

To See You Fills Me With Joy

by John Piper

The more you delight in God, the greater will be your capacity to delight in those who love Him, and the more you delight in the spiritual marks of the saints, the greater will be your capacity to delight in God in Himself.

Scripture: Philippians 3:7

Topics: "Christian Joy", "Fellowship"

Description

John Piper preaches about the joy that comes from delighting in God and fellow believers, emphasizing the importance of moving beyond a focus on God's gifts to a deep, personal relationship with God Himself. He encourages small groups to center their gatherings on God through prayer and Biblical exhortations, ensuring that joy in each other is an expression of joy in God. Piper highlights three ways joy is experienced in small groups: immediate joy from seeing God's glory reflected in others, deferred joy as the Holy Spirit works in imperfect hearts, and joy from being a source of joy to others. Drawing from the apostle Paul's life, he exemplifies the deep love and joy Paul found in being with fellow believers, urging listeners to seek joy in God and in the company of those who love Him.

Transcript

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Psalm 16:1-3

TO SEE YOU FILLS ME WITH JOY My heart was encouraged Wednesday night by the freedom and earnestness and affection for God with which you prayed. I think it is the mark of a growing people--a people growing toward God in their hearts--that they often move beyond delight in God's gifts to delight in God. They not only say, "Thank you for the rising sun," but also, "I praise you for the brightness of your glory." They not only say, "Thank you for my children," but also, "How amazing is your power, O God, that you can speak everlasting persons into being!" They not only say, "We love your Kingdom, Lord," but also, "Jesus, we love you. Father, Holy Spirit, we love you; we adore you." When the Holy Spirit stirs and quickens this people and grants to us the power to comprehend the breadth and length and height and depth of the glory of the love of God in Christ, and fills us with all the fullness of God, we become lovers of God himself; and all his gifts and creatures become secondary reflections of the Lord himself, and our affections are not satisfied until they ascend along the beam of God's generosity into the very flame of his heart. And I feel a tremendous joy when I hear this people pray, as if you've been there and know what I mean.

O that the Spirit might come down and move more and more of us beyond a preoccupation with the gifts of God to a preoccupation with God. And may our language begin to take on the flavor of personal, living encounters with Christ, so that we say, "Whatever gain I had, I counted as loss for the sake of Christ. Indeed I count everything as loss because of the surpassing worth of knowing Christ Jesus, my Lord" (Phil. 3:7,8). And may our prayers come from hearts that are not far from God, but are so close that we say, "I will go to the altar of God, to God, my exceeding joy; and I will praise thee with the lyre, O God, my God" (Ps. 43:4). "Thou dost show me the path of life; in thy presence there is fullness of joy; in thy right hand are pleasures forevermore" (Ps. 16:11). "Thou dost guide me with thy counsel and afterward thou wilt receive me to glory. Whom have I in heaven but thee? And there is nothing upon earth that I desire besides thee. My flesh and my heart may fail, but God is the strength of my heart, and my portion forever" (Ps. 73:24-26).

If it is true that growing toward God means moving beyond a preoccupation with his gifts to a deep, personal, all-satisfying relationship with God himself, then might not all this stress on small groups pert our attention from God himself and the joy that comes intimately from him? We must not be naive as we move toward small forms of togetherness. There is nothing spiritual or even Christian about gathering together in small groups. Sharing burdens, discussing common interests, providing affirmation--none of these things is godly or spiritual in itself. They happen in bars all over this city where Christ's name is rarely mentioned except in derision. It is very possible that groups could be formed in this church with no spiritual aim or atmosphere, where words from God and earnest prayer to God are viewed as uncomfortable intrusions on a good time. So the answer is yes, small groups could function to pert our attention from God and simply fill up our time with more carnal conversation.

But it is not necessary that there be a competition between our love for small togetherness and our love for God. Turn with me to Psalm 16:1-3. This text has suggested to me an answer to the question: Is it possible to delight in each other as Christians without robbing God of his prerogative? I have always felt a bit uneasy saying, "Whom have I in heaven but thee? And there is nothing on earth that I desire besides thee." That seemed to create an either-or between desiring to be with people and desiring to be with God. But read with me now Psalm 16:1-3. "Preserve me, O God, for in thee I take refuge. I say to the Lord, 'Thou art my Lord; I have no good apart from thee.' As for the saints in the land, they are the noble, in whom is all my delight." On the one hand, David can say that apart from God he has no good thing. God is his only treasure. Yet on the other hand, he can say, "I delight in the saints of the land. They are a good thing." David evidently sees no either-or, no competition between having God as his only good, and yet placing a very high value upon the saints in the land.

The answer which this text suggests to me is that when we delight in the company of the saints, we do not rob God of anything owing to him since it is precisely the saints that we enjoy. What makes them saints and what makes them our delight is that they love God and trust him and obey him. And therefore, our delight in the saints is simply an indirect delight in God. When you value someone because they value God, you are not denying that God is your only good; you are expressing it (Matt. 10:42). Nothing will guard our small groups against degenerating into mutual admiration societies better than this Biblical teaching: that apart from God we have no good and that therefore all our delight in each other's company should be an expression of our delight in him. O that the spirit might cause every group to be deeply centered on God, so that every part of it, from the lightest remark about sports to the heaviest load of depression, might be related to God. And there is no doubt in my mind that the only way this will happen is if the groups are saturated with prayer and with Biblical exhortations. It is impossible to be centered on

God when we are not listening to him and speaking to him as a group.

This is the Weekend of Joy here at Bethlehem and a time of dedicating ourselves, as God leads, to smaller forms of togetherness. So I have been drawn to think about how joy in God and joy in fellow-believers relate to each other. And I have concluded that they are not alternative or competing joys. On the contrary, I want to go so far as to say: the more you delight in God as he is in himself, the greater will be your capacity to delight in those who love him, and the more you delight in the spiritual marks of the saints, the greater will be your capacity to delight in God in himself. For those of you who are willing to center your life on God and pray from your heart, "O Lord, there is nothing on earth that I desire besides you," the possibility exists for immeasurable joy in small clusters of fellowship as you will seek it.

I want to mention three ways this joy comes and then close with some examples from Paul's life. First, the joy that has God as its ultimate object is often immediately experienced when we see the glory of God reflected in the attitudes and actions of our group. Jesus said, "Let your light so shine among men that they may see your good deeds and give glory to your Father in heaven" (Matt. 5:16). This text doesn't only refer to believers testifying by their lives to unbelievers. It also refers to that spiritual transaction between two believers, one of whom reflects like a mirror the light of God's love in his life so that the other believer sees it and leaps for joy. Great experiences of joy come immediately from seeing the beauty of God's forgiveness, power, wisdom and trustworthiness reflected in his children. When I meet with the deacons and we pray together and then discuss some difficult moral and spiritual issues, and I see grace and tenderness and spiritual earnestness and deep concern for people's faith, I see the handiwork of God and I rejoice in it and say, "These are the saints, in whom is all my delight." If you are centered on God, then every ray of his glory reflected in the joy, peace and righteousness of his saints will give you immediate delight. And that should happen to an ever-increasing degree in all our different small groups.

The second way that joy comes to us through our participation in a small support group is not immediate, but deferred. If we were perfect people, then all our joy would come from immediate experiences of God's revealed glory. But we are not perfect. And our imperfection, our sin, manifests itself in our tendency to have only a lukewarm love for God and in our tendency to love the world and its pleasures more than we love God. For some of you that may be such a characteristic experience that you should question whether you have been born again. If anyone feels that way, please come and talk to me or Glenn so we can look at the Scriptures together and pray for renewal. But even for the rest of us, it is still a struggle to delight in God as we should. "Prone to wander, Lord I feel it; prone to leave the God I love."

So we come to our small group not hot, not cold, just lukewarm. And we hear a story of an answer to prayer and a healed relationship and bold venture in witnessing, but all this work of God in our fellows causes no immediate joy. We just feel blah and unmoved. And that's all we have to share. The others understand. They pray and you leave. But later on, maybe yet that night, maybe several days later, the evidence of God's faithfulness in the lives of those friends and their prayers take effect. Maybe one morning you hit upon a promise in the Scripture and that combines with a real-life illustration you remember from the group, and together they explode with joy in your heart. As long as we are imperfect people, not all our joy in God's work will be immediate and full. We must be patient with one another. Remember how Paul said, "Encourage the fainthearted, help the weak, be patient with all" (1 Thess. 5:14). There will always be deferred joy as the Holy Spirit applies the experience of our group to our particular need.

The third way that joy comes to us through our participation in a small group is through our becoming the source of someone else's joy. When Jesus said, "It is more blessed to give than to receive" (Acts 20:35), he meant, "You get more joy if you think more about giving joy than getting joy." Before I go to any of the groups that I am a part of I pray, "Lord, help me to say what they need to hear. Bring to my mind those truths in your word perfectly suited to their condition. Take away from me a negative, critical spirit. Help me be a humble listener." The Lord will use you to bring joy to others in your group if you do that. And when he does, your own joy will be made full. The best thing you can do for your group is to keep your own heart close to God. What we all need is to be around people who have been around God. And if anything can improve upon the joy of being around God, it can only be the added blessing of seeing another person begin to delight in God because of your joy.

So, at least in these three ways, a lot of joy lies in store for people who love God above all his gifts and seek to give him and find him in small forms of togetherness.

I close the message with a glimpse into the personal life of the apostle Paul. This is very pertinent, because Paul said, "What you have learned and received and heard and seen in me, do; and the God of peace will be with you (Phil. 4:9). Paul was a very heavy thinker. He also worked very long and hard. He might have been called a workaholic in our day. But unlike most workaholics and unlike most intellectuals, Paul loved to be with people. And O how his heart was knit together with his fellow-workers and the churches. Listen to these words of love and see if they stir up in you the same longing they do in me. To the Romans he wrote, "I long to see you, that I may impart to you some spiritual gift to strengthen you; that is, that we may be mutually encouraged by each other's faith, both yours and mine. (1:11,12). "Strive together with me in your prayers . . . that by God's will I may come to you with joy and be refreshed in your company. The God of peace be with you all. Amen" (15:30f). To the Corinthians he wrote, "Our mouth is open to you, Corinthians; our heart is wide ... widen your hearts also ... Open your hearts to us (2 Cor. 6:11,13; 7:2). To the Thessalonians, "We were gentle among you, like a nurse taking care of her children. So, being affectionately desirous of you, we were ready to share with you only the gospel of God, but also our own selves, because you had become very dear to us" (1 Thess. 2:7,8). And in the last letter he wrote, Paul says to his partner, Timothy, "I thank God, whom I serve with a clear conscience, as did my fathers, when I remember you constantly in my prayers. As I remember your tears, I long night and day to see you that I may be filled with joy (2 Tim 1:3,4). O that we might be able to say to each other, "To see you fills me with joy!"

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