

'The Pleasure of Pleasing God'

A sermon delivered in

**Eastminster United Church
Belleville, Ontario**

on

Sunday, January 22, 2012

by

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Lesson:

Nehemiah 7:73b-8:3,5-6,8-10

Text:

Nehemiah 8:10b

Nehemiah 8:10b -

“... do not be grieved for the joy of the Lord is your strength.”

Dr. Kent Keith gives this advice in a piece he called ‘The Paradoxical Commandments’:

**People are often unreasonable, illogical and self-centred;
forgive them anyway.
If you are kind, people may accuse you of selfish ulterior motives;
be kind anyway.
If you are successful, you will win false friends and some true enemies;
succeed anyway.
People may cheat you;
be honest and frank anyway.
What you spend years building, someone could destroy overnight;
build anyway.
If you find serenity and happiness, they may be jealous;
be happy anyway.
The good you do today, people will often forget tomorrow;
do good anyway.
Give the world the best you have and it may never be enough;
give the world the best you’ve got anyway.
You see, in the final analysis, it is between you and God.
It is never between you and them anyway.**

Like that bit of wisdom, the theme of this sermon is motivation. Why do we care about the will of God? Why should we bother trying to live in accordance with God’s expectations of us?

According to the bit of Biblical wisdom we heard today, people of faith do not always choose the right motivation. As a result we may do the right things for the wrong reason. Doing the right thing is good, of course, but God cares about why we do what we do.

We just heard how the people of Israel came together in Jerusalem and instructed the priest Ezra to bring the book which contained the law of Moses. Here’s what happened.

‘Ezra read it ... from early morning until midday ... and the ears of all the people were attentive to the book of the law.’

Listen to how they reacted when they heard Ezra read scripture to them:

‘... all the people wept when they heard the words of the law.’

This is when Ezra challenged their motivation. He said:

‘Go your way, eat the fat and drink sweet wine and send portions of them to those for whom nothing is prepared, for this day is holy to our Lord; and do not be grieved, for the joy of the Lord is your strength.’

When they heard the law, commandment after commandment, warning after warning, prohibition after prohibition, the people were overwhelmed by the burden of obedience. They assumed their motivation for faithfulness should be fear of repercussion if they failed, realizing that some degree of failure was inevitable, that the obedience they gave to God would not be perfect, and the hopelessness of their prospects caused them to mourn and weep.

But Ezra corrected them. ***“The joy of the Lord is your strength,”*** he said.

The parents among us know that the phrase, ‘*You can’t make me*’, is the first indication that you are losing the battle of wills with your child. As much as it frustrates and infuriates us, even breaks our hearts, we know that this stage in the parent-child relationship is perfectly normal and that the battle of wills is one we are ultimately supposed to lose. The objective of effective parenting is to nurture our children to sufficient maturity that they have absolute control over their own choices, priorities, values and actions. What we want from them - more importantly, what we want for them - is that their choices will be wise, their priorities will be true, their values will be moral, and their actions will be righteous.

I think it is the longing of every loving parent that our children, in the freedom of their independence, choose what is right. It’s not enough for them to simply obey. Our better joy is knowing that they derive pleasure from the things that please us, given that what pleases us more than anything is for them to be as happy as they can possibly be, and as healthy as they can possibly be, and as safe as they can possibly be, and as content as they can possibly be. There is obvious and positive correlation between their well-being and our joy.

Ezra told the Israelites that the very same is true of God. They thought the correct motivation for faithfulness was fear of the consequences of disobedience. Not so, said the priest. The law of Moses and the expectations of God are good news because the joy of the Lord is our strength, not the anger of God. The correct motivation for faithfulness is to find pleasure in pleasing God.

For Ezra, faithfulness and happiness are two sides of the same coin. His insight was confirmed by Jesus who continually connected rightness with God and those qualities which are the components of pleasure - joy, absence of fear, absence of anxiety, peace. Remember how, when He gave His disciples what He called the greatest commandment, Jesus said, ***“I have told you this so that you might have joy that is complete.”***

Put simply, our best pleasure is pleasing God.

1) There is pleasure in giving God the devotion we owe.

A young guy, obviously distressed, went to see his pastor. Things were not going well. He had lost his job and with it most of his self-confidence. He didn’t know which way to turn. Every direction seemed to lead to a dead end. In his despondency he said, ***“I’ve begged God to say something to help me. Tell me, Pastor, why doesn’t God answer?”***

There’s the lament of an unhappy soul. I can’t tell you how many times I have heard it from good people who try and try without success to find peace, contentment, joy. Lots of folks fail because they look in the wrong places. They seek happiness by indulging in the things that provide pleasure to themselves.

They usually get the pleasure, all the pleasure money can buy or sex can provide or devotion to self can afford. Only then they realize that pleasing themselves is an empty kind of satisfaction. There are other unhappy souls who seem to do all the right things. They may be good, morals-driven, even pious, but still lack the joy that is complete and the peace beyond understanding. Like that young man in his pastor's study, they say, ***"I've begged God to say something to help me. Why doesn't God answer?"***

The older man, sitting across the room from his tormented visitor, answered the question but spoke in a whisper. The young man toward him and said, ***"What did you say?"*** The pastor repeated himself, again in a whisper. The young man moved closer still. It continued until he was leaning on the pastor's chair. ***"Sorry,"*** he said, ***"I still can't hear you."*** With their heads almost touching, the pastor said, ***"Sometimes God whispers so we will get close enough to hear."*** This time the young man heard and understood.¹

Among the duties we owe to God are the disciplines of devotion which enable us to move closer to God - worship, Bible study and prayer. When our motivation for doing these things is wrong we ask silly questions like, ***"Do you have to go to church to be a Christian?"*** and we say silly things like ***"I don't have to pray because God already knows what's in my heart"*** and ***"Bible study is for those other really religious folks."***

The fact is, these duties have been ordained by God because they afford us the pleasure of communion with God, and there is no greater pleasure available in human experience. You know it's true. If you haven't experienced it yourself, you've known others who, even in wretched circumstances, still experience incredible joy and peace beyond understanding. That pleasure does not come from obeying rules out of fear but from pleasing God for the joy of it!

2) There is pleasure in treating others with the kindness they deserve.

A devout woman who was blessed with considerable means was always a soft touch for any panhandler she met in the street. Meeting one particularly shabby fellow, she pressed a five-dollar bill in his hand and, with a warm smile, whispered, ***'Godspeed.'*** The next day, the man arrived at her house and asked to see her. ***"Here's your hundred dollars,"*** he said. ***"Godspeed came in first and paid twenty-to-one."***

We don't expect that dramatic a blessing from our acts of generosity but we generally assume there is some kind of correlation between doing good for others and feeling good ourselves. That is not, however, the best reason for treating others well.

On July 24, 2002, nine miners in western Pennsylvania were trapped almost 100 metres below ground when their mine shaft was flooded. Rescue efforts began immediately but there wasn't much hope. The miners were too deep and too many things could go wrong. Amazingly, however, all nine survived. The men later testified that they were saved by their determination to stick together. From the outset, they watched out for each other. They tied themselves together so that no one would float away or slip under the water. If one got tired, his connection with the others held him up. The miners vowed that whether they lived or died, they would be together.²

It may not have been their intention but the miners did what God required of them. They cared about each other, they acted for each other, they created a community of interdependence such as Moses described in the law and St Paul defined when he made the Body of Christ the template for human community. Our motivation for treating each other well is not fear of God's wrath but the promise of outcomes that will both benefit us and give joy to God.

The joy of the Lord is our strength and no evil can prevail against it. After the Nazis invaded Holland during World War II, they established ghettos for the Jews in Amsterdam. Many wealthy Dutch citizens responded by moving into the ghettos with the Jews, to live beside them and offer them a measure of protection. They did it because it was the right thing to do. The joy of the Lord was their strength.

Meanwhile in Denmark, King Christian the Tenth decreed that Jews were equal citizens in his country. He and other government officials began secret negotiations with Sweden and eventually thousands of Danish Jews were transported to Sweden safely out of reach of the advancing Nazi forces. In the face of evil and injustice, the king chose to identify himself with the oppressed. There was no political advantage; if anything, the opposite. There was no scripture specifying how a king should act in such a situation. He did it because it was the right thing to do.³

When we treat each other as we ought to treat each other, the joy of the Lord is our strength.

3) There is pleasure in giving ourselves the care we need.

The people of Israel were commanded in the law of Moses not to eat pork. They had no idea why pork was different from lamb. Eventually we learned that there are greater risks to eating pork if it is not cooked properly. The law reflected God's pleasure in our well-being.

We have become painfully aware of the vulnerability of our food supply, especially the risk of cross-contamination. The dietary laws given in the Book of Leviticus reduce those risks. God wants us to be healthy. Faithfulness therefore demands that we watch out for trans-fats in our diet and drink enough water and get exercise and avoid excess and so many other duties which are not stipulated in scripture but are necessary because they are pleasing to God. And as God delights in our well-being, the joy of the Lord will be our strength.

Ezra told the people of his day not to see the law as a burden but as an opportunity to please God in a way that would give themselves joy. Jesus had to deliver the same message to the people of his day: ***"You were not created for the law, the law was given for your sake."*** Still, it seems, in every age there are those who miss the point, who preach a motivation of fear and depravation.

During the late 19th and early 20th centuries, the so-called Holiness Movement was a new era of legalism in the church, especially among North American Protestants. It was the movement that translated Victorian conservatism into behavioural piety, and which spawned the age of radical temperance. In essence, church leaders were trying to define the will of God by creating a 'Leviticus' for a new age. Despite their good intentions, it didn't work very well, mainly because fear was not sufficient motivation for faithfulness. The rules were too easy to ignore and they eventually became irrelevant, as irrelevant as the rules we make for our children after they move out on their own.

What motivates us to faithfulness really matters. We choose to do what is right, not to protect ourselves from the wrath of God but so that we may enjoy the greatest pleasure which any human being can hope to experience, the pleasure that comes from pleasing God.

When you hear what God requires of us, what God commands and expects from us, do not be sad - for the joy of the Lord is our strength!

Amen.

1. *Dynamic Preaching*, 2004/01-02-03

2. 'Miners took vow to live or die together', by Larry Neumeister, AP, 2002/07/29

3. www.wikipedia.org