

THE GOSPEL-CENTERED COMMUNITY

LESSON 5 — A JOYFUL COMMUNITY

BIG IDEA

In the last lesson, we examined the concept of “faith working through love” (Galatians 5:6). We saw that our lack of love always reveals a lack of faith—a “gospel disconnect.” We said that this idea of faith working through love is a “hinge point” in the study and a core principle we’ll return to over and over again. In this lesson, we begin to look at some of the characteristic marks of gospel-centered community. The first—and perhaps the most important—is joy. If joy is missing from Christian community, it’s a clear indication that something is amiss in our understanding of the gospel. This lesson will help us understand why the relationship between justification and sanctification is crucial to experiencing joy in Christ.

NOTES:



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LESSON 5 ARTICLE — A JOYFUL COMMUNITY

One of the defining characteristics of a gospel-centered community is JOY.

If we have believed the good news of the gospel, and if we are experiencing the ongoing work of the Holy Spirit through repentance and faith, we will be a joyful people. There's no way around it! Joy is one of the by-products of knowing Jesus as Savior and Lord. "The fruit of the Spirit is . . . joy" (Galatians 5:22).

Notice how Scripture consistently describes joy as a consequence of believing the gospel:

1 Peter 1:8-9: "Though you have not seen him, you love him. Though you do not now see him, you believe in him and rejoice with joy that is inexpressible and filled with glory, obtaining the outcome of your faith, the salvation of your souls."

Romans 15:13: "May the God of hope fill you with all joy and peace in believing, so that by the power of the Holy Spirit you may abound in hope."

Acts 13:48, 52: "And when the Gentiles heard this, they began rejoicing and glorifying the word of the Lord, and as many as were appointed to eternal life believed. . . . And the disciples were filled with joy and with the Holy Spirit."

1 Thessalonians 1:5-6 (NASB): "Our gospel did not come to you in word only, but also in power and in the Holy Spirit and with full conviction. . . . You also became imitators of us and of the Lord, having received the word in much tribulation with the joy of the Holy Spirit."

The conclusion is clear: God's people ought to be consistently, recognizably, resolutely joyful.

So take a moment and think about yourself. Are you a joyful person? Do people see you that way? Now think about your church or community group. Is it marked by radical joy? Would outsiders spending time among you comment on the deep joy they see in your community?

Many of us would have to admit that joy isn't always the defining characteristic of our souls or of our communities. And we don't always recognize that as a significant problem. If our churches aren't biblically literate, or if they aren't missionally effective, making disciples, or if they aren't growing, *those* are issues we think are worth talking about. But a lack of joy? What's the big deal?

Allow Martyn Lloyd-Jones, an influential twentieth-century British preacher, to answer that question.

Christian people too often seem to be perpetually in the doldrums and too often give this appearance of unhappiness and of lack of freedom and absence of joy. There is no question at all



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*but that this is the main reason why large numbers of people have ceased to be interested in Christianity. . . . In a world where everything has gone so sadly astray, we should be standing out as men and women apart, people characterized by a fundamental joy!*¹

Our lack of joy is a missional issue. It's a gospel issue. For the glory of God, for the good of others, and for the cause of the gospel, we must relentlessly pursue joy. But how? How do we become more joyful?

In the last lesson, we saw that a lack of love always reveals a lack of faith. The same is true for a lack of joy. If we lack joy, our real problem is unbelief. We are not fully trusting and resting in Jesus and what he accomplished for us in his death and resurrection. Joy comes from believing: "May the God of hope fill you with all joy and peace in [or by] believing" (Romans 15:13).

So what is the "belief problem" beneath our lack of joy? Quite commonly, the problem is that we've confused *justification* and *sanctification*.

Justification is the theological term that refers to God's once-for-all declaration of forgiveness and pardon (and more). It's a legal term, so it might help to picture a heavenly courtroom. God is the Judge and you stand before him guilty, on trial for your sins. But because of your faith in Christ and his death on the cross on your behalf, the gavel falls and God pronounces you "not guilty." You are forgiven, freed, and pardoned! The "guilty" verdict for your sin is transferred to Jesus. But that's not all. Jesus' record of perfect righteousness is also credited to you. So you're not just forgiven; you're declared righteous in Christ! This is a once-for-all, completed judicial transaction that happens the moment you trust in Jesus: "Since we have been justified by faith [past-tense, once-and-for- all], we [now] have peace with God" (Romans 5:1).

Sanctification is the theological term that refers to our ongoing transformation into Christlikeness. It's a progressive journey toward holiness that continues throughout our lives. Sometimes it proceeds at a dramatic and breathtaking pace. Other times it's slow and methodical. But it's always happening, because God is faithful: "He who began a good work in you will carry it on to completion until the day of Christ Jesus" (Philippians 1:6 NIV). While justification is a one-time act of God, sanctification is an ongoing process that requires our cooperation: "Present your members [of your body] as slaves to righteousness, leading to sanctification" (Romans 6:19).

Here's the great mistake that often steals our joy: our confidence in our *justification* tends to be based on our *sanctification*. In other words, unless we're really "doing well" in holiness and obedience, we doubt whether we're truly forgiven by God and credited with Christ's righteousness. When we're struggling in the sanctification process, plagued by the same sins over and over again, when we can't seem to "get our act together" spiritually, we question whether God could really accept and love us. Sometimes we wonder if we're even Christians at all. We live in defeat, despair, and discouragement.

¹ D. Martyn Lloyd-Jones, *Spiritual Depression: Its Causes and Cures* (Grand Rapids: Eerdmans, 1965), 12, 23.



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Do you see this pattern in yourself? Do you see it in Christians around you?

When our confidence in our justification is based on our sanctification, what we're really doing is falling into self-righteousness. It doesn't *feel* that way because, after all, we don't *feel* righteous! But think about it: If our lack of sanctification (our lack of day-to-day righteousness) causes us to doubt God's love and acceptance, then whose righteousness are we actually relying on? Our own! *This* is the reason we lack joy. *This* is the reason we're "spiritually depressed." We're trusting in ourselves! (Let's face it, who *wouldn't* be depressed?)

So how do we experience lasting joy? By believing the truth of justification by faith. We must start every day claiming the great biblical promises of justification: I have peace with God (Romans 5:1). Jesus bore my sins in his body on the cross (1 Peter 2:24). God has credited Jesus' righteousness to me by faith (Romans 4:5). It is finished (John 19:30). How great these truths are! How rich and joyful these realities are! I don't contribute a single thing to my justification. My sanctification—or lack of it—changes nothing. It's Jesus' righteousness that guarantees my acceptance before God. "Nothing in my hand I bring, simply to thy cross I cling," says an old hymn.** Jesus' righteousness is the **ONLY** righteousness I need.

Relying completely on justification by faith—Christ's work on my behalf—is crucial to deep and abiding joy. When my sanctification is slow and my struggles against sin are intense, I'm still joyful because Jesus is my righteousness! When my sanctification is rapid and I'm experiencing victory over sin, I'm joyful because Jesus is my righteousness! Even my striving for sanctification is permeated by joy because I'm motivated by love (knowing I already have God's favor) instead of fear (trying to earn God's favor). This discipline of resting in my justification by faith is a constant process of reorientation and reminding. It's ongoing. It's daily. It requires me to hear the Spirit's conviction when I am not believing or obeying. (We'll be doing an exercise to help us learn how to do this moment by moment.)

We have been using a lot of "I" language in this lesson because justification must be experienced individually before it can be celebrated communally. But the point is this: a gospel-centered community will be a community of radical joy. So take some time together to assess and evaluate your community. Is it joyful—persistently, demonstrably, and resolutely joyful? If not, where does the truth of justification by faith need to sink in more deeply? How can you help each other grow in faith—and therefore in joy?



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LESSON 5 EXERCISE — GROWING IN JOY

It may sound paradoxical . . . but you must be made miserable before you can know true Christian joy. Indeed the real trouble with the miserable Christian is that he has never been truly made miserable because of conviction of sin. He has bypassed the essential preliminary to joy.

—Martyn Lloyd-Jones, *Spiritual Depression: Its Causes and Cures*

Question: What must you know to live and die in the joy of [gospel] comfort? Answer: Three things: first, how great my sin and misery are; second, how I am set free from all my sins and misery; third, how I am to thank God for such deliverance.

—*The Heidelberg Catechism, Question 2*

If, as this week's article states, joy comes from basing our sanctification on our justification, then growing in joy requires us to learn how to live out of our justification on a daily basis. Just like oxygen, we need to be breathing in the truth of the gospel constantly. We can't "get a little Jesus" during our small group time or Sunday worship and live off that for the rest of the week any more than we could take one big breath in the morning and then say, "I'm good. I've got my daily supply of oxygen."

This week's exercise is designed to help us start learning how to regularly (constantly!) breathe in the good news of the gospel. Doing this allows us to relate to God and others based on what Christ has already accomplished for us instead of how well we are "performing." It is this identity—people who are God's beloved children and now have the same record of righteousness that Jesus has—that is the foundation for all of our obedience. As we learn to live out our new identity, we'll also begin to change in other ways—what we do, what we love, what we desire, how we live.

But as the quotes above point out, we need to start this process by seeing where our unbelief is at work, robbing us of the joy that comes from resting in Christ. Even though we're going to do this exercise together as a group, it's really something we all need to learn to do many, many times each day. In fact, you may want to write out a few key words (e.g., seeing my sin, set free by the cross, thanking God in love) that will remind you of each of these stages. Post that note on your computer at work, in your car, or on a mirror at home. Seeing it will remind you that we need Jesus—and the message of his good news—just like we need air.

STEP ONE: SEEING OUR SIN

- Pick an area where you're struggling right now in sanctification. It could be a poor prayer life, a failure to love others, a persistent character flaw, etc.
- How is your failure in this area causing you to feel toward God? Do you feel distant from him? Discouraged? Defeated? Not very useful? Different people will feel different things. Describe how you feel toward God as you think about your failure to faithfully obey him.
- Now, think about those same feelings in terms of unbelief. What are you not believing about the gospel and, specifically, about justification? How do your feelings reveal that you are trusting in your own



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performance instead of resting in Christ's accomplishments for you?

STEP TWO: REMEMBERING AND RECEIVING WHAT WE HAVE IN CHRIST

Now, practice getting your eyes off yourself and onto Christ by remembering and receiving the great promises of justification by faith. Here are three categories to think through.

1. **Justification (Negative):** Though I am a sinner, God has forgiven all my sins—past, present, and future—because of what Christ did for me. I am no longer under condemnation. I don't have to pay for my sins doing penance or work my way back into God's favor. Romans 8:1: "There is therefore now no condemnation for those who are in Christ Jesus."
2. **Justification (Positive):** Despite my ongoing struggles with sin, Jesus' righteousness and obedience have been credited to me. His "rightness" is now mine. When God looks at me, he doesn't see my sin; he sees Jesus' righteousness. 2 Corinthians 5:21 (NASB): "He made Him who knew no sin to be sin on our behalf, so that we might become the righteousness of God in Him."
3. **Adoption:** God doesn't just forgive me; he adopts me as his beloved child. My identity is not "forgiven sinner" but "beloved child of my heavenly Father." Galatians 4:4-6: "But when the fullness of time had come, God sent forth his Son, born of woman, born under the law, to redeem those who were under the law, so that we might receive adoption as sons. And because you are sons, God has sent the Spirit of his Son into our hearts, crying, 'Abba! Father!'"

Which of these promises speaks most directly to your area of unbelief identified in Step One?

STEP THREE: RESPONDING IN JOYFUL GRATITUDE

- Finally, ask: "If I really believed the truth of justification by faith, what would I be doing (or feeling, or thinking) differently?" The benefits we have in Christ don't just make us feel better about our relationship with God; they also draw us to love others more, to respond to God in gratitude and obedience, and to repent and turn from harmful, sinful things.
- Spend some time sharing some things you are grateful for and joyful about as a result of these realities. Doing this together makes gratitude and joy contagious. Don't turn this third step into introspective navel-gazing. The point is to see that faith—resting in Christ's righteousness—brings joy! Notice that we're not asking, "What should you be doing differently?" We're asking, "How would faith work itself out in love (and joy)?"

As you close this exercise, spend a few moments worshipping "in the moment"—that is, praying short prayers thanking God for the great gift of justification by faith. As you learn to "breathe in the good news of the gospel" many times each day, praying short worshipful prayers like this will help you rejoice in Christ moment by moment.

