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Reclaiming Your JOY

A Bible Study on Conquering Your Joy-Stealers

LORRAINE HILL



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Introduction

Welcome to *Reclaiming Your Joy*! I am so excited that you have decided to take this journey with me. I know that God will bless our time together and will reveal some amazing truths to you about joy as you study his Word and deepen your relationship with him. I cannot even begin to tell you the passion I have for God's Word and its transforming power in our lives. *I came to a relationship with Christ by reading God's Word.* Let me digress for a moment and share a little about how the amazing power of God's Word changed my life and brought me true joy.

When I was in college, I met my husband, Shawn, who was a Christian. At the time, I did not have a personal relationship with Jesus Christ even though I attended church. Over time, my husband and I discussed spiritual things, but I was confused by the different religious systems. How could I know truth? Was truth relative? Why should I believe one religious system over another? As I sought to discover truth, I felt like I faced a wearisome and overwhelming struggle.

In anguish and desperation, I finally cried out to the LORD. I asked him to show me the truth if I read the Bible. So I sat down and read the Bible cover to cover. By the time I finished reading it, I knew that I was a sinner before a holy God and that Jesus was the atoning sacrifice for my sins. I also knew that salvation was through faith and not works, a free gift of God. Soon, I surrendered my life to Jesus Christ and accepted him as my LORD and Savior. I had been in such darkness and now was in such beautiful light. Because

pened; our schedules are now sometimes busier than ever. Why? Perhaps because technology has created greater diversions in our life, thereby increasing our busyness. Television, hobbies, computer games, the Internet—diversions that can easily steal our attention. None are inherently bad, but we must place things in perspective. We cannot allow these distractions to create stress and worry in our lives. We cannot allow them to crowd out the excellent things. Technology and conveniences should enable us to grow closer to our LORD, not divert us away from him.

If we are not careful, the busyness and over-commitment of our schedules can cause us to miss the LORD and his wonderful presence. And then at the end of our lives, we will wonder why we did not witness his greatness and majesty more. Elizabeth Barrett Browning penned a beautiful poem that reminds us to take time and enjoy the LORD and the world around us.

Earth's crammed with heaven
And every common bush afire with God:
But only he who sees, takes off his shoes,
The rest sit round it and pluck blackberries,⁴

Let's slow down and cherish our time on this earth. Let's enjoy our LORD and our relationship with him. Let's focus on God-ordained tasks instead of worldly focused activities, eternal pursuits rather than earthly diversions. Over the thousands of years since creation, most things that have eternal value have never changed. Take a moment and really reflect on that. From the days of Adam and Eve until now, those things that have eternal value—the LORD and our relationship with him—have never really changed. As we place more and more on our schedules, we must make sure we are investing in the eternal and not the earthly. The eternal will always produce joy and peace in our lives.

Week 4: Wearied by People

Day 1: The Royal Law

Day 2: The Difficulty of Differences

Day 3: The Hands of Compassion

Day 4: An Ambassador of Love

Day 5: The Peril of Pleasing Others

Key Thoughts for the Week

- Day 1: God has poured his love into us so that we can shower other people with the love we have received.
- Day 2: Much of the frustrations and irritations that we experience with people stem from differences in personality, dispositions, and traditions.
- Day 3: Demonstrating compassion often entails sacrifice and inconvenience.
- Day 4: Loving others deeply is our witness to an unbelieving world.
- Day 5: We must not try to please both man and God, or we may fail to truly please God.

Day 1: The Royal Law

My command is this: Love each other as I have loved you.

John 15:12

One of our greatest hindrances to joy often involves people. Though people should actually serve as one of our blessings, too often they end up being one of our burdens. It seems that people constantly irritate us, exasperate us, and drain us, all of which seems to strip the joy from our Christian walk. Though the world may be filled with irritable, cranky people, we cannot allow them to steal our joy. This week we will delve deeper into our personal relationships with one another, starting with an understanding of how the LORD commands us to treat others.

What are Jesus's two great commandments to Christians (Matthew 22:34-40)?

1. _____
2. _____

How does John 15:12-13 further echo Jesus's second commandment?

Read Leviticus 19:18. Is loving others a new command?

Yes No

Fill in the blanks - Ephesians 5:1-2.

Be imitators of _____, therefore, as dearly loved children and live _____, just as _____ and _____ as a fragrant offering and sacrifice to God.

Exercise

For this week, we will focus on loving someone who seems hard to love. Spend a few moments in prayer and decide who this person will be.

As Jesus teaches, a Pharisee approaches him and asks a question. The Pharisees were the largest and most influential religious group during New Testament times, controlling both the synagogues and the common people. The Pharisees were known for zealously studying and keeping the Law. A Pharisee asks Jesus, "Which is the greatest commandment in the Law?" Jesus replies by saying that the greatest commandment is to love the LORD with all one's heart, soul, mind, and strength. Then, he adds the second commandment—to love one's neighbor as one's self. As Jesus responds to the Pharisee, he uses two commandments to summarize the entire Ten Commandments. Jesus's first commandment involves our relationship with the LORD and summarizes the first four Commandments, while his second commandment involves our relationship with others and summarizes the remaining six Commandments. Let's take a moment and truly reflect on what Jesus is saying. Loving others is second only to loving the LORD. If we were to perform two main acts in our Christian walk, it would be to love the LORD and to love others. As we reflect on what Jesus says, it begins to transform how we view others, doesn't it? We should not view people as a burden or an encumbrance, but rather as an opportunity and a blessing.

Loving others was not a new command for the Jews. Early in their history, the LORD stressed the importance of loving others. "Do not seek revenge or bear a grudge against one of your people, but love your neighbor as yourself. I am the LORD" (Leviticus 19:18). This command is frequently reiterated throughout the New Testament. "My command is this: Love each other as I have loved you. Greater love has no one than this, that he lay down his life for his friends" (John 15:12-13). As we speak of love, we must also understand that Jesus is talking about a selfless and sacrificial love, the

type of love that places others before one's self. Jesus serves as the supreme example of such love for he died for us while we were sinners and his enemies.

Read 1 John 3:11-18 and 1 John 4:7-21 and answer the following questions about loving God and loving others.

From where does love come? _____

Do we know God if we do not love others? Yes No

How did God demonstrate his love to us? _____

According to Romans 5:5, what has God poured into our hearts?

Truth Love Wrath

Why does the LORD stress the need for us to love others (Romans 13:8-10)?

Challenge

Read 1 Corinthians 13:1-8 and answer the following questions about love. What do you learn about the importance of love? What should love do? What should love not do? Which attribute of love is the hardest for you?

One of Scriptures most basic descriptions of God is that he is love. Since God now lives in us as Christians, he gives us his love to share with others. Listen to the way *The Message* describes 1 John 4:17-18: "God is love. When we take up permanent residence in a life of love, we live in God and God lives in us. This way, love has run of

the house, becomes at home and matures in us." God encourages us to love others with the love he has provided us, but he also warns us that if we do not love others, we do not know him. "Dear Friends, let us love one another, for love comes from God. Everyone who loves has been born of God and knows God. Whoever does not love does not know God, because God is love" (1 John 4:7-8). These are challenging words, aren't they? We cannot claim to know God and yet not love others. Our love for others reveals the true depth of our love for the LORD.

First Corinthians 13, considered the love chapter of the Bible, stresses the importance of love in our lives. Though its main interpretation relates to spiritual gifts, it also reveals the different characteristics of love. As Paul addresses the Corinthian church, it struggles in the area of love, just as we may struggle today. Paul remarks that it is better to have love than the ability to speak in tongues, to possess the gift of prophecy, to have great knowledge, to have faith that can move mountains, or to give generously to the poor. Even if we die martyrs but do not possess love, we have *gained nothing*. That's amazing, isn't it? Without love, our actions remain hollow and empty. Love is the fulfillment of the law. It is the great tie that binds the rest of our virtues together, and it must serve at the heart of all we say and do. This places things in a slightly different perspective for us, doesn't it? Is loving others one of the great emphases in our lives? "Now that you have purified yourselves by obeying the truth so that you have sincere love for your brothers, love one another deeply, from the heart" (1 Peter 1:22).

First Corinthians 13 also reveals the various aspects of love. Love is patient, kind, and humble. It does not envy, boast, or keep a record of other's wrongs. It rejoices in truth. It protects, trusts, and hopes. Though the English translates most of the different aspects of love as adjectives, they are actually verbs in the Greek. Perhaps that serves as a good reminder to us that love is active, not passive. It is not something we talk about, it is something we do. Our love for others should be visible and tangible. Due to time constraints,

we are not able to fully explore each different aspect of love, but I encourage you to spend time with the LORD and reflect on this passage. Apply it to your relationships with others. Are you demonstrating this type of love to others?

If we are honest, loving others does not come naturally to us. But God has poured out his love into us so that we can shower other people with the love we have received. Christians should serve as fountains that freely dispense God's love to others. Our love also serves as a great witness to this world. Though other people cannot visibly see God, they can see us loving them in tangible ways and reflecting God's love to them.

In the earlier set of questions, we primarily focused on the book of 1 John. Interestingly, 1 John was written by the apostle John, who is known as the apostle of love. If we were to study John, however, we would find that he was nicknamed "son of thunder" (Mark 3:17) because he wanted to call down fire on a village that refused to accept Jesus (Luke 9:54). Not quite the picture of love that we would expect. And yet our LORD completely transformed him so that he would become known as the apostle of love. Can you imagine the transformation? That is the transformation that Christ makes in all of us. Every day he transforms our thoughts and actions to reflect him. Every day we love him more and those around us more.

If you are like me, God's call to unconditionally love and accept others may seem overwhelming. But the LORD does not ask us to do this in our strength and power. We could not—we would fail miserably. The LORD will provide the grace we need, even to love those difficult people. We need to rest in him and allow him to work through us.

In this life, few things endure into eternity. The love we express for others is one of them. Ephesians 5:1-2 encourages us to live lives of love. We will spend all this life and all of eternity living in love because love is God's very nature. Remember the well-worn adage "*When you come to the end of your life on earth, it will not matter how long you have lived but rather how deeply you have loved.*"

Day 2: The Difficulty of Differences

Accept one another, then, just as Christ accepted you,
in order to bring praise to God.

Romans 15:7

In this world, we will always meet people who will challenge, irritate, and frustrate us. Much of this frustration, however, could be avoided if we realized that our personality differences, preferences, and traditions often create unnecessary problems and issues. Satan then uses these differences to cause division and friction within the body of Christ.

How can personality differences cause conflicts within the body of Christ?

Read Romans 15:5-7. How should we treat others who differ from us? Why?

Exercise

Is the person you selected on Day 1 difficult to love because of personality differences? Pray that the LORD will reveal a new truth to you about this person.

The underlying cause of much of the frustration and tension that we experience with other people stems from differences in personality, dispositions, and tradition. The LORD has hand crafted us as unique individuals with certain strengths and preferences. We also have our own weaknesses and annoying habits. God has made each of us beautiful in our own right but very different from one another, enabling us to use our individuality to bring him glory.

Our varied personalities cause us to view situations very differently. Each of us naturally evaluates a situation through our own prism, a prism that includes our predispositions, our personalities, and even our own sinful tendencies. Our prisms impact how we perceive events and normally include unwritten rulebooks in which we place expectations on people and circumstances, expecting people to react in a certain way for a given situation. For example, if we are sick, we may expect someone to call or bring us food. We normally expect people to react in a manner consistent with how we would react. But different people view situations from different perspectives. An elephant from the front looks quite different than an elephant from the back. We will not all see everything the same way, and we must not try to make everyone see things exactly like us, or we strip others of their individuality. We cannot prize uniformity over uniqueness. We will dishearten and discourage the body of Christ from fulfilling its God-ordained mission if we expect everyone to behave like us. For example, if Jennifer possesses the spiritual gift of mercy, she may find Michelle who has the gift of administration to be callous or unmerciful because Michelle seems more concerned with numbers than people. Michelle, on the other hand, may find Jennifer impractical and unrealistic. God has handcrafted both of these individuals but created them very differently. He has endowed each of them with different gifts because each serves a different purpose in bringing him glory. Ultimately, the body of Christ needs the strengths of both these individuals because they balance each other and allow the body as a whole to bring glory to God.

Read Acts 15:36-41 and answer the following questions.

About what do Paul and Barnabas disagree? _____

What is Paul's position? _____

What is Barnabas's position? _____

Why might Barnabas have held this position (Colossians 4:10, Acts 4:36)? _____

With whom do you tend to side? Paul Barnabas

Honestly assess yourself. Are you accepting of Christians who differ from you or who hold different opinions than you do?

If we are honest, we sometimes struggle with accepting others who possess different opinions than us. And yet we have to learn to disagree graciously. Too often we are offended by those who hold a different opinion than ours. We may even think we are godlier because of the opinions we possess or the decisions we make. We forget that each area of disagreement usually has two sides and each side normally has some valid points. Remember that as we speak of accepting others' positions, we are discussing the grey areas, not the black and whites of Scripture. We are never to compromise on God's truths, like abortion, adultery, stealing, and so forth.

Acts 15:36-41 provides a great example of how two godly men, Paul and Barnabas, can disagree. The Greek word for *disagreement*, *paroxusmos*, means "the stirring up of anger, sharp contention, angry dispute." Paul's and Barnabas's disagreement is not a mild difference but a sharp contention between two godly men. Initially, John Mark had served with these men on a missionary journey but then deserted them in Pamphylia and returned to Jerusalem. Now as the men discuss a second missionary journey, Barnabas favors taking John Mark who is his cousin, while Paul opposes it. Who is right? As we view this scenario, we will probably side with the person who best mirrors our personality. Barnabas is the epitome of compassion, a man gifted in encouragement. The early church affectionately referred to him as "son of encouragement" (Acts 4:36). Barn-

abas views the situation as a way to encourage John Mark. Paul, on the other hand, is a man of strong conviction and determination. He probably thinks that they should take someone more reliable on the mission. It is easy to understand both points of view, isn't it?

As we study this situation, we realize that Godly men, men devoted to the LORD, can and do disagree. In order to edify the body, we must learn to disagree graciously and to accept different opinions. Remember too that God could have used both opinions to work out spiritual consequences we cannot see. Perhaps taking Mark on Paul's journey would have been disastrous for Mark, as he may have faced things for which God knew he was not ready. And perhaps God also knew that Mark needed Paul's strong rebuke in order to deal with his previous desertion and weakness. At the same time, God may not have wanted Mark completely discouraged and so used Barnabas to show him mercy and mentor him. This would enable Mark to overcome his fears and to strengthen his resolve. In the end, God's kingdom will grow, and God will use four rather than two missionaries. And John Mark will redeem himself, for he will eventually write the Gospel of Mark.

Read Romans 14:1-13. Who should we accept? Check all that apply.

The stronger brother The weaker brother Other Christians

Should we judge another Christian in grey areas of Scripture, like drinking alcohol or watching television (Romans 14:3-4, 10-13)? Explain.

What additional guidance do we receive on judging others from Matthew 7:1-5?

We do not need to create unity in the body of Christ—the LORD has already done that. We only need to preserve such unity by accepting and loving our brothers and sisters and not passing judgment on them in grey areas of Scripture. The Greek word for *accept* in Romans 15:7 means “to receive to oneself, admit to one's society and fellowship, receive and treat with kindness.”² We need to receive those who differ from us into our groups and treat them with kindness. In Romans 14, Paul provides an example of two believers; one believer thinks it is acceptable to eat everything, and the other does not. The believer who eats meat should not condemn the believer who does not, and the believer who eats only vegetables should not judge the believer who eats meat. Why? God has accepted both men because both men are living by faith. Within the Christian walk, there are many grey areas, areas in which Scripture neither affirms nor denies a particular position but where the LORD has given individual conviction. In these instances, we must rely on the Holy Spirit to provide the guidance we need and must not judge the choices of another Christian.

Scripture repeatedly warns Christians against judging others self-righteously or hypocritically. “Stop judging by mere appearances, and make a right judgment” (John 7:24). Why does Scripture command us to not judge others self-righteously? There are many reasons, but here are a few: we do not possess full information, we cannot discern motives, we judge based on our predispositions. We also tend to judge others using our strengths but their weaknesses.

Please notice that Scripture does not say that we should never judge another person but rather that we should not judge him self-righteously. Judgment is a necessary element in the body of Christ. We must discern false teachers, the LORD's truth for our lives, sound Christian advice, our own sin, others sin for the purpose of restoration, and so forth. The LORD does not, however, reveal another person's sins and weaknesses to us so that we can self-righteously judge them but rather that we might pray for them and help them in their walk.

We are also wise to remember that we are all at different stages in our Christian walk. The LORD does not conform us over night; sanctification is a long road. We may be more mature than someone else; thus certain aspects may come easier for us. We should not condemn but disciple out of love. We sometimes forget that it is by the grace of God that we are who we are and where we are; for it is the Holy Spirit who every day conforms us to the image of Christ and gives us victory over sin.

We provide Satan a great foothold when we do not accept and love our brothers and sisters in Christ. We must not naively believe that Satan only uses non-Christians to attack God's work and God's people. Satan tries to use Christians, and he frequently prevails because we succumb to his snares. We must learn to accept each other with all our faults, problems, and blemishes, remembering the LORD's great acceptance of us. "Accept one another, then, just as Christ accepted you, in order to bring praise to God" (Romans 15:7).

Day 3: The Hands of Compassion

Therefore, as God's chosen people, holy and dearly loved, clothe yourselves with compassion, kindness, humility, gentleness and patience.

Colossians 3:12

Today we have the privilege of studying about compassion through the eyes of Jesus. In Matthew 14, we find Jesus feeding five thousand men. This is the only miracle recorded in all four of the gospels and provides us wonderful insight into loving and serving others.

Read Matthew 14:13-21 and answer the following questions.

Why does Jesus retreat to a solitary place (Matthew 14:9-13)?

Describe Jesus's emotions for the crowds. _____

What do the disciples ask Jesus to do in Matthew 14:15?

Is the disciples' request practical? Yes No

Has practicality ever inhibited you from expressing compassion to someone? Explain.

As God's people, with what should we clothe ourselves (Colossians 3:12)?

The crowds follow Jesus as he travels from place to place. Some follow to hear his teaching, others to see his miracles. Still others pursue him because they believe he will usher in the Messianic kingdom and overthrow the Roman reign. In Matthew 14, the crowds follow Jesus to the Sea of Galilee, a small lake about thirteen miles long and eight miles wide. It is close to the Jewish Passover time, a time in which the Jews paid homage to God for their great deliverance from Egypt. Jesus retreats to a mountain to be alone because Herod has beheaded John the Baptist, his friend and cousin. He also retreats for security reasons to avoid capture by Herod, for his time had not yet come. Jesus desires quiet and solitude.

Though Jesus desires quiet, the crowds follow him and allow him no rest. Jesus's response to them is remarkable. He demonstrates great compassion and kindness. Rather than telling the people to leave, he cares for them. He heals the sick. He teaches the masses. Though tired and probably weary himself, he selflessly serves them, placing aside his own personal needs. The Merriam-Webster Dictionary defines compassion as "sympathetic consciousness of