

The Pursuit of Joy in God – Part 2

In this series, we're considering the pursuit of joy in God. In Part 1, we established a foundation. We said that humans naturally seek joy, meaning and purpose. We often seek it in fame, fortune, power and pleasure. However, we never seem to find lasting satisfaction in these pursuits. So, it's only sensible to instead turn to the Designer of our hearts and ask – how did He design us? How did He intend for us to find joy, fulfilment and meaning?

We saw from Isaiah and Revelation that God created man for His own glory and pleasure. We saw that God glorifying Himself is the ultimate purpose of all things. We concluded then that man's pursuit of joy, since it is natural, is actually in harmony with this purpose of God. In other words, a person will find ultimate happiness, meaning and purpose in glorifying God.

However, the thing that stops us from glorifying God is sin. Sin is when we seek pleasure outside of God's glory. It's when we find a god in anything else, even ourselves. God deals with our sin preventing us from knowing and glorifying Him by applying the death and resurrection of Christ to us when we repent and believe in Him. In this way, our sins are atoned for, and Christ's righteousness is imputed to us. It is now possible for us to please God – to glorify Him.

But that is only the beginning. When God saves someone, His goal is to make them into resemblances of Jesus Christ. Jesus is the brightness of His Father's glory. Logically, nothing could be more God-glorifying, and therefore joy-giving, than to be changed into the image of Christ.

So to simplify it – you can see it this way: to grow into the image of Christ is the primary way to meet my life's purpose. To seek to grow in likeness to God, is to seek the path to true joy and meaning in this life. But don't miss the fact that God has commanded us to approach all of life with the first commandment in mind – to love Him with all our heart soul and mind.

What does that mean? Seeking to delight in, enjoy and adore God. It does not mean to try and meet God's need of love, because He has no such need. If we do not love to love God, our pursuit of Him will soon dry up into duty, ritual, tradition, legalism, and eventually, hypocrisy.

So, my heart is set on pursuing my joy in God. I want to find happiness, meaning and purpose in Him. My heart is not dragging its feet, it has chosen to love God with everything. It is passionately pursuing the enjoyment of God.

But how does this happen? Any Christian will tell you it is not an overnight occurrence. It is the miracle of sanctification – progressive or practical sanctification – that can take a lifetime. So with my motive being to savour, delight, know and enjoy God, that is, to love Him, I come to the building blocks of accomplishing this. Ephesians lays out three stages in which sanctification occurs:

That ye put off concerning the former conversation the old man, which is corrupt according to the deceitful lusts; and be renewed in the spirit of your mind; and that ye put on the new man, which after God is created in righteousness and true holiness.

Ephesians 4:22-24

Put off sin, be renewed in your mind, and put on the new man. To help us remember, we'll tie it to our theme of pursuing our joy in God. The first one we'll call 'Kill your joy-killers.' The second, we'll call "Behold the Joy-giver." The third we'll call 'Reflect the Joy-giver.'

Put off the old man – Kill your joy-killers

Let's begin with the first command: to put off the old man. Why call this stage 'Kill your joy-killers'? The reason is in verse 22: "*deceitful lusts*." There are things that hinder me from knowing and tasting of God. There are things that numb my soul to the knowledge of God. There are things that crowd out thoughts of God, and exalt themselves against His knowledge. There are things that Paul counted as "*rubbish*" (**Philippians 3:8**) – things that held him back from obtaining this sweet knowledge.

There are things that cause me to quench the Spirit, to offend God, to drive away the filling of the Spirit. There are things that harden my heart and soul to the exquisitely tender and sensitive nature of wisdom. There are things that sear my conscience, and dull my spiritual sensitivities. There are things that blind me to their very destructiveness, and their enslaving addictiveness.

These same things bring bitter fruits of shame, regret, destruction, pain, sorrow, poverty, wasted years, heartache, misery, and emptiness. These deceitful lusts trick you into seeking after them, as if they are the real joy-givers, but eventually, they destroy you. All these things are sin. Sin is the enemy of your soul. It is the enemy of your love for God. It is the enemy of your joy. It is the enemy of the very purpose of your life.

To not root out sin in your life, to be unconcerned with having less sin, is to allow a deadly infection to fester in your life. It is to esteem your very life as forfeit to Satan and uselessness. It is to choose the shorter, easier road, with less joy, meaning and purpose. It is a cheap trade-off – instant gratification for long-term regret and destruction. It is the choice of the lazy, essentially. It is the choice of the one who would prefer to eat their bowl of soup now, rather than wait for their birthright.

But if we admit that finding God is the most precious and fulfilling thing of all, then we must set about eliminating sin from our lives with all the vigour that we have. We must see sin as our joy-killer, and desire to kill off all joy-killers.

See, many think that the Christian practice of self-denial is an end in itself, as if self-denial is a virtue by itself, like love or patience. But that is not true. The Christian practises self-denial, self-discipline, a mortification of our fleshly lusts, because of something better that awaits us. We put off the old, so we can put on the new.

We do not die to sin only; we then live the life of Christ. We put sin to death in our lives continually, because we recognise that sin is actually killing our joy. It is destructive and harmful. So this first stage, while negative, is there because it is necessary for greater positive. Let's examine a text to understand this principle of killing your joy-killers.

Woe unto the world because of offences! for it must needs be that offences come; but woe to that man by whom the offence cometh! Wherefore if thy hand or thy foot offend thee, cut them off, and cast them from thee: it is better for thee to enter into life halt or maimed, rather than having two hands or two feet to be cast into everlasting fire. And if thine eye offend thee, pluck it out, and cast it from thee: it is better for thee to enter into life with one eye, rather than having two eyes to be cast into hell fire.

Matthew 18:7-9

Jesus was talking about new believers and children, and was warning those who might cause them to stumble. He then includes this statement, also mentioned in the Sermon on the Mount, saying, if your hand or foot or eye causes you to stumble, cut them off, pluck them out, and cast them away.

Now Jesus was not telling us to maim ourselves in the pursuit of righteousness. He was explaining the seriousness of sin, and the way to deal with it. This text will help us understand the first stage of growing in to Christ's image – putting off sin, or killing your joy-killers.

The first thing you notice is that you have to practice is:

1. Identification

The word in the Greek for offend in the phrase *"if thy hand or thy foot offend thee"* (or causes you to stumble) is a strong word. It was used to refer to the stick on which the bait was placed in a trap, which would spring up and trap the animal. The idea is of something trapping you, tricking you into destruction, causing your ruin. Jesus makes the whole thing very personal.

He pictures your hand or your foot, or your own eye leading you into a trap, leading you into destruction. But you have to realise that it is doing this before you can act. If it was your foot leading you into the trap each time, and you kept blaming the kidneys, you will not make progress. The extreme surgery that Jesus commands can only take place when we know what it is that is causing us to offend.

In our lives, the thing that enables us to see our sin is the Word of God. If you are depending on your own wisdom, a good family background, a sharp sense of wrong and right, a sensitive conscience – you will go wrong. Your own heart will deceive you time and time again. Like a man trying to clean himself in a pitch black room with no light, so our quest to grow into the image of Christ is doomed without exposure to the Bible.

The Bible, when applied by the Holy Spirit, is profitable for *"reproof"* (**2 Timothy 3:16-17**) – it shows us our wrongs. Paul said he would not have known sin except for the law of God. You

need to know the Bible to know your sin. You need to be around godly people to know sin. You need to listen to good preaching to know your sin.

You need to then see your sin for what it is – an attempt to find joy, pleasure and meaning outside of God. Life on my own terms. Life outside of God's control, presence, commands, thankfulness. Living for my joy outside of God, making a new god. Unbelief in God, and idolatry. If you are committed to loving God with all your heart, that is, making him your chief joy, delight and pleasure, you need to see why sin is so evil. You need to see your sin as a joy-killer.

Too often, we see God as the joy-killer, don't we – the Cosmic Killjoy, who blows the whistle every time we seem to be having too much fun. But in fact, God is the most joyful being of all. His ideal is to share that with us. Sin deprives us of that. Sin is the joy-killer.

See where you're trying to get your joy from. Identify what James calls your own lusts – the Greek word is where we get the English word “idiosyncrasies” – your unique lust – the thing you have set up as god to bring you pleasure. Repent from it and ask forgiveness from God. But identifying the sin, and repenting of it, are not enough in Jesus' words. We need to go further and kill the sin. That's called:

2. Mortification

Jesus said, cut it off, or pluck it out and cast it from you. If this hand is secretly planning my downfall, it is not enough to identify the hand as the problem, or even repent that I have such a hand. There needs to be drastic action. The sin in our life must be killed. The Bible uses the word “*mortify*” in **Colossians 3:5** to mean put it to death, cut off its air supply. This is what Jesus meant when He said we must deny ourselves, and take up our cross daily.

So we are to disown our sinful cravings for pleasure outside God. We are to let that old man of sin die. And he dies a little more each time we say a firm and final 'NO' to temptation. The amputation of a hand or a foot, would be a short, sharp pain. So it must be with our sin. We end up in sin because we drag out the temptation into long debates with ourselves: 'Should I? Shouldn't I? Well, maybe...' That's slowly sawing off your hand. No, Jesus said – cut it off. Say no, mean it, and move away.

Sin is a joy-killer, and with the Holy Spirit, you kill this sin. Please note that you need absolute dependence on the Holy Spirit to put sin to death. “*For if ye live after the flesh, ye shall die: but if ye through the Spirit do mortify the deeds of the body, ye shall live*” (**Romans 8:13**). You say no while depending on the Holy Spirit.

Romans 6 tells us of the dynamic power behind the Christian's ability to say no. It is not the weak-willed and timid 'no' of the unsaved, who are desperately trying to rid themselves of sin by their own willpower. Instead, it is the very power of the cross of Christ itself. Jesus died to sin, He completely died to it, and rose to righteousness. Paul tells us here that the Holy Spirit has joined every believer in Christ's death and resurrection, giving us the mighty power of

Calvary to say no. When you choose not to yield to sin, you have all the power of the cross behind you. Paul says simply – reckon it to be true. Believe it, and act on it.

We must realise why Jesus chose this illustration: amputation is painful. Saying no to sin will hurt, especially breaking a habit. Jesus specifically chose the hand, foot, and eye. These are extremely useful, essential members of our body – and in the case of the eye, extremely sensitive and vulnerable. There is pain in forsaking something we held as the source of our joy, but we are doing it for something greater – the infinite joy of knowing and glorifying God.

The third stage you'll notice in Jesus' words is:

3. Separation

Jesus specifically says, *"cast it from you."* Pluck out your offending eye, and then cast it away. Cut off your offending hand or foot, and then cast it away. Why? Perhaps, we'd want to store that eye in a glass jar, to remind ourselves of our great sacrifice, and maybe just to remember the good times. But Jesus insists on a complete, non-negotiable break with sin.

See, often we may repent. We may even say no. But we don't throw away that severed sin. We keep it within hand's reach. It's available should the joy of God not be forthcoming. We say no, but the corner of our eye watches where that hand lands, to see if we might need it again. Jesus is teaching drastic action to get the sin out of your life. You'll notice in Scripture we are told to take such drastic actions to not only get sin out, but keep it out.

We are told to flee temptation. We are told to flee youthful lusts. That's throwing the hand away. Get away from the sin, and get it away from you. Don't mess around with tempting circumstances, tempting situations. Don't give sin that foot in the door, with tempting memories of the sin. Cast it off. Paul says in **Romans 13:14**, *"make no provision for the flesh."* That means – don't feed your sin.

Don't give your sin material through TV, the Internet, chats and so on to thrive on. Starve it. If you do not feed something, it will eventually die. Sin thrives only because we do not completely starve it of what it lives on – the lust of the flesh, the lust of the eyes, and the pride of life. In **1 Thessalonians 5:22**, Paul says, *"Abstain from all appearance of evil."* Even if it's starting to look bad, Paul says, get out of there. If in doubt, throw it out.

All of this means, cast sin away from you. In **Ephesians 5:11** he says, *"Have no fellowship with the works of darkness."* Don't join with them, or try to be with them but not like them. This reminds us of Jesus' words that no man who puts his hand to the plough and then looks back is fit for the kingdom of God. We must make a choice. Who will be our God?

The thing you seek pleasure from is your god. Will you make it wholeheartedly God, and turn your back on sin, casting down its idols, destroying them and walking away from them, or will you be like so many of Judah's kings – who worshipped God, but left the idolatrous places of worship intact?

See, the New Testament does not prescribe primarily cures for sin when dealing with sanctification, it deals mainly with preventions for sin. What would you prefer with your new car – good brakes, or a system that dials the ambulance automatically after you've gone over a cliff? I'll take the brakes, thank you very much!

Prevention of sin is preferable to cure. Sin is a joy-killer. We do not want to dabble with it, and after it has killed our joy, be merely thankful that we can find cleansing in Christ – though we are thankful. No, we want to prevent the accident altogether – cast the root of the sin away. Get rid of what feeds the sin.

Finally though, there is something else from Christ. Notice His words *“it is better for thee to enter into life halt or maimed, rather than having two hands or two feet to be cast into everlasting fire.”* This we call:

4. Anticipation

Jesus points out that you must make a choice. You will either choose to allow the offending hand, foot, and eye to continue as before, and seemingly suffer no loss. From one perspective, it might seem like a better option. None of this painful self-denial, death, saying no, and so on. But that person will end up in hell with all his members. He thought he was gaining by not amputating those members, but in the end, he has them all.

You may save yourself some pain in the short term, but end up with worse pain in the long term. On the other hand, the one who endures the short term pain, and discomfort or inconvenience of the amputation, ends up with long term joy. They enter life eternal.

Now Jesus is not teaching that there will be people without limbs in heaven. **1 Corinthians 15** teaches us we will have perfect bodies in heaven. No, his point is about the trade-off we all make. All of us are inwardly seeking the best deal – the most rewarding choices. The one who chooses sin thinks it's better for them, because they shrink back from the self-denial and discipline it will take to say no. They think life is better that way. But it's not.

Such a trade is a bad one. You trade a bit of extra time with those members for an eternity in a burning flame. Jesus is emphasising that the pursuit of joy in God is not limited to this life – it will be eternal. The better trade, in Jesus' own words, is to suffer some loss now, in order to enter into life eternal. This isn't a passage about how to be saved, it's a passage that speaks of the consequences of sin. It's a passage about a better choice.

Choosing to kill your joy-killers is a better trade. Yes, it takes some self-discipline, some self-denial. But it brings the sweet harvest of knowing Christ more intimately. As we said, we do not deny ourselves simply for the sake of it – it's for the joy that is before us if we will kill the joy-killers. You could say, it's not only saying no with all our might, it's saying yes with all our might to something better.

It's this principle of essentially dying to gain that Jesus was explaining when He said *"Whosoever shall seek to save his life shall lose it; and whosoever shall lose his life shall preserve it"* (**Luke 17:32**).

The eye and the hand are also important body parts. But Jesus has no mercy on sin. He says, no matter how much you may value this sin, no matter how important it may seem to you – it is causing you to stumble. It is a trap that is deceitfully leading you into its snare. It will not bring you lasting joy – it will rob you, and then spit you out.

It is better to feel the sharp pain of the flesh crying out as we starve it again and again, than to feel the ongoing leanness in our souls, as our sin crowds out the knowledge of the holy, and smothers the flame of love for God. Your love for God, and your love of loving God, is actually equally a hatred for sin. The greater your love for Him and His knowledge, the greater your hatred of sin. The more passionately you pursue the joy of God, the more passionately you will hunt down and kill the joy-killers in your life.

So, we need identification – to recognise the sin for what it is, why you are doing it, and it's true nature as a deceitful lust and a joy-killer. We then need mortification – to kill the sin, and say no to it with the power of the Spirit. Then we must practice separation – to cast the sin away, give it no hope of returning, no food to grow on. We must then remember in anticipation that we are doing this negative thing, for a greater positive.

In Part 3 of this series, we'll see the second and third stages of pursuing our joy in God as we seek to become like Christ – renewing our minds or beholding the Joy-giver, and then reflecting the Joy-giver.