

Scripture: Acts 2:42-47 NIV

Theme: *Because we are in fellowship with Christ, we can also enjoy true fellowship with one another and celebrate what we have in common.*

Introduction

When was the last time you celebrated something? Maybe it was your birthday, or an anniversary, or simply the joyous occasion of meeting up with old friends you hadn't seen in awhile. Have you ever considered the fact that *celebration* is at the very core of the Christian life, and should be one of the hallmarks of our fellowship? Richard Foster writes:

Celebration is at the heart of the way of Christ. He entered the world on a high note of jubilation: "I bring you good news of a great joy," cried the angel, "which shall come to all the people" (Lk. 2:10). He left the world bequeathing His joy to the disciples: "These things I have spoken to you that my joy may be in you, and that your joy may be full" (Jn. 15:11). -- *Celebration of Discipline*, p. 163

Some Christians and some churches believe that God is against happiness and merely tolerates joy. In "A Portrait of the Artist as a Young Man," James Joyce tells of a man's decision not to become a priest. He feared his face would become "a mirthless mask reflecting a sunken day ... devout, shot with pink tinges of suffocated anger." I've known people like that: never happy, morose, always looking at the bad things in their life instead of understanding what it is we have to celebrate as Christians.

This morning, as we come to the conclusion of the series of sermons on The Spiritual Disciplines, I want to focus on *the discipline of celebration*. We of all people on this earth have the most reason to be a people of celebration, and we need to learn how. But I want to caution that in getting to this discipline, I have skipped over many of the so-called classical disciplines. Foster in his book, for example, lists thirteen disciplines, and many I simply have not had time to cover.

But I want to re-iterate that the reason for studying, learning, and employing the spiritual disciplines, is so that we *can become more like Christ in our Christian walk*. The spiritual disciplines are very real methods, techniques and activities that train us in godliness, and serve as a means of grace.

What is celebration?

Now where do you suppose we get this idea that celebration is spiritual? Where does this come from? Is that in the Bible? You bet! In Deuteronomy 14 we read:

In the presence of the LORD your God you must eat from the tithe of your grain, your new wine, your olive oil, and the firstborn of your herds and flocks in the place he chooses to locate his name, so that you may learn to revere the LORD your God always. When he blesses you, if the place where he chooses to locate his name is distant, you may convert the tithe into money, secure the money, and travel to the place the LORD your God chooses for himself. Then you may spend the money however you wish, for cattle, sheep, wine, beer, or whatever you desire. You and your household may eat there in the presence of the LORD your God and enjoy it. **Dt 14:23-26 NET**

God was telling his people to celebrate as an act of both faith and worship, to have a good time and enjoy what He had provided them with. *Celebration begins with God's provision.* We're not talking about partying for the sake of "partying," but rather celebrating who God is and the provision of His blessing. That's a radical departure from the attitude of the world, which in a nut shell was captured by a song that became popular in the 1970's entitled "We're Here For A Good Time, Not A Long Time!" But when we celebrate, we can sing, "We're here for a good time, 'cause we're gonna live a long, long, *long* time!" For the Believer, celebration is an acknowledgement of God's gracious hand of provision. As the author of Ecclesiastes discovered:

I have seen personally what is the only beneficial and appropriate course of action for people: to eat and drink, and find enjoyment in all their hard work on earth during the few days of their life which God has given them, *for this is their reward.* To every man whom God has given wealth, and possessions, he has also given him the ability to eat from them, to receive his reward and to find enjoyment in his toil; these things are the gift of God. **Ec 5:18-10 NET**

What should really characterize our celebrations is not excess or hedonism, but rather as Willard puts it "holy delight and joy" with and in a God who loves us so much that He gave us the gift of life, and the ability to enjoy that life. *The beginning of celebration is gratitude towards God.*

Celebration Gives Strength to Life

Why should we celebrate? Because celebration brings joy into life and joy makes us strong. It is the joyful moments of life that allow us to put-up with all the rest of life! When Nehemiah and Ezra and the Levites began to teach God's Word to the people, the people began to mourn. So then Nehemiah

... said to them, "Go and eat delicacies and drink sweet drinks and send portions to those for whom nothing is prepared. For this day is holy to our Lord. Do not grieve, for the joy of the LORD is your strength." **Nehemiah 8:10 NET**

Life isn't all mourning and pain! There is joy in our lives, *because of the Lord!* We can't continue long in anything without joy. For example, women endure child birth for the joy of motherhood; young married couples struggle through the first difficult years of adjustment in anticipation of a long life together; parents hold steady through the teen years knowing their children will emerge as human beings again on the other side!

Celebration, says Foster, is central to all of the disciplines. Without it the disciplines become drudgery, and dare I say, our life becomes drudgery! We must celebrate the "joy of the Lord" as we journey through this life, even when things are not all as they seem. Foster says:

... this world is radically unsuited to the heart of the human person, and the suffering and terror of life will not be removed no matter *how* "spiritual" we become. It is because of this that a healthy faith before God cannot be built and maintained, without heartfelt celebration of his greatness and goodness *to us* in the midst of our suffering and terror ... *--Spirit of the Disciplines, p. 180*

The Path to Joy If celebration springs from joy, then ...how do we get joy? Joy isn't a "world" thing; it's a "God thing" that is much different than happiness. *The New Bible Dictionary* says joy is:

... consistently the mark both individually of the believer and corporately of the church. It is a quality and not simply an emotion, grounded upon God himself and indeed derived from him ...¹

Ephesians lists joy as one of the chief fruits of the spirit. It is indeed a quality-of and product-of the Christian's life. But what produces joy? Foster maintains that in the spiritual life, the only thing that will produce genuine joy, is *obedience*. Do you remember the words to the chorus of "Trust and Obey?" Jesus plainly revealed the source of joy in his high-priestly prayer:

"As the Father has loved me, so have I loved you. Now remain in my love. If you obey my commands, you will remain in my love, just as I have obeyed 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.* **Jn 15:9-11 NIV**

The source of genuine celebration is joy, and the source of genuine joy is obedience to God through Jesus Christ. To elicit genuine celebration, says Foster, obedience must work itself into the ordinary fabric of our daily lives. Without obedience our *celebration* will be hollow and artificial because JOY isn't a "heavenly transfusion" of some kind of feel-good drug, but rather the result of living for God:

Joy is found in obedience. When the power that is in Jesus reaches into our work and play and redeems them, there will be joy where once there was mourning. To overlook that is to miss the meaning of the Incarnation.
--*Celebration of Discipline*, pp. 165-166

In other words, Jesus came to *transform* our lives, not to brainwash us into being "happy smiley" people! He wants us to be genuinely joyful, by genuinely obeying Him and relying upon Him rather than upon this world and the things in it. And as we learn to do that, to trade the emptiness of this life for the **fullness** of life that is in Him, we will indeed experience joy, and genuinely want to celebrate all that God does for us.

But if joy is a fruit of the spirit, can we aid in its growth? Absolutely! Paul gives clear instruction in some ways we can cultivate joy (and therefore celebration) in our lives:

The Spirit of Anxiety-free Celebration

Rejoice in the Lord always. I will say it again: Rejoice! Let your gentleness be evident to all. The Lord is near. **Do not be anxious about anything**, but in everything, by prayer and petition, with thanksgiving, present your requests to God. And the peace of God, which transcends all understanding, will guard your hearts and your minds in Christ Jesus. **Philippians 4:4-7 NIV**

These are Paul's instructions to us on when and how to be joyful.

- Rejoice how? *In the Lord... in the fact we have a relationship with Him; do so with thanksgiving!* Don't focus on earthly anxieties, but heavenly realities!
- Rejoice when? *Always! In bad times, in good! He's always there, His love never ceases!*
- Rejoice why? *Because everything is temporary! Because when we pray he hears!*

1 Wood, D.R.W. (1996, c1982,c1962). *New Bible Dictionary* (615). Intersity Press.

But Paul does not stop with these instructions. He gives us a way to maintain the peace and joy that God is eager to pour into our lives.

→ Finally, brothers, 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

How disciplined is your thought life? Do you rob yourself of joy by dwelling on anxieties, or those things that are FALSE, BASE, WRONG, IMPURE, UGLY, SHAMEFUL?? The truth is, we will not be joyful, and will not be able to celebrate if we are anxious, and focusing on the things of this life that weigh us down. Foster writes:

The decision to set the mind on higher things of life is an act of the will. That is why celebration is a Discipline. It is not something that falls on our head. It is the result of a consciously chosen way of thinking and living. As we choose that way, the healing and redemption in Christ will break into the inner recesses of our lives ... and the inevitable result will be joy and more celebration! -- *Celebration of Discipline*, pp. 167-168

The Practice of Celebration

The Psalms give us some pretty good insights as to how to celebrate. One way to practice celebration is through singing, dancing and shouting. When was the last time you “gave it up” for God and his goodness to you?! Psalm 150 says:

Praise him with the sounding of the trumpet, praise him with the harp and lyre, praise him with tambourine and dancing, praise him with the strings and flute, praise him with the clash of cymbals, praise him with resounding cymbals. **Ps 150:3-5 NIV**

When children are happy, they make noise. When the Ark of the Covenant was brought back to Jerusalem, were they somber? Not hardly!

David, wearing a linen ephod, danced before the LORD with all his might, while he and the entire house of Israel brought up the ark of the LORD with shouts and the sound of trumpets. **2 Sa 6:14-15**

Celebrate by admiring and appreciating the creativity of others. Take advantage of festivals, holidays, and family gatherings. Turn ordinary times into celebration times and plan a party for the slimmest of reasons!

Celebrate the small things, i.e. completing a project, getting a raise, securing a job, finishing homework. And don't forget things like birthdays and marriage anniversaries! Don't wait for funerals to *celebrate life!!*

The Benefits of Celebration

The most important benefit of celebration is that it saves us from taking ourselves too seriously! Life is funny! God made us with the capacity to laugh, doesn't that tell us something?! Celebration should infuse our lives with some festivity and hilarity! I am not advocating sinfulness by any means. It is possible to be a Christian and be joyful! And celebrate! Our Seniors have the right spirit! What about Jesus? He was always at gatherings and house parties; don't you think he enjoyed Himself with His friends?!

Celebration can also be an antidote for seasons of sadness. I'm not talking about simply "positive thinking," but choosing to focus on and celebrate good things. Fénelon counselled those who were feeling down to encourage themselves "*with good conversation, even by making merry!*"

Celebration enables us to regain perspective and balance, even to laugh at ourselves. At one time, I took myself too seriously and became ill because of it. No more! Most of us need to be delivered from an inflated sense of self-importance, and *celebration* helps us do that.

Celebration also gives rise to more celebration. Joy begets joy as laughter begets laughter. Isn't that a good thing?! There is enough pain and sadness in this world.

Christians have a lot to be joyful about, and a lot to celebrate. Let us banish forever the myth and tragedy of Christians who are known by what they *don't do*: we are known as people who don't know how to have fun?! Let's show the world what real celebration is all about!!

Conclusion

Dallas Willard writes that celebration "is one of the most important disciplines ... yet most overlooked and misunderstood." It must, he says, dwell

...on the greatness of God as shown in his goodness *to us*. We engage in celebration when we enjoy ourselves, our life, our world, *in conjunction with* our faith and confidence in God's greatness, beauty and goodness. We concentrate on *our* life and world as God's work and as God's gift to us ... this means that we come together with others who know God to eat and drink, to sing and dance, and to relate stories of God's action for our lives and our people. -- *Spirit of the Disciplines*, p. 179

He labels celebration as one of the "disciplines of engagement," where instead of drawing back or "taking away" from our lives, we "move out" with others, and "add" to our lives. Celebration is best done (only?) with others. It's hard to have much of a party when you're by yourself! We have a lot to celebrate, as individuals, and as a church.

Coming up in two week's time is AGM Part One. Why don't we use this as an opportunity to gather together to celebrate what God has done amongst us?! There will be a potluck meal, and even if you don't usually 'do' meetings, come celebrate God's goodness! But don't stop there! Look for other avenues, other reasons to celebrate. Ultimately, all of our celebration and joy is because of our God. Let me close by quoting Foster one last time:

Celebration gives us the strength to live in all the other Disciplines. The other Disciplines faithfully pursued bring us deliverance from those things that have made our lives miserable for years, which in turn evokes increased celebration. Thus is formed an unbroken circle of life and power.

Based on: <http://www.southernbaptistchurch.org/bible/celebration.html>

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