

Joy is the endpoint for most of our goals. People want good jobs to have money, and they want money to have nice things. Joy, however, is an end in itself. Nobody wants joy for any other purpose than to be joyful. The problem is, joy can be very elusive when pursued directly, making it a frustrating goal to orient your life around. Where does joy come from, and how do we attain it? Joy is the realization of covenant, of connecting ourselves properly to God and to others, and it cannot be had in any other way. There are a lot of counterfeits to joy, but only the genuine article will satisfy. This week we will look at some ways to increase our joy by strengthening our covenants.

Day 1

Talk to Strangers

Most of us can remember being told not to talk to strangers, and it is sometimes very good advice. What is the problem with talking to strangers? It signals an openness to the outside world, and that openness can be taken advantage of by nefarious characters looking to steal rather than create. A problem arises, however, when we take the childhood advice to avoid talking to strangers into adulthood. The idea of closing ourselves off to the outside becomes life-negating when you realize that as finite human beings our life results from a connection and incorporation of things from the outside. Instead of developing a wisdom and discernment about what to let in from the outside, it becomes easier just to reject everything from the outside, resulting in a kind of death. So why should we talk to strangers? Because we, whether we like it or not, are in a covenant with all of humanity. It is important for us as humans to recognize and practice a proper covenant relationship with the human beings all around us, seeing us as part of them rather than being suspicious and hostile to them. You cannot paint all of humanity with the brush of suspicion without implicating yourself, to the detriment of joy, at the same time. When I think of all the truly joyful people I have known throughout the years, they all had the same trait in common: openness to others. Does this mean we should lack discernment? Of course not. Use your head, and if you are a vulnerable person be extra careful. But in general, seeing the world as allies vs. enemies will increase your joy, as you recognize the bonds of covenant you have with the world.

Verses: 1 John 4:20, 1 Peter 1:22, Psalm 133:1

Prayer Topics: Stranger Danger, New Friends, Community, Expansion

Day 2

Meditate

Your covenant with God is the major source for joy in your life, and yet most of the time it is largely neglected. How much time do you spend each day thinking about, pondering, and strengthening the unity of covenantal relationship you have with God? What exactly is your covenant with God? Where does it come from? What is its foundation? How do you strengthen it? What does it produce in your life? What is the role of grace, of love, and of obedience in your covenant with God? There is so much to consider, and the more you consider it the more you will find to consider. The more you meditate, the more you will want to meditate so you can explore the nature of God's love for you. When you feel the connection between you and God throughout the day, through the various positive and (seemingly) negative interactions in your life, you will find yourself being much more joyful. To know that in every experience of your life, God is working to bless you and bring you closer to him and his goal of transforming you into Christlikeness will fill you with joy. God wants to give you every good and perfect gift, and will be faithful to completing his desires to bless you in all things. What could be better than experiencing God's love for you in every moment of your life? This knowledge comes through

meditation and prayer, as David showed throughout the Psalms. Increase your joy by meditating on God's love for you.

Verses: Joshua 1:8, Isaiah 26:3, Psalm 119:15, Philippians 4:8

Prayer Topics: Reflection/Introspection, Gratitude, Perspective

Day 3

Simplify

We often mistakenly believe that more choice will result in more joy, and that anything that increases our available choices, namely power, will get us closer to our elusive goal of increasing our joy. I sometimes go to the refrigerator and ponder my choices, most of the time wishing there were more choices. Then I go to the pantry, and then to the freezer, and the process repeats itself. Then I return to the refrigerator as if a new choice will magically present itself. I inevitably settle on something disappointing, feeling that if only I had more choices, I would be happy. In reality, I have many choices but do not feel happy. Why would another choice make the difference? The problem is not lack of choices, but lack of gratitude for the choices I have. Most people, in most times in history, would love to have the choices I have, and yet I am not satisfied. This is the result from not connecting the choices I have with the love and providence of God, rather than a lack of choice. The problem is a feeling of my own sovereignty and independence, a desire for separation from God instead of a feeling of connection and dependence that leads to gratitude in what God has provided for me. Can I be thankful that God has shown his love and desire to bless me in the choices before me? Can I ask myself which choice represents the best way to complete God's desire to bless me rather than ask for more choices to exert my independence from God? Can I wish that I had only one choice before me, if that one choice represented God's will, and be completely satisfied and happy with that situation? How can we simplify our lives to the point of joy in one choice, God's choice for us?

Verses: John 15:16, Joshua 24:15, Romans 8:5-6, Hebrews 13:5, Matthew 6:25

Prayer Topics: Consolidation, Priorities, Necessity vs Want, Gratitude

Day 4

Say Important Things

Being open to the world outside of us makes us vulnerable, but without that vulnerability there can be no joy. I have very clear memories of grade school recess, when the boys and girls of our school had just started to realize that they cared about what the other thought of them. There were games of tag, and notes passed requiring boxes be checked if someone was liked. All these games were a way to try to find out, without risk, if the world had welcomed you. The problem is, there is no risk free way to do this. Even sending the note asking someone to check a box before you had indicated your choice required some level of courage, because the desire to know indicated an interest in the other person. As we grow up, we leave the box checking notes behind, but the desire to stay safe from the rejection of the world remains, and it often means that we don't have the conversations that we should be having. Most of the time, our conversations take place on a surface level, with the important stuff being left to subtext. How many of your conversations are important? How many go beyond day-to-day practicality of making sure there is food in the house and the bills are paid? How many of our conversations with God are about more than who is sick and who needs help? Do we ask God for the important things like the riches of his glory or the depth of his love? Do we talk to others about how important they are to us and figure out how we can be closer to them? Any conversation about important things will involve risk, as you open

yourself up to the world and risk rejection, but without these important conversations the rejection is certain as we will miss out on the covenantal unity that we need to live joyful lives. Spend some time today saying some important things.

Verses: 1 Peter 2:4, John 15:13, 1 Peter 4:12-14, John 15:18

Prayer Topics: Possibility, Rejection, Pursuit, Reward

Day 5

Be Grateful

There is no way to live a joyful life without gratitude. In fact, without gratitude there is only bitterness and resentment in our future. Joy does not come from what we earn, but from our unity with something greater than ourselves, from the gift of love from our creator. This gift is often mistaken for our wages, which is easily seen. In watching a survival show it is a common occurrence to see someone fail in their attempt to feed themselves. Many times someone in these shows will spend hour after hour fishing, only to come up short. When they finally succeed, it is easy to mistake their joy in success for a joy in accomplishment. Neuroscience tells us, however, that we derive the greatest joy from intermittent success rather than regular success, which suggests something more than accomplishment is at hand. When Cain was downcast about his sacrifice not being accepted, he was downcast because God had rejected unity with him, and that is how we feel when we are not successful, even if we don't realize it. We are not satisfied with a mechanical world where we put in our effort and receive our payment, like some kind of cosmic vending machine. Instead, we crave a world where we have a relationship of love with something much larger than ourselves, where we are valued and we value the God who created all things. Where we show love for him and he shows love for us. One of the easiest ways to lose our joy is to turn this world into a vending machine, treating each success as our due for the effort we paid. To avoid this fate, it is necessary to be grateful for everything, for in being grateful we recognize the world as we desire it to be, the mediator of God's love for us. Make a habit of being grateful. Spend some time each day expressing your gratitude, it will do wonders for your joy.

Verses: 1 Thessalonians 5:18, Psalm 118:24, Colossians 3:17, James 1:17

Prayer Topics: Appreciativeness, Occasional/Seasonal 'Success', Love, Relationship