

Joyful Obedience

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Psalm 119:97-104

“Oh, how I love your law!”

Movement 1 – In Search of Happiness

Are you happy? Are you living with a sense of satisfaction, with a satiated walk, feeling like you are full? Are you happy? Is there a smile on your face? Is there a lift to your step? Are you walking and singing the lyrics to the *Sunny Side of the Street*? Are you happy?

Mr. Bill is happy. Mr. Bill always seems to have a bubbly sense about him. He always seems to exude a sense of joy and confidence. Nothing can faze this man. A negative comment, bad weather, even health problems do not effect the mood and attitude and approach to life that Mr. Bill has. He is a constant source of joy and happiness. You can almost image Mr. Bill writing this section from Psalm 119, oozing out joy and love and devotion that seems to be such a central part of who he is. While he is a little out of place in funerals and goth gatherings, Mr. Bill is someone who seems to have found a way to truly and fully embrace a sense of happiness. Mr. Bill is happy.

We look at people like Mr. Bill, and unless we are the dark and artistic persona of Sylvia Plath or someone of that nature, we look and say, “I want that.” I want to be happy, to have that level of optimism, and to always be expressing joy. We want to be happy; we want to have a reservoir of joy at our disposal. We want to walk with a smile and to feel good about ourselves. We want to be happy.

We all want to be happy. It feels good, it is fulfilling and nice. In her book, *Prozac Nation*, Elizabeth Wurtzel describes happiness as equal to ^{success/}expectations. If our actions meet what we hoped for and expected than we are happy. If the results fall short, then we find ourselves disappointed. If we are expecting a sports team to win the World Series and all they do is take the division then regardless if they played well and beat many odds, our happiness is lower because the success of the team did not meet our expectations. So we live life trying to lower our expectations or raise our success rate. We live life chasing a holy grail of happiness. We want to be happy.

When we read the psalms, the ones that exude joy and thanksgiving, especially this particular one, perhaps we are drawn to the emotional content and power. Psalm 150 speaks of praising God with such a noise and such an energy and we are drawn to that level of praise. When reading these psalms, have you ever felt like an outsider, like a kid inside his house watching the rest of the kids in the neighborhood play ball outside? We watch and we long to play with them, to shout with them and to be happy with them but we are stuck inside. We yearn for the happiness that is so poetically articulated in the Psalms but for some reason it feels like we are stuck inside. It feels like we cannot claim and articulate that joy. The concerns of our life hold us down, our health, our family, our friends weighing our arms, keeping us from praising. The doubts of our faith hold us down, the fear of shame holds us down, and we feel as if we cannot fully stand by the side of the psalmist in praise and a longing grows. We want to be happy.

Many churches have named this desire, and have focused on achieving this goal – happiness – for all of their members. The main purpose of the worship service is to praise

God. The style of worship leads to shouting for joy, dancing, to clapping and showing gratitude to the Lord. Worship is upbeat all of the time so that people can, even if only for a moment, taste and experience that happiness that is articulated in the psalms and yearned for in their lives. Maybe there is a theological depth that is missing, maybe there is a relational depth that is missing, or maybe there is a lack of a sense community, but the joy is palpable, and draws people to return again and again offering praise to God. It feels good and who are we to criticize that?

In fact, I have been thinking of doing what I can to increase the happiness level here in the church. I'm not going to ask you to stand and shout and praise. Instead, my plan is to speak with a soft, monotone, quiet voice and to slowly lure you to sleep. Then, while all of you are sleeping I'm going to open up canisters of nitrous oxide, strategically placed around the sanctuary, and let you wake up happy and refreshed. I am assuming that all of you would leave feeling happy and in a good mood and would be looking forward to coming back the next week. This way I can be sure that you will be happy.

We are all searching for that holy grail of happiness, that thing which promises to keep us alive and nourished and enjoying life. We want to be confident, to be sure, and to have that deep sense of joy. We want to stand with the Psalmist, with Mr. Bill and praise the Lord without hesitation or fear. We want to be happy.

Movement 2 – Dabble or Decide; Either/Or

We have a lot of options to consider with this road to happiness. Some may say that we are blessed to have so many options before us in the path to happiness. Some might consider it a good thing to have such a plethora of options on the table. Our society has equipped us with a variety of ways to achieve happiness. Our American culture is saturated with items and programs and trinkets that assure happiness. The bookshelves are littered with road maps, with guidelines, with 12 steps, with exercises and with directions to the proper state of mind so that you can be happy. One more recent phenomenon is the book and film, *The Secret*. It is a work, endorsed by Oprah Winfrey (which means that it has to be good) that promises a method and approach to life that will insure happiness. It talks about a “law of attraction” claiming (to grossly summarize) that if you are happy, and want good things then you will be attracted to them... or then will be attracted to you. We hear about this “new” and exciting way to approach life, we hear about many who have tried and found great success and we wonder if perhaps we should jump on the bandwagon. If it works for so many others, than why not for us? This is just one of multitudes of possibilities before us promising joy and bliss.

There was a time when Mr. Bill was not always happy. There was a time when he was struggling through life, trying to find that path towards bliss. He was faced with a variety of choices offering him a variety of paths to happiness. Before he became a Christian, before he found this profound joy that he now articulates in the name of the Lord, Mr. Bill was searching. Mr. Bill was looking for something to latch onto, to name and to claim as the source of his happiness. Like opening up a box of chocolates, Mr. Bill was overwhelmed by the choices in our society and decided to taste, to dabble and to test various options. He worked halfway through a self-help book claiming his best life now for a couple of months. Then he began to go to Yoga class and practiced meditations for about two weeks until he decided that he would rather sleep in on Saturday mornings than contort his body and focus his mind on nothingness. He went on a diet that cleansed

his system, which flushed out all of the “negative” foods and then only ate the vegetarian dishes thinking that such an approach would align his body and lead him to happiness. But the smell of meat cooking next door, the McDonald’s burger sign across the street, and the protest of his stomach prompted him to leave said diet after a total of one day and return to the meats that he so enjoyed. Mr. Bill was dabbling. He was testing and trying to see if there was anything worth considering. It was as if he had one foot in one program and one foot in a different program and swimming through the sea of happiness opportunities. And the result was he found himself treading water but getting nowhere.

This is a danger we all face in many aspects of our lives. We are faced with such a variety of choices that we often find it difficult to decide. We often find it difficult to choose from the mass of colors, programs and possibilities and we would rather just taste each one and see which will suite us best. We have the tendency to dabble and to keep from deciding. We hold back from committing and going with just one option or another because we cannot be sure what will suit us best. Barry Schwartz, a psychology professor at Swarthmore claims that the more choices we have the harder it is to choose in his book, *The Paradox of Choice*. When you stand in front of the array of cereal boxes in the grocery store it becomes difficult to decide between the five different brands of cereals which all seem to be making the same thing. This is what it is like in life. There are shelves and shelves of religions, of practices, of possibilities all before us promising a fulfilling and happy life. They are before us promising to offer a knowledge, a wisdom that will meet all of our needs. In front of such an array of options, it is a scary thing to commit, to engage and to fully be a part of something. What if we make the wrong choice? What if things don’t work out? What if we change in the process and the program does not work any more?

Yet how can we fully try something out if we do not commit? I know people who dabble with religions in their search for a crown of happiness. They walk through the cafeteria of religions choosing one thing or another to place on their tray. They are making the most of their diversity and options. Yet they never really enter into one faith tradition, they never fully belong to one group or another but stand with one foot in and one foot out never completely engaging their faith. What we get is a recreational religion that is not fully committed. I know Christians who do this with their own faith. Those Christians who are recreational with their walk with Christ and are not fully committed. We get a Christianity that is regulated to a sliver of our lives, a faith that is only articulated on Sundays and maybe the occasional Wednesday. We get a relationship with Jesus that is only on our mind in our own distress or when others remind us of our faith. When we only practice our faith on Sunday mornings for an hour or so we are only practicing an amateur Christianity, something that we do, but not with all of our heart, mind or soul. It is a taste but not a full meal. It is recreational Christianity where we hold back because we might find something that will offer more.

How can this approach make one happy if one never fully engages in something? How can this approach lead to any sense of joy if you never fully be a part of one thing or another? Can you know the full joy of Christ by only dabbling with your faith, by compartmentalizing your faith? Soren Kierkegaard claims that in the choice of Either/Or one can choose to live a moral life or a hedonistic life. Yet one must choose. One must make the decision to choose one life or the other, and not dabble between the two. A part of the choice is deciding to decide to go. We cannot be seeker of Christ and expect to be

happy, we are called to be Disciples of Christ, to walk with Christ and maybe then we will be happy. We are called to embrace one way and live that one way, and then we maybe find happiness.

We have a lot of choices. We have a lot of options and path to take so that we can be happy.

Movement 3 – Levels of Commitment

So decide to commit to Christ. Decide to live the life that is prescribed in the Psalms, in the Gospels and in the Epistles. Stop dabbling, stop living a recreational Christianity and to full be a part of the life that we are called to live in the church. Let's follow the example of the psalm and engage God's word. Let's try to live like the psalm and fully engage in our faith. In doing so we are claiming that we want the wisdom, the knowledge that the psalmist so proudly describes.

Mr. Bill had this realization. Mr. Bill decided that he was going to let all the other programs, the books, the self-help tapes go and commit to Christ. Mr. Bill decided that the knowledge offered through all the other programs was that the knowledge he wanted. He wanted the knowledge that comes from the Lord, the wisdom that comes from the Lord, he was going to work to claim and understand that knowledge. Mr. Bill decided that he wanted to be like the psalmist and try to claim the joy of the psalmist. So he committed, and stayed with the church and took his faith seriously. As he was praying, as he was meditating he began to wonder, "How." How was he to gain the wisdom, the law and the ordinances of God and how was he to live them? In what way was his faith to change and effect his life? How was he to live as a Christian? The psalm speaks of instructions, of commandments, of precepts, of understanding, of law and of ordinances, but how does one apply these things to life. Mr. Bill felt like he was given a tool without any instructions when he considered the law of God and living with God.

He tried a legalistic approach; he tried to follow the torah literally, word for word thinking that the Bible is like any other self-help book, offering simple steps that will lead to a happy life. The author A.J. Jacobs in his recent book *The Year of Living Biblically: One Man's Humble Quest to Follow the Bible as Literally as Possible*, did just this. He took the Bible literary as a method to living. He didn't shave or cut his hair, he only dressed in white, he wore the tassels, he kept from lying, he changed his diet, and he stoned adulators. Literally, he would throw a handful of small stones at someone who admitted that he was committing adultery. Jacobs followed the Bible literally.

Mr. Bill tried this approach. He tried to follow the law in a legalistic fashion to keep to the letter no matter what, and it didn't seem to help. He had focus in his life, he had a drive in his life, but he wasn't happy. Something was missing, something was not fulfilling him and giving him the joy that he could palpate from the psalm. He still didn't know how to live in his faith to lead him to happiness.

We may face the same dilemma. We can say yes to Christ and then go to church not sure about the next step. We can wonder and wonder how we are to reach that point of happiness as a Christian that is articulated in the psalms as we comb through the scriptures for some direction. We could follow the scriptures in a legalistic, moralistic, duty bound kind of way, but something seems detached. Something seems missing to living a life where all we do is stay focused on following the rules the regulations and the

standards set for us. It is a relationship that is based on duty and rules and not much more. How can this bring us happiness?

It reminds me of the temple debates in the first century. There were two groups of religious leaders who had their own feelings concerning the best way to live the law of the Lord. The Pharisees claimed that the torah needed to be followed; the laws and the instructions of the Lord should be heeded with great respect. The Sadducees claimed that the worship in the temple needed to be lifted up. Each was claiming to offer a path to truly live in one's faith, but neither, when followed in an extreme way, would lead to happiness.

In his work, *Either/Or* Kierkegaard moves one step beyond the moral/ethical. He claims that one moves from a hedonistic lifestyle to a moral/ethical and then to a religious life. The moral/ethical approach to life is one of following the specifics of a law or instructions. But the religious life goes beyond simply following rules. It is a life focused on a greater thing. It is a life that is more than duty bound to the rules but is focused on God.

We choose to live our faith, and commit to our faith, but then we want to know how to live into our faith so that we can enjoy the praise and the happiness that we so desperately desire.

Movement 4 – Eating the Word

The psalmist speaks of God's instructions as sources of wisdom and understanding. The psalmist speaks of God's commands as a source of a deep joy that baffles the wise.

One commentator points out that there is a sensual nature in this passage from the psalm. The psalmist speaks of eating the word, of loving the word, of the sweet taste of the word. The meditation is one that carries a sense of joy and bliss that seems to go beyond duty and rules. The psalm speaks of God's law as something that engages one's whole body. There is a knowledge and an understanding that goes beyond just following the rules. It is a sensual, holistic approach to the word of the Lord.

It is the difference between looking at a picture of the Michelangelo's *David*, and actually going to Italy to see it for real. The picture can offer you a taste of the masterpiece, but to see the real thing is powerful and changing. You can look at a picture of a cake, and imagine what it might taste like, or you can bake it and eat it and enjoy it on a deeper, more sensual level. We could just read the word, the instructions of the Lord and try to follow them blindly in a duty-bound nature. Or we could ingest the word, we could let the word speak to us on a physical, a spiritual level and we experience more and more. It is not just going to Church; it is not just listening to the scripture, but bringing the experience of worship with you to your home. It is praying each evening about the sermon, the scripture readings and the presence of God in your life. It is studying scripture in such a way that you find yourself within the scripture, living the stories. We are to eat the word and taste its sweetness, and yet we ask how. We will follow the word of God, we will still be active as Christians, but there will be a depth to our actions that would not be there if we were approaching the word in a strict, legalistic fashion. So how do we go deeper? How do we follow the example of the psalm, and embrace God's commands with your life. How do we do more than simply read and live but engage and live?

Movement 5 – Incarnation

It is in that moment when we realize that Jesus Christ is the Word. The psalmist is speaking of the Torah, of the instructions and the teachings of God, but we have been given the fuller knowledge and the complete revelation of the Lord. Our eyes have been opened to the complete nature of God's word and that is in Christ. John 1:1 says, "In the beginning was the word and the word was with God and the word was God," and we understand that word to be Christ. So when we think about the instructions of the Lord, when we think about the ordinances, about the command, and the precepts of the Lord, we think of Christ, the one who came not to abolish but to fulfill the Law. The word incarnate is our Lord and Savior Jesus Christ. Think about this in relation to the psalm. When we meditate on God's law all day long, we meditate on Christ. When we gain understanding it is through the revelation of Jesus Christ. When we taste the sweetness of God's words, it is the sweetness of the gospel. The word that we live, the world that we follow is Christ, the logos, the divine, the word incarnate. We fully live the torah, we go beyond just following the words of the torah by following Christ.

Meditate on the actions and teachings of Christ. Meditate on the words of Christ. Meditate on the example of Christ, and you will be embracing the word of God. Enter into a relationship with Christ, one in where you find yourself walking with Christ, talking with Christ, and sitting with Christ in the garden. Invite Christ into your life and you are inviting the commands, the ordinances and the instructions of the Lord into your life.

Mr. Bill had this realization. He was trying to decide if he could wear garments with mixed fabrics, he was trying to rationalize stoning someone, he was wearing himself down with his moralistic, pietistic living and he had no joy. Yet then his eyes turned to the cross and he began to think of Christ. He thought of Christ healing on the Sabbath. He thought of Christ forgiving the prostitute. He thought of Christ forgiving the sins of the blind man, affirming the bleeding woman, and calling the children to come to him. He thought of Christ reaching out to the ones that have been cast out of the temple. He remembered Luke 10 when Jesus told the disciples about the wisdom they have received from God through him, and his heart was opened. Here was the Word that he is to follow. Here is the word that he is to love. Here is the word that changes his life. Here is the word that give joy and gives life. This is knowledge that makes the wise seem foolish. This is a wisdom that confounds the teachers. Jesus Christ is the Word of God, the instructions, the ordinance and the complete aspect of the Law. Jesus Christ is the Word and by following Jesus we live the word of God.

Movement 6 – Joy Living, Obedient Living

Let us live into the joy of following the Lord. Do you want to be happy, truly happy, then follow the Lord. Meditate on Christ daily, think of Christ often and follow the Lord. Ingest the stories in scripture; find yourself in the stories, hearing the word of the Lord, hearing Christ talk to you, reaching out to you and you will find joy. Feel the power of the grace, the forgiveness and live without fear and you will have joy. I am not saying that your life will become easy. I am not promising that all things will go well for you once you fully commit to following Christ. Life will still lead through its valleys and moments of darkness, yet you can walk through with a smile. You can walk through with

a sense of hope and grace because you have embraced the Word, because you have tasted the word, because you walk with Christ. There is joy in the cross because in it we find life. There is joy in Christ because through Christ we have life. There is joy in following Christ.

Let us sing an ode to that joy, let us embrace that joy. Let us be a joyful people, not because of some surface, superficial reason, but because of the depth of our relationship with Christ. Let us be a joyful people because we are a redeemed people through Christ. Joyful, joyful we will adore, and praise and live with Christ.

AMEN