

“LIVE WITH JOY”
REMOVE THE OBSTACLES SERIES #3
John 15:5-15, James 1:2-4, March 10, 2021

In the *Arkansas Democrat Gazette* (February 7, 1999), Larry Pillow wrote:

“Like every graduating class in Arkansas, the 1997 graduating class of Witts Springs, Arkansas, had a valedictorian and a salutatorian. Unlike other graduating classes, the two top graduates were the only graduates.

“Witts Springs, population 100, produces few graduates. They also have a hard time producing athletes from a student body of 41 in grades 7 to 12. But they manage to produce athletes that take **team play** to a new level.

“In a basketball game with rival Leslie, Witts Springs trailed by over 30 points with just over two minutes to go. The fans began to chant, ‘Put in Scotty.’ ‘Scot-TEE! Scot-TEE! Scot-TEE!’ Coach Nash obliged and inserted senior guard Scotty Harmon. Harmon has cerebral palsy.

“Harmon received a pass, stood alone on the perimeter, and unguarded, flung the ball toward the goal. He missed. His teammates scrambled for the rebound and gave Scotty a second chance. He missed again, which started another fight for the ball.

“The kids know when Scotty's in there, **their** game is over,’ Coach Nash said. ‘They're doing it for **him** now. The atmosphere changes. If they're worn out, the players will break their necks to get that rebound. Our kids will go above everybody to get the ball to Scotty.’

“On his fourth try, Harmon sunk a three pointer. Fans on both sides of the gym cheered wildly. The scoreboard said Leslie 89, Witts Springs 58, but everybody left a winner, especially Scotty's teammates.” (PreachingToday.com, *Perfect Illustrations*, [Wheaton, IL: Tyndale House, 2002] pg. 273)

Have you ever been on a team like that? This story just touches me so much, because it is supposed to be like how the church works. Each person has different abilities and skills, so while some have great ability, some do not. But because we are a part of the same “team” we are to be supporting and encouraging each other to do their very best, so that everyone can be winners, with no losers.

That's the desire of Jesus when He talks to His disciples in the upper room on that first Maundy Thursday, shortly before His arrest. Jesus had gathered His disciples together to celebrate the feast of Passover, remembering the miraculous exodus of the people of Israel out of Egypt. Jesus had washed the feet of the disciples, and talked with them about the importance of loving one another, even if others turned against them and even betrayed them. It was the lesson on Determined, Deliberate Love that we talked about two weeks ago.

Then Jesus speaks to the disciples about what was going to happen just a few hours later, that He would be arrested, beaten, tried, condemned and then crucified and buried. Yet in the midst of all of that, Jesus tells them that they can be at peace through the help of the Holy Spirit. When we have faith and trust in Jesus, even though we are troubled with great struggles and trials, the Holy Spirit can enable us to be at peace with one another. We addressed that last week.

Jesus went on in His teaching the disciples about living with joy in their lives. But part of living with joy involves being connected to Him. So Jesus began this section by using an agrarian example – a vine. He says, *“I am the vine, and you are the branches; the one who remains in Me, and I in him, will bear much fruit, for apart from Me you can do nothing”* (Jn. 15:5).

So why is this vine illustration so important? Jesus understands that we live in a world that thrives on individualism. It's all about ME; above anyone else. And our society today tells us plainly, look out for your own #1 – You. The world tells us that there is no one more important than me, and I am to look out for myself over and beyond anyone, even my family and friends. I am to search for and work for enjoyment and pleasure for myself first and foremost with no other person in mind. That's the world's message to us. Personal glory! Personal development! Personal faith! Personal finances! Everything about me!

But Jesus gives us a different message. Jesus tells us that while we are too take care of ourselves, it is only to be in association with the rest of the body, being connected to Him in all we do and say. It's not about me, according to Jesus, but about me serving others in His name. That's where

joy comes from: Jesus, Others, and You. And the only way we can have joy is to be connected, linked up with, on line with Jesus. That's the meaning of the vine, staying connected to Jesus.

You see, when we are separated from Jesus, away from the vine, away from the source of nourishment and sustenance, we end up drying out, becoming malnourished spiritually, and dead emotionally. Branches on the vine that become damaged, or cut off from the main vine, shrivel up and die. There's no life in them. They stop getting the support they need, so they no longer bear any fruit, and in fact, become a burden to the vine. If left attached to the vine, insect infestation and fungal infections can readily attack the rest of the vine, thereby compromising the whole vine.

The same is very true with us. As we remain a part of Jesus, as we put our trust in Him and follow His commands, we receive encouragement and support through the Holy Spirit. And we find ourselves refreshed and nourished so that we can live as Jesus' disciples today.

But if we rebel against Jesus, if we remove ourselves from the fellowship of the truth, if we turn away from following the commands of the Lord, we are no longer nourished by the Holy Spirit. Oh, we can talk about the Spirit, we can say we are in the Spirit, and we can even believe that we are with the Holy Spirit, but when we separate from the Way, the Truth, and the Life that is Jesus Christ, the Holy Spirit can no longer work to influence us and guide us, for we have given up faith in Jesus. We are no longer attached to the Vine (Jesus). We are no longer contributing to the benefit of the team. We are only looking out for our own #1, by ourselves, in our own strength and our own wisdom. In essence we become a shriveled up vine branch.

So what brings us back to life? What enables us to remain lively, encouraging, and joyful? Jesus explains that very well, *"If you remain in Me, and My words remain in you, ask whatever you wish, and it will be done for you. My father is glorified by this, that you bear much fruit, and so prove to be My disciples"* (Jn. 15:8). You see, we have to stay connected to Jesus, have His words active and deeply established in our lives, so that we might work for Him to be productive workers in the world today. In other words, we need to be team players, supporting and encouraging even the weakest of the

team so that everyone can contribute and build the kingdom. There's no I, or me, or mine, in team.

Only: Together Encouraging Another Member.

Remaining in Jesus, keeping His commands, doing His work inspired by the Holy Spirit, is the way that we find joy for our life. Jesus says, *“If you keep my commandments, you will remain in My love; just as I have kept My Father’s commandments and remain in His love. These things I have spoken to you so that My joy may be in you, and that your joy may be made full”* (Jn. 15:10-11).

Did you catch that? Jesus’ joy is in us as we remain in Him, keeping His commandments! That’s the only way we can have real joy! And only as we remain connected to Jesus, loyal to Him, can **OUR** joy be full! Without Jesus, without following His commandments, there is no joy, because we’ve separated ourselves away from Him, disconnected from His source of infinite joy.

So where does the teamwork come into the picture? Well, Jesus tells us, *“This is My commandment, that you love one another, just as I have loved you. Greater love has no one than this, that a person will lay down his life for his friends. You are My friends if you do what I command you”* (John 15:12-15). (Make a human vine – each member reaching out to others.)

It’s all together in these few verses; stay connected to Jesus so that we can find life and love and peace and joy in Him as a branch of the Vine; keep Jesus’ commandments so that we can bear much fruit and glorify God; love one another even to the point of laying our own life down for a friend; serving Jesus because we are a friend of Jesus. That’s what brings joy to us.

But let’s understand what joy is, lest we get confused. S. D. Gordon defines it like this. “Joy is distinctly a Christian word and a Christian thing. It is the reverse of happiness. Happiness is the result of what happens of an agreeable sort. Joy has its springs deep down inside. And that spring never runs dry, no matter what happens. Only Jesus gives that joy.” Joy is not dependent upon something going on around us. Joy is the feeling of contentment despite the surrounding hardships or troubles. Joy is that inner gladness that pervades in our life even if we have very little. Joy is a gift of the Holy Spirit that enlivens our souls and delights our minds beyond our own wants and desires. Joy is the excitement of

seeing a person with limited abilities sink a three point shot on the basketball court, while running your shoes off getting the ball to him until he can make it. Joy is the thrill of seeing a person become released from their bondage to sin and finding a new life in Jesus. Joy is that sense of satisfaction after working hard to meet a great need that a neighbor has. Joy is even doing everything right, while still suffering ridicule from others, because you have followed the ways of the Lord. Joy is not selfish, but selfless.

James 1:2-4 says this perfectly. *“Consider it all joy, my brothers and sisters, when you encounter various trials, knowing that the testing of your faith produces endurance. And let endurance have its perfect result, so that you may be perfect and complete, lacking in nothing.”*

As we keep our trust in Jesus, and depend upon His commandments as being true and just and right, we find that we can live our lives with great joy even if things turn up-side-down. A person with a fatal illness can still touch the life of her grandchildren because of the joy of Jesus within her. A person can have great joy teaching a craft that they can no longer do themselves because of arthritis. A person can have great joy in painting pictures with their mouth even when the rest of their body is paralyzed. A person can have great joy teaching children to read, or coaching a sport, or helping someone memorize verses from the Bible, because joy comes not as a result of something that has happened to us, but from what is inside of us. And that’s what makes it Christian. Jesus’ joy exuding out from inside of us.

When we are connected to Jesus, even as a branch is to a vine, we receive joy directly from Him. He suffered great physical anguish as He brought salvation to us, yet He knew that the trial and struggle and pain would not last, but would bring about an even greater reward for us as we believe and trust in Him as our Savior. His joy came as He endured the punishment of our sin and then paid the price for that sin so that we would not have to be faced with the condemnation of our own sins against us. He gave us His life so that we could have joy through Him and because of Him.

So no matter what takes place in our life, no matter what hardship or difficulty or adversity comes our way, we can have joy in our life as we have faith in Jesus, and follow His ways. And as we have joy within us, we can share that joy with those around us and give them joy, too. Let’s pray.

Father, we thank you for the trials and struggles in our lives because they drive us to depend upon You. As we endure each situation, let us find joy as we follow Your will and Your way. Thank you for Jesus, and for His demonstration of joy amid extreme hardship and sadness. Lord God, grant us the courage to follow Your commands, and to stay close to Jesus so that we do not become separated from Him, but thrive because we are in communion with Him. Allow us the joy of the Holy Spirit who reminds us of all that Jesus taught, so that we might endure all that is around us. This we pray in Jesus' precious and holy Name. Amen.