

The Gift Of Joy For You

Luke 2:8-18

Rev. Jean Smith

Christmas is a time of gift giving, there's no doubt about that. But the greatest gifts are not the perishable things we find under the tree, but the imperishable gifts God offers us. Today I want to talk to you about God's gift of joy. Not only has God made us with the ability to experience joy, but he has also given us a longing and a hunger for joy. Perhaps our greatest witness to the non-Christian world is the joy we experience as believers – as we worship the Lord, as we pray to our God, as we experience the sweet, sweet presence of the Lord in our lives.

In Paul's first letter to the Christians in Thessalonica we are commanded, "*Always be joyful.*" (1st Thes. 5:6) How do we do that? How do we live a joy filled life when there are so many things that rob us of joy? Things that you and I face on a daily basis suck the joy right out of us.

What robs us of joy? **The FIRST thing that robs us of joy is the bad things that shouldn't happen.** I'm not talking about the bad things that happen to us because of our bad decisions. I'm talking here about the bad things that just happen even when we're doing our best to live as the Lord would have us live. The bad things that shouldn't happen make us wonder if it's possible to live a joy filled life.

The SECOND thing that robs us of joy is the good things that don't happen. I'm talking about the dreams we all have that never seem to materialize no matter how hard we work to make them happen. I'm talking about the prayers we've prayed that don't seem to get answered; at least not in the way we want them to be answered. Every day of our lives we face unfulfilled longings and unanswered prayers, and we wonder if living a joy filled life is really possible. How is it possible to have joy in an imperfect and often disappointing world?

This is what Christmas is all about. God came into a hurting and broken world in the person of Jesus Christ to bring us joy. God made a way for joy to be experienced even in a world where bad things happen that shouldn't happen and good things don't happen that should. Even in your world with the problems and disappointments you face, joy can be a reality; joy can be within your reach. You can choose to be a discouraged person because you've got a lot to be discouraged about. You can choose to allow the bad things to rob you of joy. The message of

Christmas is: you can choose to be a joyful person because Jesus entered our world and changed everything.

How do you choose to be joy filled person? How do you choose joy over sadness? How do you experience the joy that transcends your circumstances?

It's easy to focus on the negative rather than the positive, isn't it? A man by the name of Dr. David Myers, wrote a book titled, *The Pursuit of Happiness*, While he was doing research for the book, he looked back over 17 years and discovered over 80,000 research studies on depression in the United States alone. At the same time, there were only 4000 research projects done on joy. It's easy to focus on the negative, but that won't get you anywhere. When you focus on the positive, you begin to move from a joyless life to a genuinely joy filled life. God would not command us to do something that is out of our reach. So how do we get to the place where we experience the joy filled life God calls us to live?

There's a group of guys in the Bible who can help us to with that. They were the shepherds. The Bible says they were out in the fields near Bethlehem when they got the news. These guys made some simple and clear choices in response to God's offer of great joy.

First, the shepherds chose to listen to the good news. They didn't hide from it or ignore it. They listened carefully to it. Have you ever been really down and the phone rings and someone tells you some really good news? All of the sudden, even for a brief moment, your spirit lifts and you feel joy? That's the power of good news. It brings joy into your life. That's what happened to the shepherds on the night of our Savior's birth. The Bible says, "*...the angel of the Lord said to them, 'Do not be afraid. I bring you good news of great joy that will be for all people.'*" (Luke 2:10) This good news was not just for the shepherds. It was for all people everywhere. It was good news that reached back into history and stretched clear into the future. It was the good news that a Savior has been born; Christ has come into our world and His coming has changed everything. His coming has made it possible for us to experience a joy that transcends our circumstances.

Jesus came to earth to show us how much God loves us. Through him, God offers us forgiveness for all the things we have done. The good news is that God offers us a new direction for our lives. He cares about what we're going through. He can fill us with joy even in the midst of the bad things that should happen to us and the good things that should but don't. That's good news!

The apostle Paul writes, ***“I am not ashamed of this good news about Christ. It is God’s powerful means of bringing all who believe it to heaven. Now everyone is invited to come to God in this same way.”*** (Romans 1:16) The good news is that God has invited you and me to have a relationship with him. He’s made a way for us to have a relationship with him, a relationship that will sustain us through life and fill us with joy. That’s what Christmas is all about. One thing is sure, you can’t respond to God’s message of joy if you never listen to it.

Hearing the good news brings joy into our lives, just as it did for the shepherds that first Christmas. Even in the midst of their fear, they chose to listen and when they did, they experienced God’s gift of joy. The apostle James writes, ***“Dear brothers and sisters, whenever trouble comes your way let it be an opportunity for joy, for when your faith is tested your endurance has an opportunity to grow.”*** (James 1:2 & 3) God can work even through the struggles of our lives when we choose to put our faith in Him. The gift of joy comes when we trust God to work in our lives and help us to overcome and transcend our problems. Hebrews 10 talks about those who have received God’s gift of joy. It says, ***“You even had joy when all that you owned was taken from you because you knew that you had something better and more lasting.”*** (Hebrews 10:34) This world is not all there is. God is preparing a place for us, a place full of joy and happiness that will never end.

The shepherds teach us that joy comes from hearing the good news.

Second, the shepherds chose to believe what God told them. Luke 2:15 says, ***“When the angel had left them and went into heaven the shepherds said to one another ‘Let’s go to Bethlehem and see this thing that has happened which the Lord has told us about.’”*** Why did they go to Bethlehem? --Because they chose to believe; they chose to trust God. If we believe God, we will act upon what he tells us and do what he wants us to do.

Figuratively speaking, there are a lot of people who are still stuck on a hill outside Bethlehem. People who have heard the good news but they haven’t done what God has told them to do. We are to listen and believe what he says. If you are still stuck on a hillside outside of Bethlehem, it is not too late for you to do what God has told you to do. It is never too late for you to seek Christ and bow down before Him. Joy happens in our lives when we choose to hear the good news and do what God tells us to do. When we bow before Jesus, and offer our gift of worship, he fills us with joy. Psalm 97:11 says, ***“Light shines on the godly and joy on those who do right.”*** We have to hear the good news and get up and do what is right.

God takes great delight in giving us gifts, just as we take great delight in giving gifts to those we love. Jesus said, *“Until now you’ve not asked for anything in My name. Ask and you will receive that your joy may be complete.”* (John 16:24) God wants your joy to be complete. He wants to give you good gifts. God doesn’t always give you what you want, but He will give you what you need, that your joy may be complete.

The third thing the shepherds teach us is that we must choose to share the good news with others. We can’t just keep it to ourselves. The Bible says, **“When they had seen Him (the baby Jesus), they spread the word concerning what had been told then about this child. . .”** (Luke 2:17) They didn’t go back to the hillside with their sheep and carry on as if nothing ever happened. They went out and immediately told everyone who would listen what had been told them about Jesus and they were filled with joy. Joy comes to us when we share Christ with others.

There are days when I stand up to preach and my heart is filled with anything but joy. By the time I finish my sermon, my heart is filled with joy. Some of you experience joy, too, when my sermons are over. But that’s not quite what I’m talking about. I’m talking about a joy that comes from faithfully telling others about Christ. It’s a joy that many Christians never experience because they never tell anyone about Christ and what he has done for them. It’s not that these Christians haven’t heard the good news. It’s not that they don’t believe in Christ and what he has done for them. But they haven’t shared their faith with another human being. Until they do, they won’t know the tremendous joy that comes from sharing Christ with others.

Maybe you could think of someone you’d like to share Christ with. Maybe there’s someone you’d like to invite to church. Inviting them to worship with you on Christmas Eve would be a good first step. People feel a special openness to going to church on Christmas Eve. They’d like to go, but nobody asks them. People want to be asked. Asking them to come to church with you could be your first step in sharing Christ with them. Christmas is about Christ and everybody knows it, whether they want to admit it or not. Invite someone to worship with you, someone who doesn’t have a church family to encourage them; someone who may be stuck on the hillside outside Bethlehem.

I want to warn you, though. Telling others about Christ is contagious. It’s a lot like a virus. I’ve been hearing people talk about a virus going around lately where people get really

sick. The Christmas virus is different. A great number of people have already been exposed to it. It's possible that people everywhere could be affected by it.

Some symptoms of the Christmas virus are:

- a tendency to think and act spontaneously rather than based on past fears;
- a loss of interest in judging other people;
- a loss of the ability to worry (that's a very serious sign if that's happening to you);
- a new appreciation of the good news of Christmas, that God came to show His love for you at Christmas;
- a slow realization that God's direction is always for your best;
- an overwhelming need to tell someone else about how good God is.

This virus can and has affected many people. You may even be a carrier of this virus and not know it because you haven't come down with it yet.

My prayer is that you will all catch the Christmas virus, and that you will share it with a friend as soon as possible.

When you tell someone the good news, you are telling him or her there is hope. They can be changed by the power of God. They can be forgiven. They can be healed. They can find new direction. Christ can come into their life and give them the joy they long for and can have, even in the midst of heartbreaking circumstances.