

“Put a Smile on”

Philippians 4:4-9, James 1:2-5

[1] Good morning. Would you do me a favor? Find someone sitting next to you, and tell them, “There is joy in the Lord.” I don’t know what emotions you might be feeling today. Maybe you had a tough week. But I am glad you are here today. I cannot imagine a better place to be than worshipping in God’s house.

We cannot be the church alone. Your presence is a gift: to me, to us, and to God.

I invite you to hold your hands out with your palms open as we pray, ready to receive something from God. Would you please pray with me?

Lord, you know our hearts. You always meet us as we are, where we are. Send down your Holy Spirit on us today, to comfort us, to teach us, and to help us know your son, Jesus Christ, in a new way this morning. We ask this in his name. Amen.

[2] A patient walks into a doctor’s office. He says, “Doc, you’ve got to help me! I’m going crazy! First I think I’m a wigwam, then I think I’m a tepee!” The doctor replies, “The problem is, you’re just two tents.”

[3] Have you ever been anxious? I’ve been anxious in plenty of circumstances. The worst moment for me recently was when I lost my job as a youth minister. I had to figure out what to do next. Those of you who have been through unemployment know, the loss of a job also means the loss of confidence, the loss of security, the loss of direction, and especially the loss of sleep. It was a struggle sometimes to simply wake up in the morning. I had to pray myself into my next step.

During this time, which lasted about three months, I met a pastor from Indian River. God truly set up our meeting, because I wasn’t even applying for a

position at her church. We had lunch, and I told her about my call. I had spent ten years in youth ministry. I was a certified candidate for pastoral ministry, but hadn't become a pastor yet. Even with all my experience in youth and music, I wasn't sure how to take the next step. All I knew was I had to enter local pastor school to be appointed.

She was looking for an intern who could help her church with education, as well as help her in the pastoral ministry: with preaching, weddings, funerals, and more. As she described what she was thinking, I told her, point blank, “I'm not sure you want me to work for you right now. I'm at a pretty low point.”

I'll never forget her next words: “Can you fake it until you make it?” She did not mean “be insincere”. What she meant was, “Can you do the best you can for the Lord, even in your desolation, and trust that the joy will follow?”

It was a pivotal moment in my life. I could have chosen to roll up inside myself, like those little pill bugs when they are scared, or I could take a risk and enter the ministry, move my entire family, into an unknown place. I didn't even really have a job description, just a chance to practice being a pastor. (PAUSE)

I told her, “Yes, I can.” And that yes is just one of a dozen different decisions when I chose to follow Christ and his example of joyful living; one choice of many that has led me to be here in front of you today.

[4] Have you experienced loss? Have you ever been faced with a choice like that? Maybe you have been in that place where you weren't sure what was happening, or why. Maybe you were flat out mad at God. Did you know, it's OK to be mad at God? If you don't believe me, read some of the psalms. “How long?” is a common cry of the psalmists. Suffering always has been, is, and will be a constant in human life. If you are sitting here today and have never faced a

trial, never faced uncertainty, please, check your pulse! You and I both know, no one is a stranger to suffering.

In all of our suffering, in all of our pain, in any and every situation, we have a choice to make. Will we choose joy in the Lord, or will we stay stuck in our self-pity?

[5] This dilemma is actually one reason why the Bible is such a great book. It is God’s love letter to us. Yet the Bible is also full of tragic stories of those who suffered – who were kidnapped, beaten, murdered, cheated on, and even lost their children. The Bible tells of people who experienced great tragedies and yet placed their trust in the Lord. How did they do it? How did they reach out in their pain and suffering and find joy?

Two passages, written out of pain and suffering, in Philippians and James, can teach us. Here we can find the hope and encouragement that we need.

[6] Take Philippians, to start. The Apostle Paul wrote this letter while he was in prison. Paul was on trial for preaching that Jesus Christ was the Son of God and the Author of forgiveness. If anyone had the right to complain, it was Paul: he was sitting in a jail while perfectly innocent!

[7] But Paul didn’t complain. Look at his words. This is not a man who is moping! This is someone who knows the real meaning of joy. “Rejoice in the Lord always, I will say it again, Rejoice.” (Philippians 4:4)

I just want to ask Paul, “How on earth can you find the strength to rejoice in your situation? For crying out loud, you are in prison!”

Look at his next words. “Let your gentleness be known to all. The Lord is near.” (Philippians 4:5)

It's like Paul is saying, the very hope he has is because he knows the presence of Jesus. Jesus is near, both in the Spirit, and near, as in, we believe he will return again. Despite his suffering, Paul knew that his attitude was a choice, a witness to others who didn't know Christ. He says, “Be gentle.” Seriously, Paul? Come on. When you are stressed, how gentle are you? If you're anything like me, not very!

Paul says that by letting go of the things that stress him, turning them into prayers, he found the peace of Christ that passes all understanding. By trusting in his Savior, Paul found his peace and his joy.

Peace is valuable. I have a tapestry that says, “A contented mind is the greatest blessing a man can enjoy in this world.” At funerals, I do my best to offer that peace to the people who mourn. My words may be temporary, but the peace that God offers is eternal. And it is only found in Jesus Christ.

How can we find that peace? What does it take to be calm and reassured in the midst of a crazy world? How can we, as the song goes, “praise God in this storm?”

[8] The book of James gives us more advice. James says to consider it pure joy when we face trials. (James 1:2) Think about that first word for a moment: Consider. That sounds like advice from a doctor. “Have you considered taking up jogging? Have you considered a gluten-free diet?” It indicates that we have a choice. Being “considerate” means choosing to care for others' needs before your own. It's not a natural choice, but you can make it! And you should. We need to consider the options we have before us, and choose one.

Life is a series of considerations and choices. It takes many choices, before we become fully mature. James says the same thing about our faith. If we face trials with the understanding that God provides for us, we will mature in our faith.

A speaker once told me, “Without trials, only spoiled brats would enter heaven.” That’s a different attitude than the world teaches. We are more likely to hear the world say, “You don’t have to feel pain. You don’t have to suffer. You can have everything! Just take care of yourself first.” And frankly, “Me first” is the most selfish, immature lifestyle one can possible live.

[9] Mature faith says, “God first, others second, me last.” Mature faith says, “Consider it joy when you suffer.” What would this place look like if we all committed to maturing in our faith in Jesus Christ, even in our suffering? Would it be different? Would it affect how we treat our neighbors? How we spend our time? How we spend our money? I think it would.

[10] I’m telling you this morning, I don’t have it all together. I have faced trials in my life, when instead of “considering joy,” I have gotten on board the “complain train.” Do you know what I’m saying? This complain train, it goes pretty fast to nowhere, it always has plenty of empty seats, and it costs nothing to buy a ticket. Anyone can complain. It doesn’t take any fancy degree, intelligence, or training to look at everything through the most pessimistic view possible. Ben Franklin once said, “Any fool can criticize, condemn and complain - and most fools do.”

[11] I don’t want to ride the complain train. I’ll bet you don’t, either, if you’re honest with yourself. So let’s do what Paul and James suggest. Let’s ask God for wisdom. Let’s give God our petitions and our burdens. Let’s beg God to show us joy, real joy, the joy that Jesus Christ knew, even though he was

persecuted, ridiculed, and killed on a cross. Christ didn't stay down! Literally! He rose again, with the power of life, real life, on his side.

Friends, ask Jesus to show you what really matters. Ask him to give you the eternal joy and peace that go beyond anything you will ever experience in this world. Give him your sorrows, your burdens, and receive his eternal life in return.

[12] I love how Paul ends this passage. Let me read it again to you. “Finally, brothers and sisters, whatever is true, whatever is noble, whatever is right, whatever is pure, whatever is lovely, whatever is admirable—if anything is excellent or praiseworthy—think about such things.” This is the motto of Northwestern University, my alma mater. Sometimes, when I was in college, and some of my classmates were complaining, I wanted to take the University seal and smack them upside the head.

[13] Let's get off the complain train and instead get on the prayer chain! Rather than lament what we see is wrong, let us instead ask, “How can I be Christ's hands and feet in this situation?”

You can do this simply by creating a “joy journal.” Get a notebook, and each day, write down the things you are thankful for. Each day, write down 5 or 10 things (or more!) that God has given you. Be specific. Go deep. You will be amazed, if you are sincere, at all the reasons God has given you to rejoice.

[14] “Whatever is true, noble, right, pure, lovely, admirable....” Will you think on these things this week? Will you look at tragedies and loss, and say, in the midst of your tears, “God, I will praise you in this storm”? If you will do that, God promises you, you will find peace and joy that lasts. Let's pray.

Memory Verse

Philippians 4:8 (NIV)

“Whatever is true, whatever is noble, whatever is right, whatever is pure, whatever is lovely, whatever is admirable—if anything is excellent or praiseworthy—think about such things.”

Reflection questions

1. What was the happiest moment of your life?
2. What was the most difficult moment of your life?
3. How often do you get onboard the “complain train”? What would it take to get you to switch to the “prayer chain” instead? (See Philippians 4:6)
4. Try starting a joy journal, writing down things you are thankful for, and the things God has brought you through. Write in it daily for one week and see how your mood changes.