

Hearts That Can Hear: The Joy Set Before Us

There are many things that people do that I do not find worth my time, effort, or money. I have never been to a Brony convention, I do not wear jewelry, and the idea of going on a cruise does nothing for me. I am not saying that everyone else is wrong, and I am right in all my tastes and preferences, but I am noticing that what is a wise use of resources to one is not to another. That does not mean, however, that everything is simply a matter of taste. There are some things that should be worthy of time and effort to everyone, and when a defect of desire for these things is found in a person's life, they are wise to see it as a fault and work to rectify it. We should all, for example, desire to draw nearer to God, and to have our sanctification progress throughout our lives. If it takes effort, sacrifice, suffering, or time for these things, we should be willing to pay the price. A heart that can hear God's call for these things in our lives will be willing to do what is necessary to answer the call, so let us look this week at how we might get rid of obstacles to answering the call.

Day 1

Giving Value

Perhaps the most common obstacle to God's call to share in his glory is our lack of effort. When we think about doing something we know is undoubtedly good for us, and will result in a positive change to our character and sanctification, we often see it primarily in terms of a burden. Whether it is engaging regularly in volunteering with a ministry at our church, or simply keeping and maintaining a clean and orderly home, we very rarely engage with these activities with all our hearts, and we often fail to do the best we can in the work as doing it for the Lord. Even though we find reluctance to give it our best effort when serving others or engaging in sanctifying work, we very often find other's failure to give their best efforts in this area frustrating. We speak often of failure to fulfill potential, and of missed opportunities. What is most frustrating for us is that we often know, even as we find it difficult to build any kind of enthusiasm for things that are good for us and others, that what we will do with the time and effort we save is of little enjoyment or value, and often just consists of sitting around. So how do we start to build enthusiasm for engaging in what is good? We can, as scripture suggests, come to understand that all of these opportunities are in fact occasions for worship, where we come to realize that everything we do on this earth is in fact done for the King of Glory and that the effort, suffering, or cost involved is a way to testify to His value. If I was speaking to Christ right now, and was in fact in his physical presence, how would I feel if he asked me to complete this task or engage in this activity? Another thing we can think about is that, since we share in Christ's glory, anything we do for his glory is increasing ours as well, since we are creatures that were made to glorify him. When I do the things that Christ asks me to do, I am benefitting, since Jesus loves me and shows his love for me in his commands. When I read my bible, engage in prayer, participate in acts of service, and love my neighbors I am being transformed into glory,

not just doing a task that Jesus needs me to do, like some kind of cosmic dishwashing. Developing the proper habits of thought is key to transforming our attitude and learning to gladly pay the price for glory.

Verses: James 1:2-4, Ecclesiastes 3:9-12, Colossians 3:23-24

Prayer Topics: Attitude, Intention, Love

Day 2

Defining Enjoyment

Another problem we face as Christians to finding the right attitude to the call of God toward glory is our habit of idol worship. Throughout the Old Testament, the Israelites were constantly battling their proclivity to worship idols, and most of us get tired of hearing about it. The problem is, they are not unique or unusual. Idol worship is a reality for most of the world, most of the time. All creation reflects the Glory of God, and yet we often fail to see him in the things we love, enjoy, and admire. Sometimes this sorry state is the result of us loving things that are evil, but other times we love things that are good without loving God as the giver of these things. People will enthusiastically engage in great acts of sacrifice for money, fame, honor, or pride but will find the same sacrifices grating when the only reward for them is virtue, character, and Christ-likeness. When we find joy in earthly things without those earthly things leading us to their creator we are engaged in idol worship. We can begin to take so much enjoyment from worldly things that they become a complete substitute for God, so when he asks us to make sacrifices to know him more completely, thereby gaining greater joy in him, we can find the call to be an irritation as it takes us away from the things in the world we are currently enjoying without him. To prevent this, we must come to enjoy God through our earthly joys, rather than trying to go without our earthly joys. Most of us have some experience with bitter Christianity, that isn't happy unless it is miserable. That is the result of taking the danger of idolatry and responding to it by cutting out earthly joys as completely as possible. This is a very dangerous strategy, for joy is life, and one will start to substitute taking joy in things where no joy should be found for the simple joys of life, which is why these kinds of Christians seem to take joy in misery. It is because they do, and that is the great danger. Instead, take joy in and worship God through those gifts from God that bring you joy in this life, and if you find yourself taking joy in anything that cannot be connected back to God, stop immediately. You are in greater danger than you realize.

Verses: Psalm 135:15-18, Galatians 4:8-9, Judges 10:14

Prayer Topics: Healing, Freedom, Choice

Day 3

Seeing Through the Window

In order to avoid the trap of idolatry, we must learn to see through the gifts that God gives to God himself, the originator and author of all gifts we receive. The glutton must, for example, see through food to the giver of food, and learn to take ultimate joy in the one whose body is true food, and blood is true drink. Food brings life, and the act of incorporating life into our body brings pleasure and joy, as well as strength, invigoration, and growth. As we learn to see through the “window” of physical food to the glory of God as our life, we will grow less worshipful of physical food, and find it easier to keep it in its place as a marker that points to divine truth. We will stop trying to find ultimate satisfaction of our desire for joy within physical food, having transferred that to the spiritual food found in Christ. How do we make progress toward the goal of seeing through the temporary physical placeholders to the eternal spiritual reality of God? First, we must learn to give thanks and always bear in mind the temporary and transitory nature of the physical world, that these things will not last and are not ultimate in their ability to satisfy us, because we are made with eternity in our hearts. It is said that when the Roman conquerors took their victory parades, a slave stood behind them whispering in their ears that all glory is fleeting. When must always have that voice that points to the eternal glory whispering in our ears. Second, we must learn to fast from things that are becoming idols to us. Anything that is beginning to take the place of God, anything that is starting to be valued more than God, and anything that is becoming an addiction, something that controls you instead of you controlling it, must be dethroned from our lives, usually by doing without it until we regain control. We must use these and other tactics to keep ourselves from the worship of idols, so that our hearts will hear the joyful call of God.

Verses: 1 Corinthians 12:1-11, Galatians 5:22-23, 2 Corinthians 3:18, John 17:22

Prayer Topics: Gratitude, Perspective, Wisdom, Praise

Day 4

Growth and Investment

One reason that we find ourselves worshipping idols instead of God is that we do not yet have the strength to find joy in God. I often find that some of the books I recommend to people about spiritual matters go over their heads, and it usually surprises me until I remember what it was like to read these books for the first time. Many of them are older, and contain language and density of thought that is not common today, making it hard to read until you have some practice. Because I have been a pastor for a

long time, and even before I was a pastor had interest in spiritual things, I have had a lot of time to gain the facility to find these books quite pleasant. The story is much different, however, when I try to read scientific books, which I have much less experience with. I struggle, read paragraphs or even sentences over and over to understand them, and find myself looking up words so often I lose the flow of the sentence I am reading. It is simply not enjoyable. I have not spent enough time reading scientific books, so they are just not fun for me to read. Enjoying God in many ways has the same challenge, where we can find aspects of him not too enjoyable until we have some practice. This should not be surprising to us, but it is. When we were children, we found most of the things our parents did to be boring, and they had to threaten us with punishment to grow up. Now that we are grown, we find most of the things kids like to do boring. How many times can you play tic-tac-toe without losing your mind? Many of the joys in life that lead us to God require a few steps of growth to be effective, and it is possible to get stuck and turn the “pointer” joy into an idol. In order to keep moving toward the voice of God that calls us to eternal joy, we must keep challenging ourselves and growing. The best way to do this is to stop moving toward comfort, and start moving toward glory. Instead of asking ourselves what is easiest, we should be asking ourselves what puts us closer to God, and make the challenging choice to pursue that always. What areas of your life need growth? How can you start that process today?

Verses: Matthew 6:19-21, Proverbs 13:11, 2 Corinthians 9:6

Prayer Topics: Trust, Sacrifice, Joy

Day 5

The Place of Sacrifice

Investing in the glory of God is laying up treasures in heaven. When we worship God, when we find joy in Him, when we are obedient to Him, we are investing in the future joy of having him welcome us into his presence. To have the God of the universe tell us that we are good and faithful servants, and that we are welcome to spend all eternity in His presence, is only a source of joy to the person who views God highly. There is no greater investment, no higher way to glorify God than to seek to be like him, because imitation is the highest form of flattery. We think God is so good that we can think of nothing better than resembling him, no matter the cost. What is the greatest attribute of God? That is, of course, a trick question as all the attributes of God gain glory by the balance provided by the others. We do know, however, that God is love, and the sacrificial love of God has glory that never ceases to amaze and inspire us, so it would not be a bad choice to want to resemble God in his love. If that is the case, then it would be wise to make it a priority to grow in our desire to see others reconciled to God, and to make it a habit to continually say yes to the sacrifices required to help others come to know him. This is the kind of pursuit that requires growth and maturity, and many do not find these sacrifices to be joyfully when they begin, but through time and the work of the spirit, it can be a great source of joy for the believer. How can you begin this pursuit today?

Verses: Hebrews 13:16, Romans 12:1-2, Psalm 51:17

Prayer Topics: Deposit, Value, Meaning, Purpose