

JOY – Choosing & Cultivating Joy

Pastor Perry Burkholder

Jonathan Hayes

Evan Burkholder

The Challenge of Choosing Joy

Romans 12:12

Be joyful in hope, patient in affliction, faithful in prayer.

The New International Version (Grand Rapids, MI: Zondervan, 2011), Ro 12:12.

1 Thessalonians 5:16-18

Rejoice always, pray continually, give thanks in all circumstances; for this is God's will for you in Christ Jesus.

The New International Version (Grand Rapids, MI: Zondervan, 2011), 1 Th 5:16–18.

This sounds wonderful; a close kinship bond with my creator. But who can live up to this? How can we pray continually and cultivate this kind of joy unceasingly?



Can we be grateful in all circumstances?

Evan shared how he's had moments of ecstatic joy in his life, and thankfulness for what God has done, praying in the Spirit and remaining in it — but only for a short time.

But he feels daunted at the prospect of staying in that spirit of joy and prayer continually.

We often live in a space between the secular and sacred, where we go to church and are sometimes convicted by the Spirit, but that we live the majority of our lives as functional seculars. And Evan has shared his experience in that and knows that he's not alone.

And so Evan asks these questions:

- Life can be tough, filled with trials and tribulations, sadness and disappointments. In these moments, do we rejoice always?
- And then, there is the hustle and bustle of our everyday lives, do we make room to pray continually amidst these distractions?
- Or, lastly, in the face of hardship and loss, do we give thanks when we lose?



Why does Paul put these commands together to be joyful continually?

Impossible Commands

Commands to rejoice always, pray continually, give thanks in all circumstances.

These are commands and are not optional.

When we look at pray continually, we don't have the option of saying, "oh my prayer life is complete and I don't need any more," but tomorrow always requires more prayer.

What does it look like to be conformed to that high bar of these commands?

Prayer as Means

Rejoice always is the function of cultivating the other two. If we try one without the other two, we won't get very far. So these commands are all connected, and the means to growing in this is through prayer.

How would knowing this help us choose and cultivate joy in our daily lives?

The destination is to rejoice always. One way to make progress is to look at each command building on the next: Praying always, giving thanks, and rejoicing always.

Jonathan shared about how this verse is one of the most important verses in his life. During a low part in his life, Jonathan took a quick, 10 minute spiritual retreat, and heard the Holy Spirit tell him, "I want to teach you to pray continually." Ever since then, this has been the guiding verse for today's study.

Evan shared about how this command isn't just for Jonathan, but also for all of us.

Paul invites the first listeners into this space, and the challenge for each succeeding generation down to us and beyond is to accept the invitation and obey the command in our lives.

This is certainly not easy. And Jonathan's word was that the Holy Spirit wanted to teach him to pray without ceasing, and that's going to be a journey to walk on for the rest of his life.



Jesus can empathize with us; the Garden of Gethsemane comes to mind where he was sweating blood while praying through the hardest trial of his life.

Praying Without Ceasing

What do you think it looks like to pray without ceasing? Practically?

If we impose our idea of what prayer looks like (maybe just saying words to God), then it would always be impossible to talk to God because we have to do other things throughout our day.

So we can rule out a hyper-literal interpretation of this command, thus asking, “what does realistic obedience look like to this command?”

The Holy Spirit wouldn't command us to do something without then leading us into his truth. The Holy Spirit always wants to be close to us, and if we're ignorant of his presence, we can snub the Holy Spirit instead of paying attention to him and speaking to him.



The underlying principle here is to learn that in the mundane moments of our day, the Holy Spirit is there with us and we can interact with him and speak to him during the monotonous times of daily life and perhaps elevate those moments beyond the ordinary.

The frequency of our prayers is a reflection of how close we think God is to us.

— Jonathan Hayes

Prayer with the Holy Spirit is much more conversational, as the Holy Spirit is a person, not a statue. But what does conversation look like when we get tired?

The Holy Spirit wants the ongoing conversation because it's an ongoing relationship where we continually draw closer, and this is comprised of a plethora of different moments.

Sometimes we draw closer to God with silence, maybe thinking of the right words to say, or speaking quickly or slowly, or more emotional or less emotional. And the Holy Spirit wants to listen to us.

Giving Thanks

When we start by finding ourselves in a situation where we can either lean into frustration about what is painful or wrong, or leaning into God's character in that situation and blessing that space, then we're actually discerning this dilemma.

During the crucible of the pandemic in a retail job, Evan saw how the Holy Spirit was breaking down Evan's defenses toward his sin. And it took things getting worse and worse and Evan letting the Holy Spirit into the mess and giving thanks to begin working the sin out of his life.

It's as if a contractor comes into your house and fixes one thing, but then reveals many other things in your house that are wrong, and he offers to continue poking around and fix things. Evan relates this analogy to how the Holy Spirit continually worked to fix things in his heart, and all he had to do was accept the invitation to let the Holy Spirit continually fix what was broken.

Evan chose to see the effects of the Holy Spirit and began to express gratitude toward the Holy Spirit, and that led to a feed-forward behavior of choosing to express more and more gratitude as time went on.

This led Evan to pray continually, but through a series of pride and sin, he lost it all. He kicked the holy contractor out the door and his joy diminished, and he felt like he was cast from the garden all over again.



Many of us have felt this pattern. How do we find our way back in the midst of the struggles?

Remembering the Gospel

I think one of the key ways is for us to believe the gospel — primarily, that God takes joy in us. When He sees us, He experiences joy. And the Gospel reveals that to us.

Jonathan believes some of us are sitting here with a view of God that's saying:

He's probably putting up with me. I have no idea how He feels towards me, but maybe He's just putting up with me, especially when I sin.

And he believes that because Jonathan had a similar belief, that Jesus was disinterested in him and it was in the background subtly affecting how he lived and behaved.

But it all changed when Jonathan and Evan were traveling through Europe and were under a lot of tension dealing with travel and change and difficult people. And the Holy Spirit convicted Jonathan to read the Luke 15 parable:

Now the tax collectors and sinners were all gathering around to hear Jesus. But the Pharisees and the teachers of the law muttered, "This man welcomes sinners and eats with them."

Then Jesus told them this parable: “Suppose one of you has a hundred sheep and loses one of them. Doesn’t he leave the ninety-nine in the open country and go after the lost sheep until he finds it? **And when he finds it, he joyfully puts it on his shoulders and goes home. Then he calls his friends and neighbors together and says, ‘Rejoice with me; I have found my lost sheep.’** I tell you that in the same way there will be more rejoicing in heaven over one sinner who repents than over ninety-nine righteous persons who do not need to repent.

The New International Version (Grand Rapids, MI: Zondervan, 2011), Lk 15:1–7.



This led Jonathan to some hard crying because he felt his view of God fundamentally changing because he related to his conversion moment, realizing that when Jesus found Jonathan, he had joy.

And this is true for everyone who has been found: Do you realize that you’re not lost anymore, and that Jesus had joy when he found you and that his attitude toward you hasn’t changed?



And that’s still his heart when he looks at you today, and even when life circumstances fluctuates, this part of the gospel remains the same. “If there’s something that I’m going to be grateful for, I’m going to pick that.” — Jonathan Hayes

Believe this gospel reality is what can help move us out of the ruts that we continually fall into. And since we're alone a lot, we have to preach this to ourselves.

— Pastor Perry Burkholder

If we actually believed this actively, how would this impact our lives?



When we become adopted children of God, we become the object of God's overwhelming joy. This joy, unlike the fleeting emotions of the world, is steadfast and abounding. You are eternally treasured by the one who made everything. More than that, we are blessed to talk with the Creator of all things. About the most personal things. At any time and under any circumstances.

Evan invites us to give things in our circumstances, rough and smooth, to pray in the mundane and spectacular, and to rejoice always. Amen.