

CHRISTMAS: JESUS IS JOY
Luke 2:10-14

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Christmas is a time when people like to think about joy, happiness and celebrations. It is a time filled with parties, family gatherings, and giving and receiving presents. It is a time people look forward to for multiple reasons, some of which center in the memories they have gathered through the years.

Yet in reality Christmas is not really very joyful for increasing numbers of people. For some Christmas has become a lonely time as they have gotten older and their families have neglected them. For some others Christmas is a sad time as they have faced a recent death, as they grieve a spouse or loved one whose death many years ago still leaves a big hole.

Then there are people who find that their family gatherings are anything but joyful. Old tensions and unresolved anger often surface when these families spend time together. Sometimes they simply try to put on a happy face yet their real feelings of hurt and sadness are deep within.

And sometimes people look forward to Christmas with all kinds of expectations, only to go into a depression when the gatherings are over, and the family and friends have gone home. A number of deaths often occur after Christmas when people's anticipation fades and their desire to stay alive for these events wanes.

So this morning we will look at how "Jesus is Joy." The angels said to the Shepherd's in Luke 2, *"Do not be afraid. I bring you good news of great joy that will be for all the people. Today in the town of David a Savior has been born to you."* Jesus our Savior is the only one who can bring us true joy.

It is interesting today how so many people think the things of this world, like presents and parties can give them joy. Some even try to conjure up joy by the over-use of alcohol, by trying to use a chemical to make them loose and happy. Yet following a high there is always a low.

The only real joy and happiness in this world is found in having a relationship of faith with Jesus. It is only found as you trust in Jesus and his promises. Even in the midst of sadness and pain, Jesus gives you a joy and assurance that is greater than simply being happy.

It is a joy that no matter what comes, no matter how sad I am, I am secure in the arms of his love and mercy. In Jesus we know we are part of his body, the church, and that blesses us with caring friends who rejoice with us when we rejoice; who weep with us when we weep.

Yet what does this joy in Jesus look like? What is unique about a Christ-follower who lives in the joy of Christ? What are some ways, as we receive Jesus by faith that the joy of Jesus will grow in our hearts and lives? The first way we live in the joy of Jesus is to learn to worship and praise God with all your heart. The posture for this is demonstrated by lifting up one's arms and hands in praise to God. It is allowing our body to actually reflect what we feel in our hearts.

Someplace people have gotten the idea that only Pentecostal or Charismatic Christians lift up their arms and hands in praise. It is not something we should be suspect or ashamed of. It should be a natural thing to do if we feel so moved, rather than standing with a bored look on our face, sitting on our hands or being afraid of what others may think.

It is a pretty sad commentary on life where it is okay for us to paint our faces, put flags in car windows, stand up and wave our hands and shout like crazy people at a sports event. Yet when it comes to the life-changing message of Jesus' birth, promises, death and resurrection we are to be as non-expressive as possible.

Psalm 134:2 says, *"Lift up your hands in the sanctuary and praise the Lord."* Psalm 47:1 says, *"Clap your hands, all you nations, shout to God with cries of joy."* And Psalm 150:4, *"Praise him with timbrel and dancing, praise him with strings and pipes, praise him with the clash of cymbals, praise him with resounding cymbals. Let everything that has breath praise the Lord."*

It has often been said that form follows function. In other words, it is difficult to have and feel joy in our hearts if our worship, our actions, our posture, cannot reflect that. Open yourself up to praise God with your whole being. Get your body, your hands, your voices and singing involved. When you can joyfully praise God your heart in turn will feel more joy.

A second way to live in the joy of Jesus is to learn to spend time in prayer for others. The posture for this can be demonstrated by folding one's hands and bowing one's head. It is calming your body and spirit so you can share with God what is deep in your heart, and can listen to his words to you.

Prayer is so important for joy to come into your heart because there are so many sins, burdens and pains that we carry that so easily dampen our joy. Only as we learn to regularly confess our sins; only as we commit our burdens and hurts to God will our hearts ever be set free to live in freedom and joy.

Jesus said in Matthew 5:44, *"But I tell you love your enemies and pray for those who persecute you."* If you are angry, or carrying hurt from what someone has done to you, there is no way you will ever know true joy or will be able to live a life of praise and love in Jesus.

Jesus commands that you don't wait for the other person to repent to you, for them to change or for them to somehow make you happy. No, you need to take the first step. You need to pray for them and love them. God gives joy to those who are forgiving and loving.

My friends, if there are family members or friends who are coming to your Christmas gatherings and your relationship has been strained, it is your job to pray for them and forgive them first.

As you pray for God to give you peace with this person, as you show them joy and grace, you will definitely see that person in a whole new way. The interesting thing is that your life will change more than theirs; your joy and peace will be a powerful witness to all.

A third and final way to live in the joy of Jesus is to learn how to give to and serve others. The position for this can be demonstrated by putting the palms of your hands up and by extending them out to others. It is sharing our hands, our talents, our gifts in joy and service.

As I have mentioned before, love and service are not nouns but are action verbs. In other words, if we are waiting for others to love and serve us, or waiting for others to make us happy, we will always be disappointed. Expecting others to make us feel happy and joyful never, ever works.

So if you want love, joy and peace in your heart go and do something loving. Go and visit someone in need. Go and serve the poor. Go and wash someone's feet. Go and give from your money and possessions to Christ's mission in this world.

Jesus said in Matthew 20:26-28, *"Whoever wants to be great among you must be your servant, and whoever wants to be first among you must be your slave—just as the Son of Man did not come to be served, but to serve, and to give his life as a ransom for many."*

The Apostle Paul said in 2 Corinthians 9:6-8, *"Remember this; whoever sows sparingly will also reap sparingly, and whoever sows generously will also reap generously. Each of you should give what you have decided in your heart to give, not reluctantly or under compulsion, for God loves a cheerful giver."*

My friends, the more wealthy and focused on possessions we are becoming as a nation the more unhappy, joyless, me-centered and demanding of our own way we are also becoming. As a result the more cruel, less patient and arrogant we are with others.

The only antidote there is to this me-centered and joyless existence is to go and serve someone else. The only antidote is to stop focusing inward on us; to rather focus on loving and serving others. The only antidote is to learn to give to others freely, joyfully, lovingly.

My friends, Christmas is all about giving. It is all about the greatest gift of all—the gift of God's very own son, Jesus. And Jesus' life was all about giving—giving his life for the lost, the hurting, the suffering. And his gift was not just words, but went to a cross to die so that we might live.

May our prayer today be, "Jesus, fill me with joy." May God give you the joy of worshipping and praising him with all your heart; may God give you the joy of praying for and finding peace with others; and may God give you joy to serve and give generously of yourself.

Joy to the world, the Lord has come. Amen.