

March 16-20, 2026 Edition

Following
The Year^(s) Of Jesus Part 219
The Power Of Gratitude & Joy

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March 14/15, 2026



When you read the Bible ask yourself if there's anything you're reading where God is speaking to you personally... anything that you need to start applying in your own life. Then try to reflect on what you read... what you heard from God throughout the day and we know you'll be blessed.

*** These are EXTREMELY rough drafts so if you see typos... well yuo knew the rest ;0) These are essentially the ramblings of thoughts running through Ed or Judy's mind the week before Ed teaches a lesson on these concepts. They are pretty much how Ed gets ready for the weekends. They are not necessarily coherent so if they don't make much sense... sorry about that. If hey help you, great. If not, sorry.

**** Also these devotionals are the product of both Judy & Ed's experiences and education. Figuring out which are from Judy and which are from Ed (sometimes both are contained in a single day) is half the fun.

**** Also you can also get these devotionals on Riverside's website (EagleRiverside.com) by going to the resource section and choosing "Reflections Download".

**** Also Jesus is awesome.

Monday Reflection: This week we are talking about the attribute of joy. It will be the second to last attribute we study during this lesson series on the fruit of the Spirit but it was the second one mentioned by Paul when describing the “evidence” on display in the life of those of us who are following Jesus and becoming more like Him:

But the Holy Spirit produces this kind of fruit in our lives: love, **joy**, peace, patience, kindness, goodness, faithfulness, gentleness, and self-control. Galatians 5:22 (NLT)

In the same way we can tell an oak tree is in fact an oak tree if it bears acorns or a persimmon tree is a persimmon tree if it bears persimmons (I decided to go with persimmons for this analogy because I don’t believe I’ve ever used the word “persimmon” in a devotional in my all time here at Riverside and in fact I’m not sure I’ve ever used the word in my conversations in all my life so it brought me a teensy bit of joy to use it today- I’m working on this week’s attribute even as I write about it. But as I write those words I realize I may be slipping in humility so I’ll just move on...).

So what’s the point of all of that? Just that there’s a correlation between what kind of fruit we are bearing in our own lives (evidence of becoming more like Jesus) and our actual growth and transformation into the image of Jesus. But we have to be careful- I’ve been part of communities in the past that felt like if you weren’t meeting their standards of what it means to grow in the fruit of the Spirit then you must not in fact actually be a follower of Jesus. WHOA!!! SLOW DOWN THERE BIG FELLA!!!! (that brought a bit of joy to me to write that as well ;o)

Who is the judge of whether I am bearing “fruit”? Is it me? Is it other Christians? Is it a church leader or some other human? Ultimately the judge is Jesus Himself which should set your mind at ease since that’s the One Who gave His life for you. All Jesus wants is for you and me to do our best and work on cultivating all of these attributes in our lives. As I’ve said a few times during this series- we can’t ignore one or two of the attributes of the fruit of the Spirit and expect the others to thrive. They all grow together or if one is suffering all the others will wilt along with it. And that doesn’t mean that we have to be perfect tens in every attribute. Some of these will lead in your life and some will lag but what Jesus wants and expects from us is that we will be working on our weaknesses right alongside our strengths and making progress in all of them.

I’ve also noticed just recently that at some points in my life certain attributes of the fruit of the Spirit are easier to cultivate than other times. Joy is a case in point for me. It’s been more difficult to “choose joy” over the last 2 1/2 months than it had been in the days/weeks/months/years before Pastor Jeff passed. Over time it’s getting a little easier but then I’ll have a day that feels a lot like a set back or I’ll start feeling guilty for choosing joy in my current circumstances. Maybe you’ve experienced similar feelings over events in your own life. What do we do then?

Well all I can do is tell you what I do. I choose joy in spite of the way I feel at the moment. My feelings as it turns out aren’t always terribly helpful in leading me into the life that Jesus has in store for me. That doesn’t mean my feelings aren’t real or that I should ignore them- we’ll talk about that a lot this week- but it does mean that when my feelings and

Jesus' direction in my life clash it's always best to do our best to submit my feelings to Jesus leading and go ahead and feel what I'm feeling while I follow in Jesus' footsteps. When I'm in the midst of doing that it always reminds me of this verse:

I will offer sacrifices of joy... to the Lord. Psalm 27:6 (NKJV)

Sacrifices of joy. I never really thought much about how choosing joy could be a sacrifice. But now I sort of get it. I'm guessing you've had periods during your life when choosing joy was a sacrifice for you too. Guess what? God is so proud of you when you make that choice. It doesn't mean we ignore our feelings or pretend like bad stuff that happens isn't really all that bad. So what does it mean? We'll talk all about that this week. Until then work on cultivating the attribute of patience that we talked about a few weeks ago (see... that brought me a teensy amount of joy just writing that sentence as well. Maybe this won't be as tough as we thought ;o)

Tuesday Reflection: Ok... so joy. How do I cultivate joy in my life? Well, first you need to recognize where true joy comes from:

I will go to God - the Source of all my joy. Psalm 43:4 (NLT)

The Bible gives several "names" to God. I wouldn't quite call them nicknames as much as different ways of describing Who He Is. We talked about one of those names a couple months ago when Mitchell taught on the name "Yahweh Nissi" which means, "the God Who Defends Me" or as Mitchell put it- the God Who's Got My Back. In Psalm 43:4 another name is reveals more about Who God Is- El Simchathgali which means, the God of Exceeding Joy.

Did you ever stop to think about the fact that God's default setting is joy? It doesn't mean that He doesn't get sad or angry- the Bible describes both at different times. But it does mean that He always reverts back to joy. Over and over the Bible describes an almost childlike side of God. A God Who never tires of the things that bring Him joy. Have you ever done something that a child liked? What were the next words out of that child's mouth? AGAIN! Do it again. And so you do it again and what does that child say? Again! Again! Again! I don't know about your nieces and nephews but mine never get tired of the things that bring them joy.

There are a lot of theologians who see similar tendencies in God. If you've ever read the opening words of the Bible you will see a God Who takes delight in what He's creating. Every day after He creates He looks around and declares what He's made as "good" (and if you remember from our discussion of the attribute of goodness, good wasn't just "ok"- good was the best adjective one could use in Hebrew). And after He's all done He looks around and declares it "very good". Next think about the Psalms. The Psalms depict God as taking delight over and over again in the same things He created millennia ago. The book of Job tells the story of a man struggling to understand the pain and misery in this world but it also tells the story of a God Who delights in the things of this world that we have grown tired of. There's a great line from G. K. Chesterton when he talks about "God's boundless delight" in what it is that he creates, and how we get tired of it. Chesterton says, "For we have sinned and grown old, and our Father is younger than we."

I heard a talk once (don't remember who gave it) where the speaker talked about the repetition of this world. Every day the sunrises. Every day the sun sets. Doesn't God get tired of it? Doesn't seem like it, does it. What if that's because God loves the sunrise so much that every day He claps His hands and says, "again!"? Why is every daisy identical? Wouldn't God get tired of seeing the same flower bloom exactly the same way over and over again after millennia have passed? Doesn't seem like it, does it? What if that's because every time a daisy blooms God claps His hands and says, "again!"?

Remember, this is the God of "all" joy. Every bit of joy in this world issues from Him. If we want joy in our lives we have to go through Him. Sure, there are counterfeit versions of joy in this world and we'll talk about those a bit this week but what the Bible talks about is a joy that will sustain us during the toughest days of our lives and make life SO sweet during the easier days of our lives. I don't know about you but I want that kind of joy.

Wednesday Reflection: So let's just say I want to pursue joy in my life? Ok, we've already established that God is the source of all joy but how do I cultivate His joy in my own life? Well, it turns out that it pretty much begins with what I focus on. Now if you've been with us during the last few weeks you might be sensing a trend here. Wasn't the one of the points for how to cultivate both peace and patience in my life? Hey, you were paying attention! That brings me such joy you can't even imagine.

Yes. Turns out that peace, patience and joy are very dependent upon what I'm focusing on. When I talked about peace I talked about managing my expectations of what God has promised me. When I talked about patience I talked about how developing a slow fuse requires me to recognize that things aren't always going to go the way I think they should go- in fact often WAY differently than I thought they should go. It is a message delivered with a single voice over thousands of years to people dealing with small irritations and people who are suffering beyond anything you or I could possibly comprehend. Patience is the unshaking belief that God is in control even (and I might say especially) when it doesn't look like it. And peace is the ability to remain under control in the midst of the most severe storms this life can throw at you. Joy then is the ability to choose to dance in the midst of that storm.

As it turns out joy, peace and patience are very closely connected to one another. You might say they are inextricably intertwined (a phrase Judy and I learned in a history class that became one of her favorites throughout college along with the word ubiquitous but I'm digressing now which if you've read many of my devotionals you'll know is something that brings me great joy ;o). As with so many of the Christian disciplines these three are different but also very closely connected. As it turns out you can't have one without the others (which is really true of all the attributes found in the fruit of the Spirit but some of them are more closely tied together than others).

So yes... we've used this concept in the last three or four of the lessons we've looked at and only the wording has been changed (sort of like the old TV show Dragnet- the stories are true but the names have been changed to protect the innocent). In this case the wording has been changed to keep us from getting bored (at least I'm hopeful it's kept us from getting bored...). So ok- focusing on the good- let me explain why that's important:

Be careful what you think, because your thoughts run your life. Proverbs 4:23 (NCV)

If you've gone to Riverside for long at all you've heard that verse quoted over and over again. Why? Because this is where much of the battle for your soul takes place. If you remember WAY back in lesson one of this series when I was introducing the concept of the fruit of the Spirit I told you that the Bible describes human behavior in terms of operating systems. There are two for us to choose from- walking in the Spirit and the sinful/selfish nature. They are both constantly at war trying to get our attention and our agreement to follow either the Spirit of Jesus or our own human/sinful/selfish nature. That battle takes place mainly in our minds so what we allow ourselves to focus on turns out to be pretty important. The main lesson I've learned over the years is, I'm not responsible for the thoughts that pop into my mind but I am responsible for what I do with them. Do I allow them to set up residence and make themselves at home or do I focus on something else? Because just like the kids in Stephen King's book/movie "It" learned about the scary clown that terrorized their town- a thought only has power over you if you give it your attention.

So in order for joy to grow in our lives we need to focus on the good and tune out of the not-so-good stuff. It's a constant battle but it turns out it's the way God works too. There is plenty of bad stuff in this world to focus on and God sees it all (not just the stuff that actually happens but also the stuff that we just think about doing to each other or ourselves). God does get sad or even angry at what He sees but it's not what He focuses on- He focuses on the good. And good thing or we'd be in deep, deep trouble. But He does and we should be eternally grateful for that:

For the LORD your God is living among you. He is a mighty savior. He will take delight in you with gladness. With his love, he will calm all your fears. He will rejoice over you with joyful songs. Zephaniah 3:17 (NLT)

God takes delight in you with gladness. He rejoices over you with joyful songs. Can you believe that? And that's after seeing everything you've ever done and even knowing everything you've ever thought. I don't know how He does it but I'm grateful that He does. And it turns out it's also how Jesus endured the worst thing that ever happened to Him even knowing it was coming and just exactly how bad it was going to be:

For the joy set before him he endured the cross, scorning its shame, and sat down at the right hand of the throne of God. Hebrews 12:2-3 (NIV)

How did Jesus endure the single worst experience of His infinite existence? He focused on the joy was set before Him. He didn't pretend it wasn't going to be so bad. He didn't fool Himself into believing the bad stuff was actually good. What He did was manage what He focused on. And what was that? What was the "joy set before Him?" Well I can tell you it wasn't the cross. If you're familiar with the story of Jesus' time in the garden of Gethsemane then you know that He was STRESSED OUT the night before the cross. He sweat drops like blood and He prayed three times that God would devise a new strategy to save mankind so He could avoid the cross altogether. But there was no other way but through the cross. And so what did Jesus do? He focused on something that brought Him

great joy. What was it? You and me. He knew that without the cross we could never be reunited with Him. That His original plan to create a perfect world in which to place His children so that He could love us and enjoy us forever and so that we could learn to love Him and enjoy Him forever would never become a reality.

So He went to the cross knowing full well how horrific it would be (and it wasn't because of the physical pain- He never mentions the physical pain. It's the spiritual stuff that brings the most courageous, powerful and amazing Being that has ever graced this universe to His knees) all the while focusing on you and me and what the cross would mean for us and for Him.

So yeah- it turns out that what we focus on is pretty important. So step one in cultivating joy into our lives is managing what we focus on- just like Jesus did/does.

Thursday Reflection: The second step to cultivating joy in my life is to recognize that joy can be a source of tremendous strength to us. Yes, you read that right- joy=strength. There's a story in the Old Testament of a time when it had been years since the people of Israel had been able to govern themselves. They had gone from being subjugated to the Assyrians and then the Babylonians and then the Persians. The walls of the city of Jerusalem had been knocked down, the Temple of God had been destroyed and there really hadn't been a faithful, godly leader in Israel to guide the people on the path God had laid out for them. So one day along comes a couple of guys who would become those leaders- Ezra and Nehemiah. One of the first things they do is read the book of God's Law to the people and as the people listen they start to recognize just how far off they've gotten in their lives. They are NOWHERE near where God wants them to be. They are devastated and are starting to get very nervous (maybe you've had a similar experience in your own life? If so listen to what Nehemiah told the people who had wandered far from God and now realized just how lost they were):

All the people had been crying as they listened to the words of the Teachings. Nehemiah said, "Go and celebrate with a feast... and share gifts... with people who have nothing. This is a sacred day... Don't be sad, because the joy of the LORD will make you strong. Nehemiah 8:10 (NCV)

Don't cry. This isn't a sad day- it's a happy day. So let's celebrate. Why? Because "the joy of the LORD will make you strong." That's an amazing statement to me. When I was growing up I never heard that joy was a spiritual discipline. I heard a lot about other "disciplines" that were a struggle for me but I never heard that joy was a spiritual habit to be cultivated. But it turns out it is. Even when I learned that joy was one of the spiritual disciplines I figured it must be the shallow one, right? Like God only put it in there to sort of toss a bone to those of us who were shallow and weak. But it turns out that's not true at all. Turns out that joy brings us strength. It makes us strong. It makes us powerful.

Makes sense when you think about the scripture we read yesterday about how it was joy that made it possible for Jesus to endure the cross. The cross?!?!? He endured it through joy?!?!?! Then I NEED more joy in my life and I'm guessing you do too. And the more joy

you and I cultivate the more powerful we'll become. Jesus wove joy and enjoyment into every aspect of His life. It wasn't all His life was about but it was a BIG part of His life. The Pharisees didn't like that one bit. They felt like joy and having fun was a big waste of time (sounds like some of the church ladies/dudes I knew growing up). In fact one time Jesus went to a party at a "sinners" house and the Pharisees complained. They told Him He was having too much fun and do you know what Jesus said?

The Son of Man came eating and drinking and enjoying life. Matthew 11:18 (PhV)

He's talking about Himself. He was the Son of Man. And when He says that He came eating and drinking and enjoying life He was actually pretty much quoting a verse from the Old Testament that everybody there would have automatically flashed to in their minds when He quoted it. Rabbis did this all the time in the first century. Jesus does it on the cross- at one point He says,

My God, my God, why have you forsaken me? Matthew 27:46 (NIV)

I always thought it was just some random thing that He blurted out. But it was more than that- it was a direct quote from one of the Psalms and a fulfillment of a prophecy that was written almost a thousand years before He walked this earth. Here's the beginning of that prophecy:

My God, my God, why have you forsaken me? Why are you so far from saving me, so far from my cries of anguish? Psalm 22:1 (NIV)

Everybody standing there that day who was familiar with the Old Testament scriptures would have heard Jesus cry out on the cross and immediately they would have thought about the 22nd Psalm. I bet there were more than a few, "ohhhhh"s as they started recalling that Psalm and the eerie way that prophecy paralleled Jesus' experience that day. Go ahead and stop for a minute and read that Psalm. I'll wait. If you know what He went through that Psalm will make you stop and think for a minute or two.

Jesus is doing the same thing when He says that He came "eating and drinking and enjoying life." Anybody familiar with the Old Testament scriptures would have heard those words and a passage from the book of Ecclesiastes would have flashed across the screen of their minds:

I recommend having fun, because there is nothing better for people to do in this world than to eat, drink and enjoy life. Ecclesiastes 8:15 (NLT)

What is Jesus getting at in quoting Ecclesiastes 8:15 to the Pharisees who are criticizing Him for having too much fun? That He recommends having fun because there's nothing better for people to do in this world than enjoy themselves. It's not all that life is made for but if you miss this part you miss a HUGE part of what makes this life so sweet. And you miss the power and strength that comes from joy. Turns out joy is more than just a fluff discipline- it's something that will power your life when storms come along.

Friday Reflection: So today we are going to look at the last concept for this week as far as cultivating joy in our lives goes- setting my internal thermostat to joy. It's not easy but it's what the Bible invites us to over and over again:

Always be joyful. 1 Thessalonians 5:16 (NLT)

Always be full of joy in the Lord. I say it again-rejoice! Philippians 4:1 (NLT)

I used to read verses like that and wonder if it was even possible? ALWAYS be joyful? That seems like an impossible task even for someone like me! But that's before I really started looking into what biblical joy is. Turns out that biblical joy isn't an emotion or a feeling- it's a way of looking at life. It's a choice. It's an attitude. Recognizing that I started to see how it was possible to "always be joyful". And that means that I can choose joy even in the midst of the greatest storms this life will ever throw at me- and not just can choose joy but really I NEED to choose joy during those times.

Why? Because we've seen how powerful joy is this week (at least I hope I've made the case for why joy is SO important to the human life). It brings us strength. It makes life sweet. And it's something that will power us through the most difficult days this world will throw at you. Not a joy that ignores sorrow or pretends suffering isn't all that bad but a joy that says even in the face of the darkest days of my life I will not be shaken from my hope. There's a phrase for that way of looking at life- I've heard it called "nevertheless" theology and it stems from a passage in the book of Habakkuk:

Fig trees may no longer bloom, or vineyards produce grapes; olive trees may be fruitless, and harvest time a failure; sheep pens may be empty, and cattle stalls vacant- (nevertheless) I will still celebrate because the LORD God saves me. Habakkuk 3:17-18 (CEV)

In ancient Israel the picture the prophet is painting is bleak. Israel was a farming society. If the crops didn't grow and the livestock died it would have been devastating to Israel's economy and every area of their lives would have suffered. The prophet is describing one of the darkest scenes imaginable. And what does He say? Nevertheless! Even when things are at their bleakest I will still celebrate! Why? Because there's power in celebration as we've seen throughout this week. Sometimes it's not easy at all. Sometimes we would rather do anything other than celebrate. But I've learned in my own life that there are other people who depend on me. It turns out they need me to be at the best I can possibly be. My decision to celebrate and find both joy and strength isn't just about me. And it's not just about you either. We depend on each other. It's why God placed us in community and families. I don't know what's going on in your life today. I know that it's not always easy to choose to celebrate and practice joy. I hope you'll join me today and say, "things may not always go the way I'd like them to. Sometimes things seem as bad as I could possibly imagine. NEVERTHELESS... I will still celebrate because the LORD God saves me."

Easy. Nope. But powerful? You bet. It got Jesus through the cross. It'll get you and me through whatever we may be going through too. I believe it with every ounce of my being. Nevertheless. Nevertheless. Nevertheless...