

May 3, 2009

Revelation 13:1b-10 / Luke 10:17-24

Rejoicing in Spiritual Power or God's Gracious and Irrevocable Love For Us?

If there was ever a passage that the Church worldwide needed to be reminded of again and again, or that individual Christians need to be reminded of again and again — especially in the times of REVIVAL or GREAT SPIRITUAL SUCCESS — it's this one!

WHY? Because in this passage addresses one of the most subtle, yet common mistakes I've seen the people of God fall prey to:

The mistake of deriving MORE joy or getting MORE emotionally stirred up or being MORE thrilled and enthralled by displays of miraculous power or supernatural manifestations or from some success in ministry or exciting burst of church growth, than from simply remembering the most important thing of all — that God loves them, redeemed them and saved them! The unchangeable fact that, "their names are written in heaven."

"Don't do it," says Jesus in verse 20! "Don't allow it to happen!" He's very emphatic! ***"Do NOT rejoice that the spirits submit to you,"*** He says, ***"but rejoice that your names are written in heaven."***

In other words, it's OK to get excited about the things God does in our life, like answers to prayer and displays of miraculous power.

Though verse 20, as I. Howard Marshall points out, ***"should probably be interpreted in terms of a Semitic idiom to mean, 'Do not rejoice primarily..."*** It's not that they can't rejoice at all that demons submitted to them in Jesus name, it's that it can't be their primary and ongoing source of joy.

You see, the disciples come back from their successful short-term missions trip all excited and full of joy, because they've exercised authority or power over the demonic. They've seen demons coweringly obey them! The powers of evil have submitted to their commands!

And because of it they're pumped! The exercise of such power thrills them! It's the stuff of movies like "The Exorcist" or "The Exorcism of Emily Rose," except in the case of the disciples, the demons simply do whatever they're commanded in Jesus name!

And although Jesus approves of what they did and the crushing blow their ministry activity dealt to Satan (vv. 18-19), who as a result, *“fell from heaven like lightning,”* He’s also quick to throw in a very pointed *“However...”* What you did is good, however your rejoicing in the wrong thing!

You did what I sent you out to do and Satan took a massive hit as a result. Yet do not let THAT be the source of your abiding joy. Rather, let the source of your joy be the fact that *“God has written your names in heaven,”* or *“the Lambs book of life,”* as John puts it in Rev. 13. It’s good to have joy, but your joy must be grounded in the right thing!

So, with that as the obvious background to what’s happening here, let’s consider what each one of us can learn from this text in regard to the dangers of being excited or rejoicing about the wrong thing.

And in that regard the **FIRST** danger is obvious: Making transient, occasional, intermittent or non-permanent things the source of your joy robs you of the ability to experience abiding joy. Rejoicing primarily in the high of powerful victories over evil, or the thrill of the miraculous places you on an emotional roller coaster ride that leaves you craving and needing more and more such experiences to keep you going.

I say this from experience, my friends, because over the years (and especially in my first few years as a Christian) I had many intense spiritual or mystical experiences. And in one sense I’m grateful for having had them, because they broke down my naturalistic worldview.

As a Mechanical Engineering Student, I was of the opinion that if I could not see it, feel it, touch it, measure it, prove it or put it in a box, it could not exist! But then I saw some answers to prayer, and had some spiritual experiences and witnessed some miracles I could not deny — all of which helped me see the reality of Him whom no one can see! It was part of the process by which God graciously led me to faith in Jesus.

But you know, as much as I can look back and appreciate those experiences and what they did for me in helping me come to faith, they were transient and very intermittent or sporadic. They lasted only seconds or minutes or hours at the most. And then I would go months (sometimes years) without any — and believe it or not — the lack of them would cause me to doubt again!

WHY? Because I had inadvertently come to depend on them to sustain my walk with God! I HAD to have them! I had come to NEED them to ASSURE me that God loved me and was

pleased with me. When I had them I rejoiced, but when I'd go for any length of time without them I'd become anxious and lose that abiding joy.

And that's precisely the problem which Jesus, in this text, seeks to help the disciples avoid!

Miracles and the exercise of spiritual power **CAN** be a great encouragement. But when one comes to need them and depend on having them in order to believe or be the source of their joy and assurance that God loves and accepts them — and then they don't have any for an extended period of time — it leaves them gasping for air! It throws them into a spiritual tailspin, craving and yearning or praying for more such experiences to retain the sense of God's approval. It can even become an addiction.

And **LISTEN**: Any addiction, other than God and our constant need for Gospel truth, is an unhealthy addiction which leads to inner insecurity and puts you on emotional roller coaster ride you don't want to be on — trust me! You're "up" when you have them and in the pits or feeling anxious when you don't. And that cycle robs the soul of peace and abiding joy!

And Jesus sees that potential danger brewing in the lives of His disciples when they come back thrilled and full of joy and having an excitement that's based in the wrong thing!

And thus, as the wisest of all spiritual guides, He warns them not to get caught up in it! Joy is good! But joy that is grounded in the wrong thing can do great spiritual damage. That, my friends, is Jesus word to you.

Then **SECOND**, not only can our misplaced joy be harmful to us, it can lead other people astray, and actually (though often quite unintentionally) encourage idolatries in the lives of people who see US (like the disciples) rejoicing in the wrong things.

"All people," as Blaise Pascal once noted, ***"seek happiness."*** And he's right, they do! And one of the ways they set about pursuing or attaining happiness, is by observing people they think are happy or joyful, and then engaging in the activities those people engage in, or experimenting with what those people get all excited about, reasoning that if it makes those other people happy, it will make them happy as well.

That's the ploy behind MOST television commercials! Like Pascal, advertising executives know all people desire to be happy, and so they go to great measures (in their commercials) to portray the people who use their products as smiling and happy and content and full of joy and outgoing

and surrounded by friends and always laughing and having a good time with others, while those who DON'T use their product are often shown to be unhappy or frustrated or anxious or irritated or insecure.

It doesn't matter whether its alcohol or cars or deodorant or clothes or some cleaning product or viagra — the message is almost always the same. Buy our product and you'll be as happy and as content and as full of joy as the people you see in their commercials. That's the overt or subliminal message behind most ads.

But now, let's switch that scenario from television commercials to the spiritual life, and consider the fact that your life is one long uninterrupted commercial to others!

People are around you every day and they're searching for joy and happiness. So they scope you out and notice that you often seem very happy, and bubbling over with joy and excited about life. And because of it they watch you, and listen to what you talk about, and try to discern what it is that lights up your soul. What it is that you're into, and do, and pour your energies into that gets you so excited.

So let's say they watch you, and like the disciples as they returned from their ministry experience, they notice that what gets you all excited and causes you to jump for joy, is engaging in spiritual warfare! It's the thrill of doing exorcisms and casting out demons! It's exercising phenomenal spiritual power over evil! It's the excitement of success in the realm of doing battle with demons!

So what do they do? They make it their goal (like the Jewish exorcists in Acts 19) to get a hold of that power, and engage in spiritual warfare — wrongly thinking that that must be the source of a Christian's joy.

But let me ask you: If that is what they've concluded by observing your life, what have you done?

And the answer? You've led them astray, and possibly erected in their soul an idolatrous craving for spiritual power and a dependence on spiritual experiences or doing battle with demons as the source of their joy.

You see, we need to be very careful we don't give off the wrong EMOTIONAL signals, or rejoice in the wrong things, because when we do, we can lead others terribly astray.

For instance: I love to build things! It gives me a great sense of accomplishment to see something where there was once nothing!

But God help me if I ever lead my children to think that the source of their dad's joy and happiness comes from building rather than Jesus! That I derive greater joy from making things than from knowing and belonging to Jesus. If that's what I lead them to think, I have terribly misled them and possibly even established an idol in their hearts.

You see, it's ok to derive joy from doing certain things. But if we convey, by our words and especially our emotions, that those things bring us more joy than Jesus or the salvation of our souls, we have encouraged the growth of idolatry in the lives of others.

We can say whatever we want with our words — that we love Him with all our hearts, and that He's the source of our happiness or joy in life.

But if we get more excited and more emotionally charged and show more joy and enthusiasm when we talk about other things, like what we have or what we do, then we contradict with our emotions and affections what we confess about Jesus with our words.

One Christian man who I met at a restaurant while visiting my parents, drove 2 hours to my house in Westport, and had his son sit in the car for another 2 hours while he went on and on and on about how wonderful AMWAY was! How being involved in Amway had changed his life, and could change mine as well by making me rich! ("Wish Book" with mansions and Rolls Royces)

Which leads me to ask you: What lights up your soul when you begin to talk about it? / What gives you the most joy in life? / Is it the Gospel and belonging to Jesus and having your name written in heaven, or some other thing?

People do notice. So the question is NOT "what do you tell people about Jesus," but what do your emotions tell people when you speak? Because it's NOT what you say, it's what you get excited about that tells people the source of your joy and happiness.

Then **THIRD**, I want to share what Jesus says our source of abiding joy SHOULD BE. And it's not simply stated in verse 20. It's stated in verse 20 and then expanded upon in varying detail from verses 21-24! So what is the Christians source of joy according to Jesus? Jesus says there are **THREE** aspects to it.

1st) In verse 20, as we've already seen, He says ***"rejoice that your names are written in heaven."*** How does that give us abiding joy? Because that is an unchanging, permanent and irrevocable act of God!

In fact, the text in Revelation 13:8, which speaks of names being written in the Lamb's book of life, can be translated (as in the ESV), ***"whose names were not written before the foundation of the world in the Lamb's book of life..."***

In other words, when were the names in "The Book of Life" inscribed there? Before the foundation of the world! Not when we were born again, but long before we were ever born — before the earth was ever created! Your name (if you have or ever will come to Christ) has been inscribed in the Lamb's book of life from eternity past.

What could possibly be more comforting? What could possibly be a greater source of abiding joy? What could possibly make us rejoice more, or be habitually more happy, than to discover (after we come to Christ) that our names had been written in heaven, or inscribed in that Book of Life from everlasting ages past — an inscription that will never be altered!

Then 2nd) Jesus shares another source of joy in verse 21 – The presence of the Holy Spirit. ***"At that time,"*** says Luke, ***"Jesus, full of joy through the Holy Spirit..."*** The word translated "full of joy" is actually means ecstatic, bubbling over with joy, or "thrilled with joy," as Moffatt put it in his translation of the NT.

The NT confirms it over and over again — The Holy Spirit is the source of the believer's joy! Because the Holy Spirit, as J. I. Packer points out in relation to John 14:23, is the presence of the Father and the presence of the Son, mediated into the life of the one who believes. It's the Spirit's indwelling presence that spawns joy in the believers heart, just as His indwelling presence is noted as one of the things that caused Jesus to be "overflowing with joy" on this particular occasion.

It is not God's power, but His presence mediated to us because He accepts us in Jesus, that gives life and joy to the soul! If you want abiding joy, you must have the Holy Spirit, and to have the Holy Spirit, you must have Jesus! It's a package deal!

What's the greatest promise in Scripture in regard to joy? It comes in Acts 2:38-39: ***"Repent and be baptized, every one of you, in the name of Jesus Christ, for the forgiveness of your sins, and you will receive the gift of the Holy Spirit. This promise is for you, and your children, and all who are far off – for all whom the Lord our God will call."***

Turn to Jesus, and trust in Him, and you'll not only be forgiven (and thus saved from sins power and penalty), you'll also receive the gift of the Holy Spirit — our abiding source of joy. That's God's promise!

Then **LAST** Jesus rejoices in the sovereignty of God, who has purposely hidden His ways from the wise and learned, and revealed to children (or those who become like children by trusting in Him rather than trusting in their learning or intellectual prowess). *"Yes, Father," says Jesus, "for this was your good pleasure."*

In fact, speaking of that same selectivity in revealing Himself to certain people and not others, Jesus goes on to say:

"All things have been committed to me by my Father. No one knows who the Son is except the Father, and no one knows who the Father is except the Son and those to whom the Son chooses to reveal Him."

What's He talking about? He's talking about that Scriptural truth that is so unsettling to so many people! The truth that we are entirely dependent upon the grace of God for our salvation.

That we're are not the captain of our ship, or the masters of our own destiny. That we don't awaken ourselves to the truth, or come to know Jesus through our own powers of reason. / That we're not saved because we we're better, or "gooder" (as one child put it!) or more virtuous, or talented, or successful, or zealous, or worthy, or educated or anything like that!

NO! What Jesus tells us is that if we have received the blessing of knowing Christ, and being found in Him, it is for no other reason than that He, of His own good pleasure, chose to reveal or make Himself known to us as a sheer act of undeserved grace.

He is known by us only because He has chosen to make Himself known to us, by an internal revelation of Himself to our soul—something that He does as an expression of His free kindness and sovereign mercy and good pleasure.

Like it or not (and many don't) that IS what this text says! Those who know Him know Him because He chose to reveal Himself to them in a way that He has not, and may not reveal Himself to others.

That's a hard pill to swallow, is it not? In fact, it often causes people to say: "But why me, I don't feel worthy." But that's the whole point — He doesn't require you to be.

"I'm no better than anyone else," you say. That's right, you're not. / "I don't deserve to be saved any more than any other person on the face of this earth," you say. That's right — you don't.

But that's the point Jesus is making: Salvation is the gracious **GIFT** of a sovereign God to those He chooses, in His good pleasure, to give it to. Which means that if we know Him it's simply because, sinful, ungodly and unworthy as we were, He freely and mercifully chose to give us a gift we had done everything (by our sin) **NOT** to deserve.

And that, Jesus is saying, should fill your heart with great joy! On occasion it's filled my heart with so much joy it's reduced me to tears! That's what this truth is meant to do! It's meant to encourage and be a source of abiding joy in the lives of God's people.

That's why Paul can speak of the same thing in Eph. 1:5 and say: ***"In LOVE He predestined us to be adopted as His sons through Jesus Christ, in accordance with HIS good pleasure and will — to the praise of His glorious grace..."*** Paul sees it as an expression of the incomprehensible love of God that should spawn continuous joy in the hearts of believers.

LISTEN carefully: As much as it may seem "unfair" that God or Jesus would make Himself known to some and not others, ***IT MUST BE THAT WAY*** if salvation is to be by grace! For what is grace except God giving to people what they do not deserve.

You see, salvation can either be by grace or by works. / It's either a gift, or we must somehow earn it.

It either comes to us by the free and sovereign kindness of a merciful God which ***WE DO NOT DESERVE***, or it comes to us as ***A REWARD WE DO DESERVE*** for having expended some degree of effort or achieved some degree of goodness, desire, holiness, or ethical reformation.

Those are the only two options! If salvation is to be by grace, that's the way it has to be!

That's how the right source of joy and God's choosing to reveal Himself to particular individuals and not others are related.

If I have to do something to earn or make myself worthy of salvation, then I will lose it when I stop doing that thing or become unworthy. / If salvation is by works, or if I attain it by human effort, then I can NEVER REALLY HAVE ABIDING JOY, because I can NEVER really be sure I'm doing enough, or doing it well enough, or long enough, or good enough, or earnestly enough to retain the salvation I earned in the first place.

Only if it's a **GIFT**, bestowed upon me by the sheer kindness of a merciful God, who looked down upon me even in my darkest depravity, and chose to save me (not because of what I did, but in spite of what I did) can I have abiding joy because I can know that my acceptance with Him is secure! I can't lose it precisely because I didn't do anything to earn it to begin with!

Fight or resist that truth as we might (and many people do), Jesus won't let us believe otherwise, lest He Himself do the very thing He wants to keep us from doing — ***grounding the source of their joy in the wrong thing and thus place us on an emotional roller coaster ride all our lives, or lead us astray into the idolatry of works!***