

## **No Obedience—No Joy**

Galatians 5:22; Ecclesiastes 3:12-15

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Americans spend billions of dollars each year on toys, amusements, sex and pornography, homes, cars, and anything they believe will make them happy in this life. When one toy doesn't fulfill them, they search for and pay for another toy. It is an endless search for the fount of joy. There is a vacuum in their life (and in the life of us all) that no mere creature can fill—that only the Fount of everlasting joy can fill. Only the God who created us and saves us through faith alone in Christ alone can bring a joy that abides with us in whatever circumstance of life He may bring us through.

We continue our study this Lord's Day of the fruit of joy as one of the graces implanted in the heart of every Christian at regeneration and as one of the graces that the Lord calls us to water by learning contentment, by unceasing prayer, by being thankful in all circumstances, and by loving obedience in doing good (as we shall see today), so that our joy might be made full.

DOING what is good (and not merely talking about doing what is good) is an essential ingredient to growing the fruit of joy in our life. We often talk the talk, but less often consistently walk the walk. But dear ones, our joy is made full in not merely professing our faith before others, but in giving hands and feet to that faith in loving God and others by a cheerful and willing obedience to God's commands in doing what is good.

For the Lord Jesus, who is our joy, our first love, and our reason for living has said, "If ye know these things, happy are ye IF YE DO THEM" (John 13:17). You see, dear ones, our blessed Savior did not merely say, "happy are ye IF YE KNOW these things", and simply leave our joy hanging upon our mere knowledge of what is good and right to do. For, dear ones, merely knowing (but not practicing what we know) will not bring joy and blessedness, it will only aggravate our sin (Luke 12:47). It will only serve to make us more miserable. But doing what we know to be good, right, and true out of love for God and for our neighbor inevitably brings the joy of the Lord.

Let us turn our attention to the words of the wisest mere man that ever lived (Christ was not a mere man), the words of Solomon from Ecclesiastes 3:12-15, where we will focus our attention on the following two main points: (I) There Is Joy in the Lord in Doing Good (Ecclesiastes 3:12-13); (II) There is Joy in the Lord in Fearing God (Ecclesiastes 3:14-15).

### **I. There Is Joy in the Lord in Doing Good (Ecclesiastes 3:12-13).**

A. Solomon has just highlighted in the previous verses how our hope is not in the many changing circumstances in which man labors (Ecclesiastes 3:1-8), but rather is in the unchanging God who has made and shall make all things beautiful in His time (Ecclesiastes 3:9-11a). That, my friends, is the formula for a lasting joy. How can we tell what we are looking to at any particular moment of the day as the source of our joy? If we live in frustration, worry, or bitterness over the afflictions, trials, and delays that come into our lives, we are looking to people or to the circumstances of life to bring us joy. However, if we live in the hope that God has already decreed from eternity and shall make in the future everything beautiful in His own time (in the life of the Christian), we are looking to Christ to bring us joy. To whom or what are you looking for that lasting joy and contentment—to the unchangeable God or to the changeable creature (or changeable circumstances of life)?

B. Solomon has personally observed and learned from his own experience that which does not lead to a lasting joy and that which does lead to a lasting joy: “I know” (Ecclesiastes 3:12). Solomon had learned from his own experience that the pleasure, laughter, feasting, building projects, wealth, and fame of the world do not bring joy without the Lord. He had to learn the hard way because he would not learn the easy way (i.e. by way of trusting and obeying the Lord).

1. What did Solomon say he knew: “I know that there is no good in them [i.e. nothing better for them—GLP], but for a man to rejoice, and to do good in his life” (Ecclesiastes 3:12). In other words, our inspired author is saying that in a world of such constant change as described in verses 1-8, there is nothing better for a man than to rejoice and to do good during the course of his entire life. Obedience to Christ and His good commandments leads to satisfaction, joy, and contentment; whereas disobedience to Christ and His good commandments leads to confusion, frustration, and misery.

a. Dear ones, we will never know the joy of the Lord if we only talk about the will of God, but do not DO the will of God (1 Thessalonians 5:16-18). I don’t mean a mere formality of obedience to God’s commandments. I mean an obedience that is the fruit of trusting alone in the obedience of Christ alone as our only hope of ever being right with God. I mean an obedience that aims at the glory of God, and is a response to His immeasurable love for us, in saving us and providing for us.

b. If you take two children (one who is generally an obedient child and the other who is generally a rebellious child) and observe them closely, you will find that of the two children the one who generally exhibits joy is the one who is generally obedient, while the one who is generally miserable is the one who is generally disobedient. If that is true by way of common grace, how much more so it is by way of special grace in the life of a Christian. For joy in the Lord is the reward that springs up in our own hearts when we know that we have pleased God, helped others, loved others, or have been an encouragement to others. The fruit of obedience to Christ out of a heart that is filled with love to Christ is the joy of the Lord.

c. How thankful I am to the Lord that He has not hidden the sins and failures of even the most heralded of God’s saints in Scripture. Listen to the testimony of David (a man after God’s own heart) when he fell into sin and resisted the work of God’s Spirit in his life: Psalm 32:3-5,11; Psalm 51:8). Dear ones, when we walk in rebellion against the Lord (as did David), sorrow, misery, and discontentment will replace the joy of the Lord. When we are acting like a rebellious child who wants his/her own way, we are choosing to walk the path to misery rather than the path to joy. Dear ones, let us remember that there is joy (and much joy that will flood our heart) in doing what is good and right in obeying God’s commandments out of a heart of love to Christ as our first love.

2. As we further consider Ecclesiastes 3:12, what is it, “to do good”? Good works from a scriptural perspective always involve the following three marks: (1) They are done for the glory of God (1 Corinthians 10:31); (2) They are done from a heart of faith in God and love for God and our neighbor (Hebrews 11:6; 1 John 5:3); and (3) They are done according to the supreme standard of God’s Word (2 Timothy 3:16-17).

a. Some act as if joy should simply fall out of heaven into our hearts because we intellectually know the truth. Jesus was quite clear on this point. Joy is not the fruit of a mere intellectual knowledge of God or of His truth (John 13:17). The Psalmist declares the blessed man (woman or child) to be one whose “delight is in the law of the LORD, and in his law doth he meditate both day and night” (Psalm 1:2).

b. Beloved, you cannot be filled with the joy of the Lord and yet be filled with a hatred for God’s Law or an indifference to God’s Law (“I can take it or leave it”). In fact, one who cares not to be holy in this life will hate heaven; for heaven will be a place of absolute holiness. In heaven perfect righteousness and obedience to the will of God will be followed by all who inherit it for all eternity. Thus, perfect joy will be ours in heaven because we will be perfected in holiness.

c. Understand then, dear ones, that lawlessness, following your own will, doing your own thing is the enemy of joy; whereas cheerfully obeying the good commandments of God from a heart

of faith in Christ and love for Christ is the friend of true joy now and for all eternity. Our good works (after justification) do not deny God's grace in our lives, but are absolutely dependent upon God's grace (Philippians 4:12-13).

3. But let us now consider Ecclesiastes 3:13. Here, we are likely taken in a direction we had not anticipated in doing that which is good. It is not only NOT sin (in a negative sense) to eat and drink of the many earthly blessings of God to the glory of God (whether it be food, clothing, homes, health, jobs, wealth, family, and divine protection), it is a commanded duty (in a positive sense) to enjoy all such good that comes from one's honest labor to the glory of God (1 Timothy 6:17). For all that we have in this life by way of necessities and comforts are the gift of God graciously given to us.

a. Therefore, when we do not enjoy to the glory of God that which God graciously gives to us by way of our time, talents, and treasures, we disobey God. We do that which is evil, rather than that which is good (Ecclesiastes 3:13).

b. For, dear ones, to enjoy God's gifts to us with humble and thankful hearts is to enjoy the Giver of all good gifts. To enjoy God's good gifts (in a biblical sense) is not to be ruled by those gifts, so that we forget God and indulge the lusts of the flesh. To enjoy God's good gifts is not to make the gifts of God our lord and master. But rather, to enjoy God's good gifts is to see the hand of God in every good gift and to worship Him, praise Him, and thank Him for His abundant, undeserved goodness to us.

c. Dear child of God, you will never rejoice in the many blessings God has graciously bestowed upon you, if you are not consciously thankful for the many blessings you have received from the Lord. If you sit around complaining about all of the trials, afflictions, and delays you endure and how poorly others have treated you, but do not turn to thank your loving Father for all spiritual blessings and the many material blessings you undeservedly enjoy every moment of the day, you will be deservedly miserable. In fact, you have chosen to be miserable. For you have chosen to focus your attention upon what you do not have and might lose, rather than upon what you do have in Christ and cannot lose. You have chosen to blame God, rather than to praise God. You have chosen to be blind, rather than to see. You have chosen to grumble against God's good providence, rather than to rejoice in God's good providence (knowing He has made and shall make everything beautiful in His time).

d. But consider this. Doing what is good and right is always more difficult when there is a sacrifice to make, or when it will cost you something. It is much easier to do what is right when you not only do not suffer for it, but are immediately rewarded for it.

e. For example, it is easier for us to do what is good when it comes to eating and drinking in the blessings of God as stated in Ecclesiastes 3:13 because it is comfortable. A command to do what is good in enjoying such blessings from God is a duty most of us would prefer to have set before us rather than a command to endure suffering, humiliation, affliction, and deprivation. But before there can be the sitting at the table to enjoy the blessedness of food and drink, there ordinarily comes the sorrow and tears of hard work and sacrifice (Psalm 126:5-6).

f. What sacrifices has the Lord called you to make in doing what is good? The Lord promises that the sacrifices you make in doing what is good will pale in comparison to the joy you will receive from the Lord (in this life, but especially in the glories of heaven). Whatever you have to suffer in body or mind, whatever the temptations you must endure in this life, whatever the hardships and trials, whatever the pain and the sorrow, it will all fade away as nothing in comparison to the joy that will be yours when you cast your crowns before God, who worked within you both to will and to do His good pleasure (Philippians 2:13). Once in heaven, do you really believe anyone would give up the joys of heaven just to have had more comfort and less sacrifice upon earth? We need heaven's perspective every day. No matter how tired and exhausted we become in doing what is good, no matter what we must sacrifice in doing what is good, IT WILL BE WORTH IT ALL when we stand in the presence of our Savior and rest for all eternity from the sorrows, heartaches, trials, temptations, sins, and tears of this life. Don't give up! Don't quit! Press on in doing good and in resting

in the promises of Christ.

## II. There Is the Joy of the Lord in Fearing God (Ecclesiastes 3:14-15).

A. Solomon now turns to one other consideration as to what one should do, if he/she would know the joy of the Lord in a world where at times everything can seem upside down or inside out. Solomon not only leads us to joy by means of DOING GOOD in our obedience to God's good commandments, but he would also lead us to joy by means of FEARING GOD. Whereas DOING GOOD is **more active** (by way of outward activity) on the part of the Christian, I would suggest that FEARING GOD is **more passive** on the part of the Christian. For in FEARING GOD there is the idea of quietly resting and humbly submitting to the eternal purposes of God, which He brings into our lives by His good providence (it's being still and knowing that He is God—He's in control). The fear of God for the adopted child of God who trusts alone in Christ alone is not a slavish fear of bondage wherein the child of God cowers in fear waiting moment by moment for God's judgment to fall (1 John 4:18). There is such a fear for the wicked (for they await the judgment of God). **To fear God** for the child of God is to take God seriously in all that He is, in all that He declares, and in all that He does. **To fear God** is to reverently stand in awe and wonder of His power, His wisdom, His mercy, His love, and His faithfulness to undeserving sinners in ordering all things in our lives for the beauty of His own glory and for the benefit of His beloved children (who due to their sin deserve nothing from God but His everlasting condemnation). If that does not cause our jaw to drop, our head to bow, and our heart to melt, nothing else will.

B. Again Solomon speaks from his own personal experience of what he has learned: "I know" (Ecclesiastes 3:14). What has Solomon personally learned? He has learned in effect that God's eternal purposes and appointed seasons in his life (and our lives) are unchangeable (Ecclesiastes 3:14).

1. Here is an irony. The events of Ecclesiastes 3:1-8 are in one sense (from an earthly perspective) changeable and alterable according to the designs of men, and therefore, we cannot look to them to bring us the joy of the Lord. However, these same events are in another sense (from a heavenly perspective) unchangeable by God's eternal decree, and therefore we must see these events as ordained by God in order to teach us to rejoice in the midst of them. From heaven's perspective, there is no adding to nor taking from the events that occur in your life and mine (Ecclesiastes 3:14). They are forever settled and determined by our most wise, loving, and holy God.

2. That which has been eternally decreed by God in wisdom and holiness is **now** falling out, and that which is **yet to happen in the future** is simply that which has already been eternally decreed by God (Ecclesiastes 3:15). The events of every day are divinely appointed for His glory and for the good of His Church collectively and His children individually. From the divisions that rend the peace and unity of Christ's Church, to the individual trials and afflictions that a Christian suffers—there are no accidents. There are no surprises that catch God unexpectedly (Psalm 33:11).

C. It is one thing to know intellectually these truths, but another thing to quietly rest in God's eternal purpose and good providence for you, His child. It is one thing to profess with your mouth that you believe these truths, but another thing to humbly submit yourself to whatever God may bring into your life as ultimately being for your good. This is the fear of God. To see with the eye of faith the awesome hand of God in what you are experiencing and to reverently bow before Him.

1. Dear ones, in this path and in this path alone is joy to be found. Humbly submitting in the fear of God to whatever He brings into your life (for His own wise and holy purposes). Learning not to grumble or to complain. Learning not to wallow in self-pity. Learning not to worry or to fear. Learning not to become frustrated or angry. But rather learning to rest. Learning to receive both the good and the ill from the

hand of God for your benefit and profit. This is the path to joy. I can assure you that the joy of the Lord will elude you, if you choose not to walk this path. Is it easy? No. Is it comfortable? No. Does it lead us to joy? Absolutely! For, dear ones, it is the very road which the Lord Jesus Himself walked.

2. We read even concerning the Lord Jesus that His joy was found in SUBMITTING to the will of His Father—not merely knowing it, or merely professing it, but DOING it and SUBMITTING to it: “Looking unto Jesus the author and finisher of our faith; who for the joy that was set before him endured the cross, despising the shame, and is set down at the right hand of the throne of God” (Hebrews 12:2). The Lord Jesus submitted to God’s most wise and holy plan for His life, although it meant ENDURING THE CROSS and DISPIRING THE SHAME that was brought by sinners against Him. And the reward of His submission was JOY.

3. We are so short-sighted at times, thinking that joy will be ours if we can only sit on the throne (as it were)—if we could only be free of this trial, affliction, heartache, slander, sorrow, or delay. If we could only get off that cross, there would be joy. But the example of our Lord rebukes such a sinful way of thinking in us all. It was not in His getting off of that cross (which would have been an act of disobedience to the will of the Father), but rather it was in suffering the cross (in DOING, OBEYING, and SUBMITTING to the will of His Father, even when it was hard, difficult, painful, stressful, and sorrowful) that a joy unspeakable and full of glory was realized. And likewise, dear ones, it is not in getting off the cross of suffering that God has brought into our lives that we will taste the sweet fruit of the joy of the Lord, but rather in enduring the cross that God has prepared for each of us every day—obediently enduring the rejection of friends and loved ones, the sorrow and physical afflictions of this life, the heartache of disappointments, the death of loved ones, the slander of others for the sake of Christ. Then, and only then, will the joy of the Lord be growing and made full in your life and mine.

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