

## **Rethinking Religion:**

### ***Joy in Spiritual Growth, aka, What Happy People Know***

Rev. Scott McGinnis - First Presb. Church of Newton, KS - June 27, 2021

God has created us to be creative, to advance, and to progress in life. Which is why people can be easily drawn into a rules based religion, because it feels like progress. Still, there is a way to move forward in life that builds our faith in response to grace. One that really changes not only what we do, but what we want to do. Galatians 4:19 is our theme verse today states. It says, **“I died to the law so that I might live for God.”**

This is what God calls us to and it creates joy. Some of you were raised in a rules based religious environment and so you have a hard time putting God and joy in the same sentence. For you, remember that God is the author of joy. Again and again in the Bible we hear statements like when Jesus said, **I have come that you might have joy and your joy might be full...** or in some translations, **...your joy might be complete.** C.S. Lewis, whose writing is almost canonical, said, *“Joy is the Serious Business of Heaven.”*

Now when I talk about joy, I know we have a lot of different thoughts on what it is, and how to experience it, so let me tell you what I believe and why.

First I believe.... **Joy is Possible**

I know some of you may have had tough lives and happiness seems fleeting to you much of the time. It's doesn't need to be that way. See true happiness comes from joy, which means no matter what is happening on the outside, something different can be happening on the inside. And more, it's not too late to change trajectory in life to one that fosters joy. I'll explain how in a little bit.

It's also important to understand that... **Joy is Not a Personality**

How many of you remember Richard Simmons? Some think you have to have that kind of personality to have joy. Let's hope not.

But there is the reality that... **Joy can be Lost**

King David, one of the great kings of Israel experienced this and so he prays to God in Psalm 51, "**God, would you give back to me the joy of Your salvation?**" Joy can be lost from sin or from removing God as the center of our lives. But the good news is we can find joy again.

The main point of this message and another reality is that... **Joy is Connected to Spiritual Growth**

The French Philosopher Blaise Pascal said that each person has a God Shaped Hole in their heart. And here's the deal, you will try to fill that with something. It may be consumption, rules based living, or it can be an expanding

and growing relationship with God. Here's how Jesus put it,

**“As the Father has loved me, so have I loved you. Now remain in my love. If you keep my commands, you will remain in my love, just as I have kept my Father’s commands and remain in his love. I have told you this so that my joy may be in you and that your joy may be complete.” John 15:9-11 (NIV)**

I want to look now at a response to the grace of God that produces spiritual growth and from that growth a lasting sense of joy. So I want to look at the last half of Galatians 5, as the apostle Paul lays out, this is.... **WHAT HAPPY PEOPLE DO.**

I wonder if the Galatian people got caught up in legalism and rules based religion, because they wanted to see spiritual progress in their lives and mostly because they didn't know how to respond to God's grace. Thereby, they didn't know that grace is the greatest motivator of spiritual growth. Instead, they made rules to try to get that growth. But they were going at it all wrong. So here's... **WHAT HAPPY PEOPLE DO.** (See if you agree.)

**Happy people...**

## **1. Understand the End Game**

What is the end game of faith? Ultimately a relationship with God and going to heaven is the end game. But along

the way there is something we want this to produce in our lives: JOY. We want to enjoy this life, this journey. Galatians 5 says how to enjoy life.

**But the fruit of the Spirit is love, joy, peace, patience, kindness, goodness, faithfulness, gentleness and self-control. Galatians 5:22-23 (NIV)**

Think about that, enjoying love, peace, kindness, faithfulness: that sounds like a pretty good life. Paul wants to make sure that the Galatians understand that this is then more about what God is calling them to, than calling them from.

That leads to number two it's that they...

## **2. Confront Negativity Bias**

The term Negativity Bias comes out of the research of social scientists and psychologists. The negativity bias, also known as the negativity effect, refers to the notion that even when of equal intensity, things of a more negative nature (e.g. unpleasant thoughts, emotions, or social interactions; or harmful/traumatic events) have a greater effect on one's psychological state and processes than do neutral or positive things. In other words, something very positive will generally have less of an impact on a person's behavior and cognition than something equally emotional but negative. That's why for

joy, we need to train our minds to do not what comes naturally, but what produces the best results.

When people were focused on religious rituals, Paul describes what is known as the fruit of the spirit and he says, **...against such things there is no law.** Galatians 5:23  
NIV

That's why the Apostle Paul wrote,

**Finally, brothers and sisters, whatever is true, whatever is noble, whatever is right, whatever is pure, whatever is lovely, whatever is admirable—if anything is excellent or praiseworthy—think about such things.** Philippians 4:8 (NIV)

Paul is fighting the negative. He is saying fight against that focus on the negative. Here is one reason why that is so important, focusing on religious rules will reduce our faith to minimalism. We will eventually say, *"What is the thing I need to do at a minimum or not do?"* and that doesn't make you very happy.

Instead of focusing on rules and what to avoid, if we focus on what we're pursuing, that leads towards creativity, generosity, growth, and more fulfillment in life. We can flip the script in our heads when we confront our negativity bias.

Then of course there is number 3...

### 3. Decide Jesus Matters

Of course the first thing to decide is what do you believe about Jesus: just a man, a religious guru or what He claimed to be, God manifested as a human. We do see that Jesus was intent on forcing this issue. As His followers were telling Him about the speculation that surrounded Jesus, He says to His closest follower Peter, **“But what about you?’ he asked. “Who do you say I am?” Simon Peter answered, ‘You are the Messiah, the Son of the living God.’”** Matthew 16:15-16 (NIV)

By the way the passage goes on and Jesus says, blessed is Peter because this was not revealed to him by people, but by God.

I actually get excited when people say they are not sure what they believe about Jesus and are searching, because the evidence of history, Scripture and even our experience today point in the direction of Jesus being the Son of God. Keep searching and I think you’ll find you’ve already been found by Jesus and our Heavenly Father.

Yet the question I want to ask goes even deeper. Does Jesus matter to how I live, how I deal with failure, mine and other people's, to the hope I have in my life?

In the Galatians passage it says, **“Those who belong to Jesus...”** Galatians 5:24 (NIV)

So that question we would rightly ask ourselves is how much of our lives belongs to Jesus? Or maybe, like the old book *My Heart Christs Home* says, “What rooms are off limits?” How we avoid that duality is to invite Jesus even into the messy areas of our lives, the areas where we don’t have it all figured out yet, or maybe we aren’t sure we want to figure it out. The fact is, we were not meant to live without Jesus. Jesus can make a home in our hearts, even in those rooms we feel are not ready for prime time.

Now this can seem counterintuitive, but part of what happy people do is...

#### **4. Impose Self-Limits**

Where Scripture gives freedom, we can be wise, free and grace-filled. One good example is music. Despite what some of you learned in strict religious environments growing up, the Scripture does not say that some music is bad and some is good. Yet, there are some lyrics that I might want to keep out of my head. “*Who let the dogs out?*” does not need to be a song. But even then, I don’t take away someone else’s freedom to listen to their favorite low quality music. In reality, some lyrics are not helpful and we can avoid them.

The freedom we have in Jesus is then not an idea that, if I am saved by grace, then my actions don’t matter. We see this kind of thinking is confronted in Romans 6. We read,

**What shall we say, then? Shall we go on sinning so that grace may increase? By no means! We are those who have died to sin; how can we live in it any longer? Romans 6:1-2 (NIV)**

That is what it means when it says in Galatians 5, “...I have crucified the flesh with its passions and desires.” Galatians 5:24 (NIV)

Another one of the key things that happy people do is they...

## **5. Resist the impulse towards Pride, Anger and Bitterness**

This is huge! The apostle Paul says, “Let us not become conceited, provoking and envying each other.” Galatians 5:26 (NIV)

I’ve heard of three tests to help us see if this is describing us.

**The blame test** -- Do you blame anybody else in the world for your unhappiness? Who are you blaming? That is an indication of resentment. *“Life would be so much better if...”* Blame is an indication of bitterness. You need to let it go.

**The bitterness test** -- Have I been keeping score? Is there a mental balance sheet in my mind that every time they do "something" I say, *“They owe me one”*? That kind

of attitude can make you an unappeasable person, because in your mind, no matter what someone says or does, it's all just repayment. No matter how good they are to you, you're saying, "*They owe it to me.*" You are then unpleasable, because you won't forgive. You will be harming the relationship by your unforgiveness and you can't see it, because it's couched in, "*They owe me one!*"

Then there's...

**The behavior test** -- Do you ever find yourself reacting toward someone, not because of what they've done, but because they remind you of somebody else you resent? That is an indication that you need to learn to forgive. You are taking it out on the wrong person. Often what happens is this: resentment against your parent, whom you were never able to express that resentment to, was held in and now anytime your spouse happens to act like that parent, you transfer all the years of resentment onto that person and blow up! What you're reacting to is not really their fault, it's just that they remind you of somebody else that you never dealt with. You need to let that go. You need to offer forgiveness and you need to accept forgiveness. A past relationship could be destroying a present one.

Finally...

Happy people... **know that hope is future facing.** You can't hope in the past. Hope instead asks the question,

*Father, what do you have for me today?* It's knowing you truly have a Father in heaven who loves you and guides you.

So here's my **Final Thought - The Best way to Follow Jesus is always one step at a time.**

Spiritual growth that leads to joy is really a daily choice. That's what it means when we read, **Since we live by the Spirit, let us keep in step with the Spirit.** Galatians 5:25 (NIV)

What does that look like, I call it taking your next right step. Can you take a step in the right direction today? No, it won't be possible to solve all your biggest challenges with one giant step, but can you take a step, any step in the right direction. It's a daily choice we really can do. What's your next right step?