

The following is a rough transcript, not in its final form and may be updated.

Joy and Holiness

John 17:13-17

Intro: We are in the midst of Jesus' High-priestly prayer in ch17. We have noticed that there is a definite progression in this prayer. Jesus began this prayer with a petition for Himself. He asked, since He had glorified the Father on earth by finishing the work that He had been given to do, that He might soon be glorified by the Father with the same brilliant glory He had before He came to earth. Now, He turns His attention to His disciples and intercedes for them. In the final section, Jesus will pray for all those who will come after the disciple and believe on Jesus by faith. So, this prayer moves in stages from the Lord to the Lord's church.

In praying for His disciples, I find it interesting to discover exactly what Jesus prays about for them. What does Jesus think these men need most? What are His greatest concerns for this small group of faithful, dedicated followers who have given up everything to learn from Him and assist Him in His earthly ministry? Surely, Jesus is concerned that these men should have amazingly successful ministries, live comfortable lives, own nice homes, drive fancy chariots and have fat wallets! Surely, He concerned that those who proclaim to be children of the King should lead lives becoming of royalty and privilege! What kind of image will they present to the world of themselves if not that?

Strangely enough, Jesus doesn't pray for any of those things for His disciples. In fact, He fails to pray for material things altogether. As you recall from last week, the first thing Jesus prays about is for their safekeeping. That doesn't sound fun. You mean this ministry thing is not just going to fall in our laps? You mean if we just hang a sign out by the road announcing our arrival that the people aren't just going to flood right in? Wait - is He saying this Christian life might actually be dangerous? I guess I should have read all the fine print!

Later, Jesus will pray for their sanctification, for their unity and for their eventual presence with Him in heaven. We can't help but notice that all His petitions for them are for spiritual things. He doesn't ask for riches, honor, worldly influence or preferential treatment. He does most earnestly ask that

they be kept from evil, separated from the world, qualified for duty, and brought home safely to heaven. What does this tell us about what is important to Jesus? Is He concerned for their physical comfort and prosperity or the prosperity of their souls? The truth is: soul prosperity is the best prosperity. In fact, all physical (temporal) prosperity is only real when it is in proportion to the prosperity of the soul (3 Jn 2). Spiritual prosperity is the only index of true prosperity. Without it, all other prosperity is detrimental.

13- What sets the Body of Christ apart from the rest of the world? Sure, we enjoy the forgiveness of sin and eternal salvation through the blood sacrifice of Jesus but how does that work out in real life? What are the distinguishing marks of the church? What should be its most important characteristics in light of who Jesus is and what He's done?

Some might say it should be doctrinal faithfulness, holiness, unity or love. As we continue our study **ch17**, containing Jesus' prayer for His church, He's going to list out the characteristics that will distinguish the church as belonging to Him. The first characteristic of the church that Jesus mentions in our text is joy!

Most Christians don't usually consider joy to be a primary characteristic of the church which is a sad sign of how little regard we have for joy and how far we've moved from the joyful spirit of the early church. If the early church was known for anything, it was for being characterized as a joyous assembly. This is readily apparent to any one who reads the NT because the NT is a book of joy! In the original Greek NT, the verb for to rejoice or be joyful (*chairein*) is found 72 times. The noun for joy (*chara*) occurs 60 times. Joy is not just a technical idea associated with highly theological passages either. It appears most often as simply a greeting, meaning "Joy be with you!" Of course, it's not always restricted to the speech of Christians but in Christian usage it obviously meant so much more than when pagans used it and Christians used it more frequently.

But, is the church joyful today? Of course we're more joyful now than we would be if we weren't Christians and of course there are places where joy is evident but on the whole, if we were to monitor the entire spectrum of the body of Christ on a week to week basis, would the joy that characterized the life of Jesus and the early church be visible? Probably not! Just judging from my own experience in countless churches over my lifetime, joy was present

but fleeting in all but a rare few. Life is tough, sometimes church life is even tough. “To live above with saints we love...”

There’s often a difference between what we profess and know we ought to be, and what we really are. We should be joyful, but usually we’re not. We’re depressed. Circumstances get us down. Instead of the victory we should be experiencing, we only know defeat and discouragement. Now, none of us want to stay gloomy and depressed so what is the remedy? Is there one? There must be or else, why is Jesus even praying for this characteristic? His prayer shows that not only is He well aware of our negative tendencies, He knows the secret to overcoming them.

The 1st remedy for a lack of joy is obvious in the text. Jesus says, “that they may have My joy fulfilled in themselves.” What is His joy? It’s only discovered by reading and learning about Jesus from God’s Word. Thus, the true *basis* for Christian joy is sound doctrine. Notice how often the Bible associates joy with a mature knowledge of God’s Word. **Ps 19:8** “The statutes of the LORD are right, rejoicing the heart.” **Ps 119:14** “I have rejoiced in the way of Your testimonies as much as in all riches.” Jesus declared as much in **John 15:10-11**.

It’s not that the study or learning of sound doctrine brings joy in itself but when we begin to know by experience God’s character as presented in His Word, this is what brings joy to the believer’s life. When our hearts and minds are established in the truth of Who He is, when our thoughts are settled on God, on His dealings with us and His divine purposes for us and through us. When we are unsettled in our understanding of God, doubt and turmoil set in. It’s when we are settled in our knowledge of God, of His will and His ways, we can peacefully and joyfully trust Him no matter what the circumstances may be.

When we allow circumstances to dictate our emotions, we are revealing either a practical ignorance of or a blatant disregard for the sovereignty of God. We’re confessing that our thoughts are not really settled in Him. Instead, we should recognize that God has planned the particular circumstances we find ourselves in, and because of this, we should be looking for His purposes for us in them. Circumstances refer to things that are without, external. Where’s the Lord in all this? Is He without? No, He’s within. “Christ in you, the hope of glory” (**Col 1:27**). So why worry about what

going on outside of us if Jesus is on the inside? To know He's within and is directing us moment by moment, day by day, is the secret of that supernatural joy that is our rightful birthmark as the children of God.

The 2nd remedy for a lack of joy in the believer's life is fellowship and this must be experienced in 2 dimensions: a vertical fellowship (fellowship with God) and a horizontal fellowship (fellowship with other believers). Jesus is the pattern for us in both cases. Jesus was joyful, even though He was rightly called "a man of sorrows and acquainted with grief." In our text, Jesus speaks of My joy. It's what He offers to us. What was His joy? It was the joy of moment by moment contact and fellowship with the Father. That's what sustained Him in this prayer and on the cross and it's what will sustain us if we would only enter into the reality of that fellowship. Jesus enjoyed that close fellowship as the Son of God but we're God's children too, so we have the right to enjoy the same closeness with the Father.

We can enjoy it on the horizontal level as well. In fact, we must enjoy it on that level, for fellowship with the Father and with other believers always go together (1 Jn 1:3-4). This shows that fellowship with the Father and fellowship with other Christians go together. If you're not joyful, it may be that you've cut yourself off from other Christians. You can't have your own private fellowship with God. It does not work that way. You need other believers, and they need you. Without them your fellowship with God will be diminished and your joy will not be full.

There's a 3rd remedy for a lack of joy that leads into our next distinguishing mark of the church. It's the need for us to live holy lives. Sin will keep us from God, and the fellowship that we have with Him, which we so desperately need in order to properly experience His joy, will be broken. Jesus prays that holiness will characterize our lives.

14-17 – Last time we noticed that holiness is the characteristic of God that's most mentioned in Scripture so; quite naturally, it should also characterize His church. We're to be a "holy" people (1 Pt 2:9). We're to "pursue...holiness for without it, no one will see the Lord (Heb 12:14). It is the characteristic Jesus prays for in this passage.

What is holiness? Some consider it a culturally accepted pattern of behavior. They associate holiness with refraining from gambling, smoking,

drinking, play cards, going to movies and the list goes on. But this approach reveals a basic misconception about holiness. It's true that holiness in a particular Christian can result in abstinence from some or all of these things but the essence of holiness is not found here. Besides, to insist on these things in the church doesn't promote holiness, it promotes legalism and hypocrisy. In some extreme cases it can even promote a false concept of salvation where sinners are justified before God on the basis of some supposedly ethical behavior (works).

The biblical idea of holiness becomes clear when we look at words that are synonyms for it in English, namely saint or sanctify (17). What is a saint? It's not a person who has achieved a certain level of goodness. It's certainly not someone who plays football in New Orleans. A saint is simply someone who has been set apart by God for Himself. Thus, in the Bible, the word saint is not restricted to a special class of Christians; it is routinely used to refer to all Christians! The saints are the called-out ones who make up all of God's church.

The same idea is seen in Ex 40, which refers to the sanctification of articles for the tabernacle. Moses is instructed to sanctify the altar and laver that are set up inside the tabernacle. Meaning, he made them into saints. Now, the text doesn't record any intrinsic change in the nature of the articles that were sanctified—they were not made righteous. It merely says that they were set apart for a special use by God. In the same way, Jesus prays just two verses later, "I sanctify Myself, that they also may be sanctified by the truth" (19). This doesn't mean Jesus made Himself more righteous, He was already perfectly righteous. It just means that He separated Himself to a special task, providing salvation for all men by His death. If holiness is to be understood at all, it must be understood in this framework.

But, if holiness refers to separation (consecration) and if believers are already holy by virtue of being set apart to God by Himself, why does Jesus pray for our sanctification here? Why pray for that which we already have? The answer is: although we've already been set apart to God we often clearly fail to live up to that calling. We're truly separated unto God but we're also "trailing clouds of old commitments, sins and loyalties as we come." The church is worldly in the sense that the world's values often remain its values and the world's priorities are its priorities.

The church is plagued by the influx of the world's wisdom. The old wisdom of the church was the wisdom of the Bible. Christians stood on God's Word and confessed their own ignorance in spiritual things, their inability to even understand the Scriptures except by the grace of God through the ministry of the Holy Spirit who opens the Bible to us. But what's happened in our day is that this old wisdom has been cast aside for secularism. The sad result is that the authoritative and reforming voice of God through the Scriptures is being ignored. When the authority of Scripture is ignored or rejected, the church loses its authority in the world as well as its relevancy.

With the authority of the Scripture gone, the church naturally turns to rely on the world's theology. This is the idea that man is basically good, that no one is really lost and Jesus is not necessary for salvation. Worldly theology still employs the same terms the church has always used, it just redefines them. Sin no longer refers to rebellion against God, which man is accountable for. It now just means ignorance or oppression inherent in social structures. Since sin is only found in society, the way to overcome it is not by Jesus' death but by changing society through revolution.

Jesus is no longer God incarnate who died for our salvation; He's merely a pattern for creative living. We're to look to Him as an example, but not as our Savior. Salvation is not getting right with God or being redeemed in Christ, its just liberation from the oppression of this world's structures. Faith isn't trusting God or taking His Word at face value. It's just an awareness of the situation as we see it. Evangelism is also redefined. It no longer means carrying the gospel of Jesus Christ to a perishing world, but working to overthrow injustice.

So without any authority or truth, the church has become preoccupied with the world's agenda. What's important to the world? Hunger, poverty, racism, ecology, energy, aging, alcoholism, drug abuse – anything that makes the news becomes the primary concern of the church. Now, I'm not saying that these aren't important social issues, they're just not supposed to be the primary concern of the church – sharing the gospel should. In fact, only the gospel can properly address each of these issues but, if the church attempts to deal with them apart from the gospel; of Jesus Christ, then she'll look stupid in the eyes of the world. She's trying to deal with things she doesn't understand and is powerless to change.

Finally, the church in this miserable state is left to operate with the world's methods. God's methods are prayer and the power of the gospel, by which the Holy Spirit moves to turn God's people from their wicked ways and heal their land. That's always been the strength of the church of Jesus Christ. But today that power is despised by the great denominations. It's laughed at, because the methods they want to use are politics and money. Without the power of God manifested in the presence of the Holy Spirit in their midst – that's all the church has left. "Neither can we say 'take up thy bed and walk.'" (Assisi)

What's the cure for secularism in the church? The Word of God (14b; 17)! It's by the means of the Bible that we are to gradually become separated from the mind-set and practices of this world unto God and grow in practical holiness, the kind of holiness that daily affects our thoughts and actions to the glory of God. Without a regular, disciplined, and practical study of the Bible, the church will always be secular (II Tim 3:1-5). That's the secular church! But, with the Bible, God's people will be the opposite. The true Body of Christ will seek the wisdom of God, stand on the theology of the Scriptures, pursue God's agenda as revealed in His Word and employ the methods that have been given to us by Him to exercise in the church until the Lord Jesus comes back again.

Many Christians lack the joy they should rightly have because they don't have the peace of God. They're not resting in God—that means having your thoughts established in Him. That's one reason. It's also true that they often don't have joy because they don't have righteousness. They go their way, not God's. They disobey His commands and the Spirit's fruit in their lives evaporates. It's much better to just go God's way in holiness, to rest in Him, and to allow Him to "fill you with all joy and peace as you trust in Him" (Rom 15:13). 😊