



## LIVING WORD EPISCOPAL CHURCH

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### Pursuing Holiness: The Joy of Holiness

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I think that we might be prone to hearing this series on pursuing holiness and be tempted to go away thinking that holiness is all about hard work and going around being dour and sombre all the time, and yet God clearly intends the Christian life to be a life of joy – not drudgery. The idea that holiness is associated with a dour disposition is a false caricature. In fact, it's just the opposite that's true. In the end it's only those who walk in holiness who will ever experience true joy.

Jesus said in John 15:10-11, "If you keep my commandments, you will abide in my love, just as I have kept my Father's commandments and abide in his love. These things I have spoken to you, *that my joy may be in you, and that your joy may be full.*" Jesus makes a direct connection between obedience and joy in a cause and effect relationship; that is, joy is the result of obedience. Only those who are obedient – those who are pursuing holiness as a way of life – will know the joy that comes from God.

Consider the example of Cain. He presented an unacceptable offering to God. When his brother, Abel's, offering was accepted, Cain became angry and depressed. God came to him and ask, "Why are you angry and why has your face fallen. If you do well – if you do what is right and are obedient to what I tell you – will your face not look up?" Cain was disobedient to God and the result was a lack of joy – depression in fact. Notice God didn't tell him, be joyful, improve your attitude, and then obey me. No, he said, do what you know is right and then your face will look up – then you will have joy. That's the principle here. Joy comes from obedience. In Cain's case he continued in his disobedience and spiralled down and down into depression and allowed his sin to fester until he killed his own brother. Disobedience starts a downward spiral into depression, but obedience starts the upward spiral into great and greater joy.

You want to experience more joy in the Christian life? Start asking the Spirit to show you the sin in your life and start setting it aside in obedience to God.

Now how does holiness produce joy? First, there is the joy of *fellowship with God*. David said in Psalm 16:11, "In your presence there is fullness of joy; at your right hand are pleasures forevermore." True joy comes only from God and he shares his joy with those who walk in fellowship with him. Consider that it was when David committed adultery with Bathsheba and then had her husband murdered, he lost his sense of God's joy because he lost fellowship with God. In Psalm 51:12 he prayed, "Restore to me the joy of your salvation." Living a life of disobedience can never be a life of joy.

The daily experience of Christ's love for us is linked to our obedience to him. It's not that his love is conditioned on our obedience. That's legalism. But our experience of his love is dependent on our obedience.

In his commentary on St. John's Gospel, William Hendrickson observes that God's love both precedes and follows our obedience. God's love, he says, "by *preceding* our love...creates in us the eager desire to keep Christ's precepts; then, by *following* our love, it rewards us for keeping them."

Joy also comes from knowing that we're obeying God – that we're no longer resisting him in some part of our lives. This kind of joy is especially apparent when, after a long struggle between the Holy Spirit and our sinful natures, we have by his grace finally and radically dealt with some besetting sin that has up to that point mastered us. We might call this the joy of victory...or better, the joy of obedience.

In addition to the joy of fellowship with the Holy God, a holy life also produces the joy of *anticipated reward*. The writer of Hebrews, in 12:1-2, said, "Let us also lay aside every weight, and sin which clings so closely, and let us run with endurance the race that is set before us, looking to Jesus, the founder and perfecter of our faith, who *for the joy that was set before him* endured the cross, despising the shame, and is seated at the right hand of the throne of God." Jesus was motivated to endure by anticipating the joy of his reward. No amount of hardship

and struggle could deprive him of that anticipation.

In the parable of the talents, the Lord said to two servants who used their talents, "Well done, good and faithful servant...Enter into the joy of your master" (Matthew 25:21, 23). One of the "talents" God has given to every Christian is the possibility of walking in holiness, being free from the dominion of sin. Just like those faithful stewards, we can look forward to entering into the joy of the Lord as we walk in holiness to the end of our days.

Joy not only *results* from a holy life, but there's also a sense in which joy helps *produce* a holy life. When Nehemiah led a group of exiled Jews back to Judah it wasn't long before they lost their hope and spirit rebuilding the ruins of Jerusalem. Nehemiah encouraged them saying, "The joy of the LORD is your strength" (Nehemiah 8:10). The Christian who is living in disobedience also lives life without joy and hope. But when he starts to understand that Christ has delivered him from the reign of sin, when he begins to see that he is united to him who has all power and authority, and that it's possible to walk in obedience, he starts to have hope. And as he hopes in Christ, he starts to have joy. In the strength of this joy he starts to overcome the sins that so easily entangle him. He then finds the joy that a holy walk is infinitely more satisfying than the fleeting pleasures of sin.

But to experience joy, we have to make some choices. We have to choose to forsake sin, not only because it's defeating to us, but because it grieves the heart of God. We need to choose to count on the fact that we are dead to sin, freed from its reign and dominion, and we can now actually say no to sin. We need to choose to accept our responsibility to discipline our lives for obedience.

God has provided all we need for our pursuit of holiness. He has delivered us from the reign of sin and given us his indwelling Holy Spirit. He has revealed his will for holy living in his word, and he works in us to will and to act according to his good purpose. He has sent pastors and teachers to exhort and encourage us in the path of holiness; and he answers our prayers when we cry out to him for strength against temptation.

Brothers and sisters, the choice is ours. What will we choose? Will we accept our responsibility and discipline ourselves to live habitually in the will of God? Will we persevere in the face of frequent failure, resolving never to give up? Will we decide that personal holiness is worth the price of saying no to our body's demands to indulge its appetites?

Back at the beginning of this series I talked about how a farmer depends on God, but also understands his own responsibility to produce a harvest. He doesn't just buy a field, pray for crops to grow, and then sit back and do nothing. No. He takes action to plow the soil, to plant the seeds, and to nurture them until they can be harvested. God brings the growth, but not without the farmer doing his part while trusting in God to grow the crops for him. If we're going to attain any measure of holiness we have to do the same thing. We have to trust God to work, but at the same time we have to take action to work with his grace as he tells us, "Be holy, for I am holy."

He hasn't commanded us to be holy without also providing the means to be holy. The privilege of being holy is ours, and the decision and responsibility to be holy is ours too. If you make that decision, you will experience the fullness of joy that Christ has promised to those who walk in obedience to him.