

# Simple Faith

◆ December 2 ◆

## “The Elusive Joy of Christmas”

*Simple faith helps us choke out commercialism and discover the joy of Christmas.*

Luke 2:1-16; John 15:11; Psalm 51:10-12

Opening Suggestion:

Play the first few minutes of the movie, “A Charlie Brown Christmas.”

### Introduction

The classic Peanuts movie, “A Charlie Brown Christmas,” opens with a scene featuring Charlie Brown and Linus walking and talking together. Charlie Brown says, “I think there must be something wrong with me Linus. Christmas is coming but I’m not happy. I don’t feel like I’m supposed to feel. I just don’t understand Christmas, I guess. I like getting presents and sending cards, and decorating trees and all of that, but I’m not happy. I always end up feeling depressed.”

Do you ever feel like Charlie Brown? Do you ever feel like you should be happy but it seems like something is missing? As the Christmas season approaches, we all have our traditions ... the parties, the food, the decorations, giving and receiving gifts. But in the midst of all of these good things, happiness may become elusive. In fact, lying silently beneath our smiling faces, emptiness may be found, perhaps even a gnawing sense that something is missing.

Our experiences can be confusing. On the one hand, Christmas is all about expectations. “Come Though Long Expected Jesus” was the prayer of God’s chosen people as they awaited the promised Messiah. The very nature of the season of Advent is about expectation. Much of the fun of Christmas is the anticipation of opening beautifully wrapped gifts on Christmas morning. We expect to be happy. We expect to be excited. We look for it in the gifts, the decorations, the parties, the food, and the traditions. We expect some magic from Christmas to twinkle a new kind of brightness into our lives.

On the other hand, we often feel a let down. It’s like the music was to crescendo into a full choir of song but only a soloist showed up. And, like Charlie Brown, we find we don’t feel the way we are supposed to feel and we end up being depressed.

Here’s what is really going on:

**Expectations are much higher than the reality we experience.**

For example...

Expectation: We want to buy incredible gifts for the ones we love.

Reality: The **financial pressure** is too much.

Expectation: We want to create a festive time with food and decorations.

Reality: The **time pressure** is too much.

Expectation: Attend all the parties and events with our family and friends.

Reality: The **physical pressure** (exhaustion) is too much.

Does this seem to be your situation? Is this your reality? Consider the following simple but difficult question: How can this Christmas be different? Put another way, how can a simple faith in Jesus help us choke out the commercialism around us and help us discover the joy of Christmas in us?

## The Meaning of Joy

(Read Luke 2:1-16)

Notice these powerful words in verse 10:

“good news of great joy which will be for all the people....”

The joy referred to 2,000 years ago in this verse is also the joy meant for all people today—and that means you! You, too, can experience the joy of Christmas!

Merriam-Webster defines joy as:

the emotion evoked by well-being, success, good fortune or by the prospect of possessing what one desires; a state of happiness;

1. a source of delight.

Most of us who have been in church for more than a minute have always been told that happiness is not dependent on outward circumstances but joy from within. We have been told that joy lasts but happiness comes and goes. Certainly these thoughts contain truth, but there is more to the story.

If you were to dive into the Bible and conduct a study on the word “joy,” you might be surprised.

For example:

Example 1: In the Old Testament, joy is most often experienced as a result of a great victory or a great blessing. To illustrate: in 1 Samuel 18 the people experienced joy as a result of David and King Saul’s battlefield victory. The scripture says the women played their tambourines with great joy and music filled the air. Circumstance led to joy.

Example 2: Similarly, 1 Kings 1 the joy the people of Israel experienced as Saul was anointed as their new King. In fact, the people were so joyful over this event that the earth shook with their noise! Circumstance led to joy.

Example 3: In 2 Chronicles 30, King Hezekiah reinstated the Passover. Verse 26 reads, “So there was great joy in Jerusalem because there was nothing like this in Jerusalem since the days of Solomon.” Circumstance led to joy.

In each of these examples, as well as many other Old Testament passages, joy was experienced because of a victory, great event, or great blessing. Joy was based on temporary circumstances or events. The circumstance led to joy.

In New Testament, similarities exist as well.

Example 1: The Wise Men saw the star and they rejoiced exceedingly with great joy. Circumstance led to joy.

Example 2: Luke 10 records that the seventy returned with joy saying “Lord, even the demons are subject to us.” Circumstance led to joy

Example 3: In John 15:11 (NASB) Jesus said, “These things I have spoke to you so that my joy may be in you and that your joy may be made full.” What was Jesus talking about? Jesus frequently illustrated his teachings by using illustrations of vineyards and grapevines. In this chapter Jesus teaches that as a “branch cannot bear fruit on its own unless it abides or stays connected to the vine, neither can we unless we abide with Him.”

## Joy Comes from Abiding in Christ

What do these texts say to us? In the Old Testament God produced joy for His people through the events of life. The joy produced great fervor and excitement. In the New Testament, joy was often situational, but because of a new spiritual connection with Jesus, the Vine, our joy can supersede circumstance. For us today—His joy, lasting joy, full joy—comes from abiding with Him. It is about our relationship with Jesus. It's not circumstance that leads to joy, although there were many victories and great events to celebrate in the ministry of Jesus. John is trying to help us see that in the New Covenant, the message is the inward and continuous dwelling of Jesus in the person of faith. Joy comes from abiding in Christ.

This is THE good news for all the people. A Savior born, who is Christ the Lord, and He gave us all the opportunity to have a relationship with Jesus. Why? "For God so loved the world..."

*ILLUSTRATION: This summer, my wife and I had the opportunity to have a few vacation days in the northwest before some attending a set of meetings. It was our first time to visit the Seattle area. We were able to go whale watching, to see the Space Needle, and to have a cup of coffee at the original Starbucks. We were able to see lots of sights that we had never seen before. But the richness of our time there wasn't what we did. The richness of our time was our time together. The vacation wasn't about the activity but our togetherness. We had time away from work, away from ministry, and away from family responsibilities. It was an opportunity for us to have our focus on being together.*

During the Christmas season, we can get so focused on all the activities of Christmas that we forget the Christ of Christmas. The joy of Christmas doesn't come through the activities; it comes from a renewed focus on Jesus. In fact, I would offer to you this morning that Christmas season might mirror our trip to Seattle. Christmas isn't as much about the activity as about the togetherness.

Jesus was telling us how we could have His joy and how it can ripen to its fullest. It comes from abiding in Him. Abiding in him is like that branch staying connected to the vine.

*ILLUSTRATION: My wife has a rose bush—and she loves her roses. These roses are called Knock Out Roses and they bloom all summer long. If you cut off one of those roses and put it in a vase of water, it will brighten up any room—for a while. In a few days, even while immersed in water, the rose will begin to fade and wither.*

Likewise, if we allow ourselves to be cut off from our relationship with Christ, through disobedience or even simply through busyness, it's like the rose being cut off from the branch. We may have joy to brighten our room for a short time, but eventually, our joy is going to fade. Lasting joy only comes through an abiding relationship with Jesus.

## Joy Comes From Sitting At His Feet

There are many things that can cut us off from Jesus and the joy that He gives. During the holiday season, there seems to be an unusual demand on our schedules. Luke records the story of Jesus spending time with Mary and Martha in their home (Luke 10:38-42, NIV). A bit of tension ensued during this visit. Martha was frantically busy with cooking, cleaning, and taking care of the many details of those who were visiting. Meanwhile, Mary, her sister, was not helping her. Mary let all of those things go so she could sit at the feet of Jesus and listen to him tell stories of eternal value. Jesus gently rebukes Martha's complaint. He says to her: "Martha, Martha ... you are worried and upset about many things, but few things are needed—or indeed only one. Mary has chosen what is better, and it will not be taken away from her."

The lesson is simple: **Joy comes from sitting at his feet.** This is a great example for all of us this Christmas season.

## Joy Comes From Our Salvation

Simple faith calls us to remember the Christ of Christmas! Our simple faith calls us to take some time and sit at the feet of Jesus! But, there are times when we have trouble connecting with Jesus, and this often means the joy of our salvation can easily weaken. How does this happen? Let me illustrate with this story.

*ILLUSTRATION: Two-time Heisman trophy winner Archie Griffin told a story about playing football at The Ohio State University. Back in those days, freshman rarely saw playing time on game day, but as a freshman he got into the game. The coach sent in the play—he was to run the ball. Griffin was so excited and so nervous. As the ball was snapped, his line opened up a hole in front of him like Moses parting the waters of the Red Sea. He was so busy looking at all the running room in front of him that he failed to secure the ball as it was tossed to him. He fumbled and the other team recovered the ball. Archie said that the first thing he did was look on the sidelines to see where Coach Hayes was standing. He got up off the ground and ran to the sidelines as far away from Coach Hayes as he could possibly find. It didn't matter. Coach Hayes found him and had a few words to say!*

Here's my point. Archie Griffin lost the ball because he lost focus. He took his eyes off the ball and didn't see it into his hands. After he fumbled, he then tried to escape Coach Hayes. Do you see the parallel? We, too, can see so many other things in life and forget to keep our focus on Jesus. We forget to pray, or read our Bible, or stay in community with other believers. At the same time, when we fumble in our lives, we can mentally, emotionally and spiritually avoid getting close to Jesus. We want to find a seat on the end of the bench.

King David admitted his fumble and he took a different approach. He confessed his sin. In Psalm 51:12 (NASB) he asks God to "restore to me the joy of Your salvation."

**Joy comes from our salvation!** There is joy in knowing that your sins have been forgiven. There is joy in experience the cleansing of our hearts! The angels were bringing "...good news of great joy which will be for all the people...." The good news was that a Savior was being born. This means that all of us could have our sins forgiven! This news meant that we all could have the joy of salvation!

## Conclusion

There may be some of us here this morning that need to pray as David (Ps 51:10, NASB) did: "Create in me a clean heart, O God, and renew a steadfast spirit within me." Some of us may need to pray this same prayer for renewal. There may be some of us that need to pray this prayer and meet Jesus for the very first time.

There is no better way to enter the Christmas season than to connect, or reconnect, with the Jesus of Christmas? Simple faith helps us to connect with Jesus and in the process helps to reduce the impact of the commercialism of Christmas in our lives. Like Charlie Brown in the movie, a simple tree, decorated with love and faith helps us to rediscover joy.

What do you need in order to have Christmas joy? It's not found at the parties. It's not found in the kitchen. It's not found under the tree. It's found in the manger. It's found in Jesus.