

Text: Philippians 4:4-8

Theme: Rejoicing - Making It a Habit

October 15, 2017

How do you create a habit? Sounds like a senseless question, doesn't it? Habits just happen. They're self-created; they simply create themselves. Perhaps I should have asked the question more carefully, "How do you create a good habit, a habit that you want to exist?" It's not easy, is it? In today's text, Paul encourages us to create a habit. He may not use that particular word, but "always" make it clear that he intends us to make rejoicing a good habit.

I. Our loving God wants us to rejoice always. A. But we already know that rejoicing always isn't what occurs. 1. We fail to rejoice always because we've become pessimistic. When you look at the world, go to work, or look at the economy, which do you see in abundance? Optimism or pessimism? Everywhere we turn, someone has bad news, discouraging news, depressing news. Since we're surrounded by so much pessimism, we, without realizing it, have allowed it to rub off on us. It didn't ask for permission. It just happened and because it's occurred, pessimism has become the norm and when pessimism is the norm, rejoicing always takes a back seat.

2. We fail to rejoice because our focus is misdirected. Suppose we asked people on the street, "What's your purpose for existence?" Wouldn't most explain their purpose in terms of accumulation? We're here to do more, become more, have more? But that focus is misdirected. It leads us to be distracted by the unimportant, by what appears to be essential, but really isn't of any great value. The more we're distracted, the more our focus takes a detour instead of remaining on God's path. When our focus leaves the path, rejoicing ends up in the ditch along the roadside instead of walking hand-in-hand as our friend.

B. How, then, do we make rejoicing a good habit? 1. We choose to rejoice in the Lord. What's the difference between rejoicing and rejoicing in the Lord? The first is prompted by circumstances. Rejoicing in the Lord occurs because we are part of His family, because He chose us at our Baptism, because He is kind, loving, gracious, caring, and forgiving, because He is always with us, always at our side. To make rejoicing a good habit, we begin by focusing on our God, not our circumstances. As we focus on our God, on what He does for us, we discover reasons to rejoice every day, reasons to rejoice in every situation.

2. We make rejoicing a habit by reducing our anxiety. Paul says, "Do not be anxious about anything," and we want to say, "Paul, you need to get a life! If you lived in my world, you'd realize that isn't possible!" But it must be possible or God wouldn't ask us to do it! So, how do we reduce our anxiety? We increase our trust; we refocus our energy. We remember where to turn before stress takes over. When we trust in the Lord with all our heart, anxiety has no room to move in. When we redirect our focus to the ability of God to step in and change everything, rejoicing becomes possible. As we remember where to turn and to give it to God, our rejoicing becomes a good habit.

3. Prayer leads rejoicing to become a habit. "But in everything by prayer and supplication, let your requests be made known to God." What would happen in the next month if each one of us took every situation to God in prayer before we took the next step? Would we notice a difference as people entered this building?

Absolutely! Prayer is our connecting link to God. It's how we invite God into our situations and when God is involved, good things happen. The more frequently we invite God into our circumstances, the more rejoicing we will see in response. In time, God's presence in our situations will create that good habit of rejoicing always.

4. Thanksgiving also leads to rejoicing. I deliberately omitted that important phrase from the words above because I wanted to focus on it separately. Paul writes, "But in everything by prayer and supplication with thanksgiving, let your requests be made known to God." Why is that phrase interjected in the middle of the prayer thought? Because our prayers need thankfulness; they need a full measure of gratefulness so that we imprint on our minds the past power of God. As we recall the past power via thanksgiving, we're convinced that God's present power is available to us. Where there is prayer with fervent thanksgiving, there you will find rejoicing.

5. We make rejoicing a good habit by assuring ourselves that the Lord is near. What does Paul mean as he says, "The Lord is at hand"? He could be referencing two different things and both would be good. It could be our reminder of Immanuel, God with us, and, at the same time, it could be a reminder that the return of Christ is not far away. Either way, knowing that the Lord is near is a good thing, a great thing. With God nearby, with Him at our side, we can find a reason to rejoice. We can find multiple reasons to rejoice because the greatness of God, when we take the time to bring it to mind, will always give us good reason to make rejoicing a habit.

6. We make rejoicing a habit by assuring ourselves that we are surrounded by the peace of God. Imagine that you were surrounded by a bubble, that any hurtful words or actions would merely bounce off your bubble unnoticed, that life within your bubble was always quiet, calm, and peace-filled. Maybe the peace of God doesn't function quite like a bubble, but notice Paul's words, "And the peace of God will guard your hearts and minds in Christ Jesus." Sounds protective, doesn't it? We may not be able to live inside a bubble, but we can create a mental bubble that allows God's peace to guard, to protect, to keep us safe because that's what He promises to do.

7. We make rejoicing a habit by focusing on the right stuff. Ever had your mind take you down some strange, uncomfortable path? The mind is a powerful thing and because it has so much power, we need to keep it focused on the right stuff. When rejoicing isn't the first thought in our minds, Paul says, "Refocus. Turn your focus to what is pure, what is commendable, what is excellent, what is worthy of praise" because he knows from experience that the more time we spend focusing on the right stuff, the more effective our minds become at pushing out the wrong stuff. And when the wrong stuff is on the outside, rejoicing fills that space on the inside.

8. Bad habits - they simply happen. They create themselves. But a good habit, although it takes effort, is a great thing. When we make rejoicing a good habit, God smiles and says, "Well done. Carry on, My child. Carry on!" Amen.