we’ll see it but if we are determined to seek joy in life we will find it. “Seek and you shall find” Jesus said.

I suspect that sometimes each of us goes through the week and somehow misses moments for celebration so this week begin to train yourselves in the practice of celebration. Start small and readjust your mindset. “Rejoice in the Lord always, again I say rejoice.”

In two weeks time Mike is going to help us look at **‘the practice of slowing.’**