

Delight #7 – The Rhythm of Delight

Based on *Delight! – Discipleship as the adventure of living and being loved* by Justin Rossow

Bible Reading

I am the true vine, and my Father is the gardener. He cuts off every branch in me that bears no fruit, while every branch that does bear fruit he prunes so that it will be even more fruitful. You are already clean because of the word I have spoken to you. Remain in me, as I also remain in you. No branch can bear fruit by itself; it must remain in the vine. Neither can you bear fruit unless you remain in me.

John 15:1-4

Introduction

This is the seventh and final talk in our series on delight. I have found it challenging and enjoyable to prepare and deliver, I hope you have found it challenging and enjoyable as well.

In the previous talk we went through the Lord's prayer, seeing how Jesus gave us a pattern of how to pray, a framework for how to ask him to help us enter a place where we can live in his joy and delight.

We learned about how God delights in shaping us to be the people we are meant to be, and how he wants us to be fully engaged in our adventure of faith and discovery, a delightful gift from a loving God.

But, like all things in this broken world, even the most delightful gift can become a burden.

A good friend of mine has recently had the joyful experience of seeing his 20-something daughter become a Christian. The last time I spoke with him he talked about how she is so excited about her new faith, and how she can't believe how apathetic so many of the Christians she meets seem to be about Jesus' love and forgiveness.

It made me smile as I thought about how enthusiastic I was about Jesus when I first became a Christian, and how this wasn't always a good thing... my mum still hasn't forgotten (or let me forget) how I announced to my dad that I now had a new, heavenly father! Not everything that proceeds from the mouths of spiritual babes is wise.

However, it is true that for many of us, our Christian lives are not always characterised by joy and delight. I spoke in the last session about how God wants us to be fully engaged in our faith lives. And this will not always be sunshine and rainbows. We will get tired, we will have days when we aren't sure what is going on.

And when this happens, people often drift away from praying, reading the Bible and meeting with other Christians.

But there is another response to spiritual exhaustion that can be equally damaging. Some people decide that their tiredness and lack of enthusiasm is because they're not trying hard enough, so they get involved in more and more Christian activities to try and drag themselves closer to God.

But this is getting things backwards. We cannot drag ourselves closer to God, God is the one who draws close to us. Our task is to make ourselves available to his guidance and power.

And to do that it is important that we cultivate a lifestyle that has a healthy balance of work and rest. As Psalm 127 reads...

Unless the LORD builds the house, the builders labour in vain.

Unless the LORD watches over the city, the guards stand watch in vain.

*In vain you rise early and stay up late, toiling for food to eat –
for he grants sleep to those he loves.*

Psalm 127:1-2

God delights in your rest as much as he does your work. Both are good things, but too much of either can be destructive.

The Sabbath, a weekly day of rest, was something God included at the beginning of his creation. It is a part of his intended rhythm of life. And as Christians we have God the Spirit working in us to help us both to want to do (desirable delight) and to put into practice what is pleasing (thoughtful delight) to God.

The builder still has to labour, the guard still has to watch. There will be times when we need to rise early, and sometimes stay up late. But we don't do it solely in our own strength, and we trust that God will give us times of rest as well as work.

And when he gives us the opportunity to rest, take it, trusting that the world will continue to spin without our effort. Dependence on Jesus includes accepting both work and rest as a gift, and it takes wisdom and discipline to get the balance right.

In the Gospel of John, Jesus uses the image of a vine to illustrate how this works.

The reading today was John 15:1-4...

I am the true vine, and my Father is the gardener. He cuts off every branch in me that bears no fruit, while every branch that does bear fruit he prunes so that it will be even more fruitful. You are already clean because of the word I have spoken to you. Remain in me, as I also remain in you. No branch can bear fruit by itself; it must remain in the vine. Neither can you bear fruit unless you remain in me.

John 15:1-4

As he so often does, Jesus is using picture language to make his point. The Old Testament talks about God's people as being like a vine that he has planted (cf Psalm 80, Isaiah 5), so Jesus' listeners will have understood the reference.

Jesus says that *he* is the true vine. Jesus is identifying himself with God's people, and, to use the Gospel of John's language, this means that we are in him, and he is in us.

Jesus says that God, like a good gardner, works to keep his vine healthy, cutting off the dead wood, and pruning the fruitful branches to make them even more fruitful.

He reassures the disciples that they are in the 'healthy branches' category 'because of the word I have spoken to you', the faith that Jesus has given them makes them part of his kingdom. We are in Jesus.

And this is an ongoing process, working with Jesus to get rid of the bad things in our lives that hinder our relationship with him, so that we have space for the good things that he wants us to enjoy and delight in.

This is the rhythm of godly delight, we receive power from God to help us do things, we cooperate with him and experience the delight of seeing our lives become more positive and fruitful.

Sometimes it will be hard work, it will involve getting rid of things that are holding us back from God's delight. But there will also be times of rest, when we get to look back at what God has helped us achieve, when we give thanks to him for not letting us take second-best in our lives.

God delights in our work. God delights in our rest. And he also delights in our play.

Play is something that involves active engagement (like work), and which results in rejuvenation and refreshment (like rest), that's why it's often called 're-creation'.

We looked at playful delight earlier in the series.

Sha'a' (שׂשׂוּ), pronounced 'shah-AH', means sport, take delight in, play. The word is used to describe the delight we get from reading God's words, because they help us understand how to live well, for instance...

*I **delight** in your decrees;*

I will not neglect your word.

Psalm 119:16

*I **delight** in your commands*

because I love them.

Psalm 119:47

But it's not just us delighting in God, God also delights in us and the rest of his creation.

In this series we've talked about wisdom, how God wants us to work out how to live our lives in an intelligent and discerning way.

The book of Proverbs is all about wisdom. In fact, one of its main characters is Woman Wisdom (yes, wisdom is *female* :-). Clever people argue over whether we are meant to link Wisdom to God, or God's Spirit, or God's Word. What we do know is that Wisdom is closely linked to God's character and the way he works in the world he created.

In Proverbs 8:27-31, Wisdom declares

*I was there when he set the heavens in place,
when he marked out the horizon on the face of the deep,
when he established the clouds above
and fixed securely the fountains of the deep,
when he gave the sea its boundary
so that the waters would not overstep his command,
and when he marked out the foundations of the earth.*

Then I was constantly at his side.

*I was filled with **delight** [sha'a'] day after day,
rejoicing always in his presence,
rejoicing in his whole world
and **delighting** [sha'a'] in the human race.*

Proverbs 8:27-31

When God created the earth and the human race, Wisdom, the personification of God's character is there delighting and *rejoicing* (another 'delight' word) in it. There is playful delight in what is going on.

And as people made in God's image, our lives should have room for playfulness. The marketeers for the Mars Bar got it right, let's develop a rhythm of life that includes work, rest and play.

They are all gifts from God. And they all require a large dose of wisdom to get the balance right, and as we do so, with God the Spirit's guidance and enabling, they can move us into a deeper and more delightful relationship with God.

And balance is the key. Even the best of God's gifts can become idols if we forget the giver, an idol being anything that takes the place of God in our lives.

Work is the most obvious one, rather than being a gift that helps us rely on God's leading and strengthening, it can become an idol that we rely on to provide us with purpose and security.

Rest, rather than a welcome pause that *rest-ores* us, enabling us to be a functioning part of our family, community and church, can become an idol that encourages us to avoid anything that challenges us.

If we are not careful we can find ourselves abandoning any form of exercise, avoiding spending time with friends, forgetting to pray and read the scriptures and deciding that we have much better things to do on a Sunday than go to church.

Play is one that requires the most wisdom to discern when it is becoming an idol. As a general rule, when the things we consider play become addictive and especially when they are things that we do alone, then we need to exercise caution. Whether that be incessant scrolling through social media, watching television for hours at a time and/or eating and drinking too much.

God's good gifts are given to build us up, they give us purpose, strength, joy and delight. When we turn them into idols, they stop giving, and start taking.

Good gifts, separated from God's strength and purpose slowly but surely begin to erode our relationships, wear away our self-esteem and put burdens on us that we cannot sustain.

Good gifts, removed from relationship with God their provider, will see you becoming increasingly self-centred and negative. Friends become problems. Work becomes a burden. Fulfilment and delight leave the building, and life becomes wearisome, a thing to escape from.

If you are in this situation, there is great news, God is ready to help you turn around. Throughout history people have come to the end of their rope and found Jesus there waiting to help them.

And if you don't think you're in this situation, be thankful, but beware! The process of a good gift becoming an idol is rarely instant, it is usually a gradual process, similar to how people become addicted to pain killers.

A good habit is to regularly ask God to highlight areas of your life where you are in danger of turning his good gifts into idols, and to pray that he will give you the strength to let go of them, and keep you dependent on the giver and not the gifts.

Earlier in the talk we looked at how Jesus talked about himself and God's people as being like a vine, and how we need to remain in that vine if we want to remain in relationship with him.

The verses following this read...

As the Father has loved me, so have I loved you. Now remain in my love. If you keep my commands, you will remain in my love, just as I have kept my Father's commands and remain in his love. I have told you this so that my joy may be in you and that your joy may be complete.

John 15:9-11

We looked at this in our first session on delight. Jesus is speaking to his disciples before his arrest and crucifixion, and he is talking about joy!

This is the Chara (Ka-Rah) type of joy, describing gladness and delight. Work by itself won't bring you this joyful delight. Rest by itself won't bring you this joyful delight. Even play, by itself, won't bring you this kind of joyful delight.

The way to true fulfilment, true delight, is to remain in Jesus' love.

As I've said previously, ***if you keep my commands you will remain in my love...*** is not a threat, it is a promise! Jesus kept his Father's commands, and remains in his love. And why has he told us this? ***So that his joy may be in us, and our joy may be complete!***

And remember, when we talk about doing God's will, we are talking about yet another form of delight.

So, what does this mean in our everyday lives? How do we apply this in the week ahead, or even as we talk with people after the service?

There is a temptation at this point to think to ourselves, 'that's all very well for Jesus, he is perfect... he is God! But me, I haven't got a hope of keeping Jesus' commands, I've tried so many times, and failed so many, many times'.

But this is where a proper understanding of the scriptures is really important. What Jesus is saying is not merely 'as I have obeyed the father, so you should obey me', it is much more like...

As I live in dependence on the Father,
and the Father works in me
through the power of the Spirit, who fills me,
so you live in my dependence on the Father, shaped in you,
and I will be in you and work in you
through the power of that same Spirit,
who now fills you, and shapes me in you.

Jesus isn't setting himself up as an impossible ideal to attain to, Jesus has done the heavy lifting on our behalf, and now comes to you and dwells with and in you by the presence of God the Holy Spirit. The power of the Spirit in you enables God's delight to become your delight.

God delights to work with you in shaping your mind, heart and soul to reflect the perfection of Jesus. Where we fall over is when we make Jesus more like an idol than a trusted helper and friend.

Discipleship is a journey, and it is a journey that Jesus wants to be an active part of.

God works in us, and we actively allow God to work in us.

Like clay in the potter's hands, we are not in charge. And God knows each one of us perfectly. Each 'pot' is being custom made, lovingly crafted by the Master Potter.

You may already be aware of this, and if so, you'll know what a fantastic experience it is to live in relationship with a God who delights in you. Don't look back, be aware that you have a powerful enemy who will do anything he can to destroy your relationship with God, but also be aware that Jesus has defeated him, and you are in Jesus, and Jesus is in you.

But if you know that this is not a reality in your life, if you've been trying to live the Christian life in your own strength... why not make today the day when you ask God to help you, to let you know that you are loved and forgiven by him, and ask him to help you live a life that is filled with the presence and strength of God the Holy Spirit.

Lay down the idol of trying to be like Jesus, and allow Jesus to shape you by the power of the Spirit, to the immense delight of the Father.

And remember, wherever you are on your journey of faith, you will fail. When you do, know that your heavenly Father still loves you. Say sorry. Accept Jesus' forgiveness. Don't resist the Spirit as he encourages and enables you to get back on the potter's wheel. You are not doing this alone. You can't do this alone.

I'm going to end this series with some verses from 1 Peter. Peter was someone who knew what it was to fail Jesus. He also knew what it was to be forgiven by him, and to live a life devoted to telling others about him.

Let's pray the words for one another, and for ourselves, either out loud or in your hearts...

Humble yourselves under God's mighty hand, that he may lift you up in due time. Cast all your anxiety on him because he cares for you.

Be alert and of sober mind. Your enemy the devil prowls around like a roaring lion looking for someone to devour. Resist him, standing firm in the faith, because you know that the family of believers throughout the world is undergoing the same kind of sufferings.

And the God of all grace, who called you to his eternal glory in Christ, after you have suffered a little while, will himself restore you and make you strong, firm and steadfast.

To him be the power for ever and ever. Amen.

1 Peter 5:6-11