

We Work With You for Your Joy

by John Piper

This sermon emphasizes the apostolic ambition to work for the joy of God's people, highlighting the sacrificial love and deep commitment required to bring about true joy in Christ. It explores the correlation between faith, joy, and love, showcasing how embracing the joy of faith in Christ transforms believers to endure suffering and exhibit radical love. The speaker challenges listeners to prioritize joy in Christ above all else, even in the face of afflictions and poverty, as exemplified by the churches in Macedonia.

Scripture: 2 Corinthians 1:24, 2 Corinthians 8:1, Philippians 1:23, Psalm 16:11, Romans 15:13, James 1:2, 1 Peter 1:8, John 15:11, Galatians 5:22

Topics: "Apostolic Ambition", "Joy in Christ"

Description

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Transcript

If you have a Bible, I invite you to take it and turn to 2 Corinthians chapter one. And while you're turning to it, thank you, Dr. Mohler, for the invitation and the honor to stand here. I take it very seriously.

So we will attend to God's word. We'll start at verse 24 of chapter one. Of 2 Corinthians, and read through chapter two, verse four.

Not that we lord it over your faith, but we work with you for your joy. For you stand firm in your faith. For I made up my mind not to make another painful visit to you.

For if I cause you pain, who's there to make me glad? But the one whom I have pained. And I wrote as I did so that when I came, I might not suffer pain from those who should have made me rejoice. For I felt sure of all of you that my joy would be the joy of you all.

For I wrote to you out of much affliction and anguish of heart and with many tears. Not to cause you pain, but to let you know the abundant love that I have for you. Let's pray.

Father, I pray that the effect of the unfolding of this word would be that hundreds of students and faculty, administrators, and guests would embrace the apostolic ambition to work for the joy of his people. It's come, Holy Spirit, and cause this lifelong transforming embrace of this ambition, I pray. In Jesus' name, amen.

So that's my exhortation. I hope that every one of you will find it within you. To embrace the apostolic passion, the apostolic ambition expressed in the middle of verse 24.

So let's read verse 24 again and make it very clear. I work with you for your joy. That's my paraphrase, let's read the verse.

Not that we lord it over your faith, but we literally are workers with you for your joy. For you stand firm in your faith. So there it is.

With apostolic force and clarity, Paul's ambition is I am working with the churches for their joy. It's not a cheap ambition. You remember, this is the letter in which he became a madman as he fought for his apostolic life.

And the price he had to pay for this ambition was uncalculably great. Just read a few verses from chapter 11, verse 23 following. Are they servants of Christ, these false apostles? I'm a better one.

I'm talking like a madman. With far greater labors, far more imprisonments, with countless beatings, often near death. Five times I received at the hands of the Jews, 40 lashes less one.

Three times I was beaten with rods. Once I was stoned. Three times I was shipwrecked.

A night and a day I was adrift at sea on frequent journeys, in danger from rivers, danger from robbers, danger from my own people, danger from the Gentiles, danger in the city, danger in the wilderness, danger at sea, danger from false brothers, in toil and hardship through many a sleepless night, in hunger and thirst, often without food, in cold and exposure. My passion for your joy is not cheap. To work for a church's joy is costly.

It will cost you your life. Nor is this ambition a sop, kind of an off-the-cuff sop tossed into the congregation for the emotionally needy types. Oh, I'm for your joy.

Relax, we're happy here. It's not a sop tossed to the psychologically needy. It is a profoundly deep, thought through, theologically grounded, apostolic commitment.

He lived, he breathed, he preached, he wrote, he suffered to advance the joy of his churches. Came from somewhere deep within him. So to see this, just follow him.

Follow the seriousness of the joy language in verses one to four of the next chapter. Forget that chapter break, it shouldn't be there. For I made up my mind not to make another painful visit to you, verse two.

For if I cause you pain, who's there to make me glad? But the one whom I've pained, I'm working for your joy. Because if I produce the opposite, who's there to make me glad? Which means the reason I'm pursuing your joy is because your joy is my joy. I find my joy in your joy.

That's why I'm pursuing your joy. If I make you miserable, who's there to make me glad? I don't wanna be unhappy, therefore I want you glad. Because my joy is in your joy.

And then he turns it around in verse three. Says the converse, I wrote as I did so that when I came, I might not suffer pain from those who should have made me rejoice. For I felt sure of all of you that my joy would be the joy of all of you.

So in verse two, he says I'm working for your joy because if I make you miserable, where will I find joy? Because I find joy in your joy. And then he turns it around in verse three and he says and I surely believe that my joy is your joy. You find joy in my joy, don't you, Corinthians? So it goes both ways.

And then, magnificently, he puts a name on that dynamic. Puts a name on that in verse four. What's that, what's going on there? What's that called? It's called love.

Verse four, for I wrote to you out of much affliction and anguish of heart and with many tears not to cause you pain, but to let you know the abundant love that I have for you. That's what it means, this is what's happening when I find my joy in your joy and you find your joy in my joy. God calls that love.

That's the triumph of love in a church. That would be pure sentimentalism. All that talk would be pure sentimentalism if we did not see the kind of joy he's talking about, which is very plain in this text.

He's not talking about generic joy, joy in just anything. It doesn't take any new birth, it doesn't take any faith, it doesn't take the cross, it doesn't take Christ to have a mutual admiration society where everybody's happy when everybody's happy. And we know that's not what he means is because the central statement in the middle of verse 24 of chapter one is sandwiched on either side by another kind of language besides joy language, namely faith language.

So let's read verse 24 again. Not that we lorded over your faith, but we work with you for your, and you would expect him to say faith. Not that we lorded over your faith, we're working with you for your faith.

I think that is essentially what he said. That's the way I understand faith. Not that we lorded over your faith, we work with you for your joy.

Gotta go with Paul here. You gotta go down into what faith is here. For you stand firm in your faith, so you have faith in front and faith in the back and joy in the middle.

I wonder if you can think of another place where light shines on this text, the only other place in Paul, where he states his earthly ambition in terms of the pursuit of his people's joy. You got it? It's Philippians chapter one, verses 23 to 25. He's struggling with whether he should die, which would be so much better, or stay and labor for the joy of the churches some more, which would be hard because it's not cheap.

So let's read the way he describes that. Verse 23, Philippians one, I am hard pressed between the two. My desire is to depart and be with Christ, for that's far better.

But to remain in the flesh is more necessary on your account. Convinced of this, I know that I will remain and continue with you all for your progress, and now we get the two together. Joy of faith.

In 124 of Corinthians, it was not that we lorded over your faith, we worked with you for your joy, for you stand in your faith. And here, it's we're staying on the planet as much as we'd like to leave, because we have one holy ambition. Your joy of faith.

That's why he's doing what he's doing. So we have two massive ambition statements in Paul relating to joy. I live for the joy of my churches.

I'm on the planet, I don't go to heaven for the sake of the joy of my churches. And since it's now called the joy of faith, we know it's not generic joy. It's not joy in food, it's not joy in wife, it's not joy in children, it's not joy in sunrises, it's not joy in health, it's joy in Christ.

Faith is a receiving of Christ, the Redeemer, the Mediator, the Savior, the Lord, the supreme treasure of the universe. Faith receives Him as the infinitely valuable Savior. Faith receives Him as the infinitely valuable Lord.

Faith receives Him as the infinitely valuable treasure. Faith receives Him as the infinitely valuable Mediator, substitute, righteousness, forgiver, wrath remover. Faith embraces Him as infinitely valuable for all that He is, and that is joy in Him.

Or He's not felt as valuable. He's not embraced as valuable. He's not embraced as a treasure.

He's embraced as a ticket, somewhere where joy might happen. Just get me there, Jesus, and it really doesn't matter whether you're there when I get there. I just want joy, and you're not it.

But you might get me there. When you have faith in Jesus, you rejoice in His glorious deity as Christ. You rejoice in the humble, sinless, virgin-born humanity of Jesus.

You're satisfied by the universe-creating, miracle-working power of Jesus. You're satisfied by the covenant-keeping, law-fulfilling, righteousness-performing, perfection-providing obedience of Jesus. You're satisfied by the wrath-bearing, justice-satisfying, sin-atoning death of Jesus.

You're satisfied by the death-defeating, devil-destroying, heaven-opening resurrection of Jesus. And you're satisfied by the sovereign, interceding, ever-present, never-leaving-us-alone, triumphant reign of Jesus at the Father's right hand. And if that doesn't delight you, then this verse will never make any sense to you.

Not that we lord it over your faith. We work with you for your joy. I'm coming alongside you for your joy.

I will die for your joy. I will be beaten five times with 39 lashes if I can just bring about joy in your heart, in Jesus, above all things. So will you embrace that? Will that be what you go to do in the churches? Or will you treat this as somehow icing on the cake? Like so many people, we work with you for your joy.

We work with you so that Jesus Christ would be seen and experienced as the supreme treasure of your life in all that he is for you. So it is not mere sentimentalism. This dynamic of your joy is my joy, and my joy is your joy.

This is love. It's not sentimentalism. When he says that he finds his joy in their joy, he means when you find your satisfaction in Christ, I find satisfaction in you.

And when he says, surely my joy is your joy, he means when I am delighting in Christ supremely above all things, surely you are finding joy in me in that, aren't you? This is not generic joy. This is joy in each other's joy in Christ. That's what the joy of faith is.

It's not cheap, and it's not sentimental. It is radical. It is deep.

It will cost you your life. When you do this for a people, when you go to a church and this is your passion, this is your ambition, it's very dangerous for the people. And you need to tell them that right up front in the

interview.

I'm coming with a message that could cost you your life. I'm here to make you happy. So happy in Jesus, you don't need to be alive.

You don't need that house. You don't need that car. You don't need this family.

If they all die, he's alive. I'm coming to make you so glad in God, revealed in Christ that you will sing, let goods and kindred go, this mortal life also, the body they may kill. God's truth abideth still, satisfying my heart no matter what I count.

Everything is lost for the surpassing value of knowing Jesus Christ, my Lord. That's your passion in the pulpit. That's what you're living for.

That's the message you're bringing to this people. It will cost you and them their lives if you follow through. Two years ago, I watched a four DVD series called The Cross Jesus in China, four hours of documentary.

You can get the DVD at Chinasoul.org. That's where I bought it. DVD number one entitled The Spring of Life, double meaning for spring. DVD number two, Seeds of Blood.

DVD number three, The Bitter Cup. And the last one was on music and indigenous humanity. They tell the story, story after story after story, interview after interview after interview of people who've been in prison, five, 10, 15, 20 years.

And here's the point. The overwhelming pervading spirit is joy, joy, joy. It just takes your breath away to hear these sufferers talk.

And the ones who seem to have suffered most have the most tender, delicate, sweet, kind language about it all. They're the ones who use the lavish language. Sweeter than honey and drippings from the honeycomb, my communion in that cell.

That's what we're after. We don't care about any other kind of happiness. Paul's apostolic ambition was to produce that kind of people.

We work with you for your joy. When you say that to a people, you are not pampering them. If that's what they think, they don't get it.

You're not pampering them, you're preparing them to suffer. The point of joy is the ability to suffer. That's the point.

Now, for the joy set before him, he suffered exquisitely on the Calvary Road. That's the only road we want our people to be on. The road towards Calvary is a hard road.

It is not a joyless road. You just die and you die and you die and you die and you are thrilled that he never leaves you and never forsakes you. He's always there in your dying.

He's especially there in your dying. Have you ever met anybody who said they learned most of him and delighted most in him on the sunny days? Never. None on the planet have I ever heard such a testimony.

You need to see this worked out in reality in the Bible. So what I've arrived at is I work with you for your joy not to pamper you in the path of luxury but to prepare you for the path of suffering. That's where we are.

And the path of suffering is the Calvary Road and the Calvary Road is the road of love. So now let's go to chapter eight and watch it work. This is the way it's gonna work in your church if the Holy Spirit comes down and honors your labors and honors your suffering.

Chapter eight, there is a unity to this book and we're very close to it. Verse one through two of chapter eight, what you're looking for here is how does it work? How does working with them for their joy produce not pampered people but people prepared to suffer for the sake of lavish love? How does that work in verses one and two? We want you to know, brothers, about the grace of God that has been given among the churches of Macedonia. So he's talking about Macedonia, that's up here where Philippi is, right? And he's addressing people down here at Corinth at the bottom of the peninsula and he's using these folks up here as an example for these folks down here to try to stir them up to be like that.

That's what's going on here. We want you to know, brothers, about the grace of God that was given among the churches of Macedonia. Grace came down.

For in a severe test of affliction, their abundance of joy and their extreme poverty have overflowed in a wealth of generosity on their part. This is breathtaking. You ever seen a church like this? This is the diametric opposite of the prosperity gospel, isn't it? I mean, I don't have to wax eloquent here as much as I hate that gospel.

I'll have to just read this. Take it in three steps, verse one. We want you to know, brothers, about the grace of God that has been given among the churches.

So the first thing that happened when Paul arrived, went to jail, beaten with rods, in the stocks, crazy man, singing at midnight with Silas, the first thing that happens for Lydia, the girl rescued from fortune-telling, is that grace came down. Sovereign, mighty, Christ-displaying, Holy Spirit-empowered, grace came down. That's verse one.

Grace was given. Now verse two. For in a severe test of affliction, their abundance of joy and their extreme poverty, you stop there.

The next phrase is step three, this is step two. What happened when grace came down? Number one, poverty remained. Number two, afflictions increased.

Number three, joy abounded. That's the opposite of the prosperity gospel. Poverty stays, affliction goes up, joy abounds.

Now step three. Their abundance of joy and their extreme poverty overflowed in a wealth of generous, out of poverty, out of affliction. Why? Joy! There is no other explanation.

It is clear as day. Could the apostle make the point any more clearly why he works for the church's joy? Because it turns them into crazy, radical people who when they don't have anything and afflictions are increasing, they're saying please take another offering for the poor saints in Jerusalem because we have tasted the grace of God and our joy is abounding. There's your ambition.

This is your calling if you will embrace this. This is not optional. This is not a way to do ministry.

This is your calling. This is the apostolic ambition. So I only have time to give you a few concluding practical how-tos.

Let's just do a few. What are you gonna do? How will this happen? You will in every Sunday sermon, in every evening lesson, in every wedding homily, in every funeral meditation, in every banquet message, in every devotional for the staff and in all of your practical labors, you will portray God in Christ as supremely valuable, won't you? How else will you work with them for their joy? In Christ, not a successful church, not your preaching, not their families, how else except constantly, constantly displaying Christ as supremely valuable above every good thing in Louisville? I get the heebie-jeebies in this room and this campus. It is so posh, right? It is so amazingly genteel and Southern high class.

It's just everywhere you go, it's rude. Should I touch anything in my room? This guy's office, he has 10 offices. You have to walk from office to office.

Is this the real one? Or is this just for the protesters? The fake office. I love this institution. I would like to die with you for what you stand for here.

But this is a problem for me. And I only mention it, I'll tell you why I mention it. I debated, should I mention this? Then it just came up, so I mentioned it.

The reason I reflected on mentioning this is simply this. It's hard, I think, harder in America to be a Christian than anywhere else on the planet. These things, when you go to a church, will be very hard to do.

And they won't be hard because suffering. They won't be hard because affliction. They'll be hard because of Disneyland.

How anybody, you know, I was in Orlando last week. I thought, how does anybody minister next to Mickey Mouse? It's because everything in Orlando says life is insignificant. And here, the danger is, life is good when the architecture is fine, the carpet's fine, the woodwork is fine, everything is fine.

That's the danger here. Every place has its unique danger. And God is calling all of you to lay it down.

And it's harder to lay it down when you live in it. It is not impossible. I have learned how to abound, and I have learned how to be abased.

It is not impossible to be a Christian at Southern Seminary, just hard. And to become the kind of people who say, let it go. Let it go.

There's a calling on my life, and it is to be happy in Christ above all things, and to lay my life down, to display His supreme value so that others would have that same joy. So very practically, what do you do toward that end? And I'll give you four quick things, and be done. Number one, you will fight with all your might for joy in Christ.

It is the supreme battle in the ministry to love Jesus more than success, more than family, more than health, more than anything. That is the supreme warfare. Upon your face every morning and all day long.

So you will cry out with the psalmist, incline my heart to your testimonies, oh God. Open my eyes that I may behold wonders in your word. Satisfy me in the morning with your steadfast love that I may rejoice and be glad in you.

So that's the way you'll fight. That's number one. Your number one battle will be your own soul.

Is He your treasure above all things? Number two, you will ground everything you say in the gospel of Christ crucified and risen, because, and I think this is where we'll go on Thursday, God willing, because 2 Corinthians, same book, 4.4 says that where the joy comes from primarily is seeing the light of the gospel of the glory of Christ who is the image of God. The gospel, the gospel of the glory of Christ, which means that in the gospel, Christ crucified and risen is where the glory shines most radiantly for our joy. That's number two.

You will ground everything there. You'll take them there again and again and again. And number three, you will sustain the joy of your people by teaching them faithfully the glorious truth of God's sovereignty in suffering so that they have a deep, unshakable confidence that all things work together for good and they are not fools to rejoice in tribulation.

And finally, number four, you will support their joy in the midst of their terrible losses by being there for them the way Christ is always there for you. In these ways, your people will see in you that Christ is supremely desirable and that you are a workman who does not need to be ashamed because you have handled your life and you've handled the book in a way that reveals you are a worker for their joy. Father in heaven, please, not because of our merit, but because of Christ, please grant that these men and women will embrace this apostolic ambition.

Not that we lord it over your faith. We are workers with you for your joy, for you stand firm in your faith and you suffer for Christ.

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