

A Lesson In Rejoicing

by Steve Zeisler

This August has been 'Safe Driving Month' on our block. The reason for that is that two little girls who live on our street are learning to ride two--wheelers, and one never knows when they are going to go careening out of control off the sidewalk and wobble down the street. I have enjoyed watching them try to gain control over a small part of the creation, try to exert mastery over the gravity defying phenomenon of two--wheeled transportation

Another who has stirred interest of a much different sort this month is John DeLorean. He too has had a long and painful struggle to try and exert mastery over part of God's creation and build an economic empire based on an automobile that would challenge the giant automobile corporations. He has suffered in trying to do that. He may even have come to Christ as a result. But clearly, the battle to own something, to command something, to subject an element of world to his control has been the driving force of his life.

All around us we see examples of this kind of ambition. Many of us are living right in the heart of Silicon Valley, which is awash with computer companies who are constantly coming up with mastery of new and exciting technology. The Diablo Canyon Nuclear Power Plant represents an attempt by Pacific Gas and Electric Co. to convince Californians that they have mastered nuclear power sufficiently to be granted a license to produce electricity. You can think of dozens of other examples, I am sure. Part of the human condition is to strive to subject the natural world to our will. We want to have dominion over the world in which we live. Unfortunately, however, our capacity to obey the good command of God to man to have dominion over the earth was twisted and ruined in the fall of Adam so that nothing seems to work out right.

The examples I have just made will illustrate a lesson taught by Jesus, beginning at verse 17 of chapter 10 of the gospel of Luke, following the return of the 70 disciples whom the Lord had sent out to minister throughout the countryside. They had returned 'with joy,' the text says and reported to Jesus, 'Lord, even the demons are subject to us in Your name.' The part of their statement they focused least on was the power of Jesus' name. What really turned them on was the words, 'The demons are subject to us. We have dominion over the personal and terrible forces of evil. We have been able to encounter human bondage and release it. We have subjugated the demons to our statements and our will.' What a thrill that was, the thrill of ministry and seeing God work because of their actions and words! Nevertheless, Jesus told them (v. 20) that what they should rejoice over was not that the demons were subject to them, but that 'your names are recorded in heaven.'

The love of our hearts is to subject the world of creation to ourselves. But that dominion cannot be the ultimate source of human joy. As much as we long to, we cannot derive life--satisfying joy from our ability to control things. That, essentially, is what Jesus is saying in this passage. In the long run, joy comes from our relationship with him, and nothing more. Our joy comes from knowing that our names are recorded in heaven.

But what is the context of this lesson, and who are these 70 disciples? Let us set the scene by looking at the background to this passage. Verse 51 of Luke 9 marks a turning point in this gospel:

It came about, when the days were approaching for Jesus' ascension, he resolutely set his face to go to Jerusalem.

Or, as one translation has it, 'He set his face like a flint to go to Jerusalem.' Jesus has left Galilee now, and everything about his ministry is focused south toward Jerusalem, toward Passover, when he would be offered up as 'the Lamb of God who takes away the sins of the world.' His intent in ministry becomes more focused as well. Instead of spreading seeds as widely as he can and inviting as many people as possible to consider the Kingdom of God (though he does not give that up), his focus is more and more on those who are his disciples and on his training of them. For example, following verse 51 of Luke 9, James and John are taught that they cannot be violent with people who reject them. They had gone to a Samaritan village and were not received so they wanted to send fire from heaven and wipe out the village. But Jesus told them that discipleship did not

include beating up people who didn't like them. Another example of his training of his disciples was his admonition to an unnamed disciple. 'You cannot put your hand on the plow and then look back. You cannot cut a straight furrow if you are looking over your shoulder.' Single-mindedness is part of discipleship, in other words.

Chapter 10 opens with Jesus sending the 70 out to minister. I am convinced he was much more concerned about the lessons they would learn than he was about any good they would do in their ministry. There is a great deal that is symbolic and illustrative in his directions to them. He gives them a formula for blessing a house, for instance, and a way to graphically show the displeasure of God by shaking the dust off their sandals when they left towns that were unresponsive to the gospel message. Their very number, 70 (or 72 in some old manuscripts) was intended by Jesus to remind these people and all who would read these words of the day when Moses chose elders to lead the people of Israel. The 70 were, in a sense, representative of the church of God. So this whole section is filled with illustration and symbolic representation of large and important truths. The details of Jesus' words concerning where to stay and what to eat (v. 7) are important for what they symbolize to us about serious discipleship.

In line with this, then, the first three verses in the section we will be looking at today have a further lesson in discipleship. What is the source of joy of a disciple of Christ? Here, disciples are given a lesson on true joy. Luke 10: 17-20:

The seventy returned with joy, saying, "Lord, even the demons are subject to us in Your name." And he said to them, "I was watching Satan fall from heaven like lightning. Behold, I have given you authority to tread upon serpents and scorpions, and over all the power of the enemy, and nothing shall injure you. Nevertheless do not rejoice in this, that the spirits are subject to you, but rejoice that your names are recorded in heaven."

Many of us have experienced the power of God working within us to perform exciting, electrifying things. We have heard accounts of how God's servants in our day have been miraculously protected from danger, whether in the jungles of South America, facing the secret police in Uganda, or in the prisons of California. I personally have seen powerful men reduced to tears by statements I have made. I have overseen the mending of shattered families, having been enabled by the grace of God to bring knowledge and purpose where confusion had reigned. I have prayed with people who have recovered mental and physical health. There is nothing that compares, there is nothing more intoxicating and more remarkable than to walk away from a situation and realize that God has used you to bring life to the world. There is no experience I have ever encountered or heard of that compares with it. That was how the disciples felt when they returned and said to Jesus, 'Even the demons are subject to us.' They were alert enough to add the phrase, 'in your name,' but what thrilled them was the fact that their commands were obeyed.

Earlier this morning a friend told me of an experience he recently had along this line. While my friend is utterly convinced that he does not have the gift of mercy, he nevertheless felt impelled to leave his home in the middle of the night, against the advice of his wife and some friends, to go to the darkened halls of Stanford Hospital and call on a woman he knew was hospitalized with a serious illness. He discovered her to be awake and deep in despair. After he had prayed with her, her despair was lifted and she became a changed woman. My friend knew that God had forced him out of his home to go to the hospital to see this woman. It was plain even as he spoke that his excitement at being used by the Lord was overflowing.

How electrifying to be used of God! While the disciples were filled with joy because the demons were subject to them in Jesus' name, our Lord responded to them, in effect, 'You haven't see anything yet. If you think that's exciting, let me tell you what I can see. You saw the tip of the iceberg, but I saw the iceberg. "I saw Satan falling from heaven like lightning," being cast down in tragedy because of what you were doing. The very throne of the forces of darkness was shaken because my 70 followers went out and spoke in my name.' Jesus gave them powers of protection on this occasion that were remarkable, as a way of saying that throughout the ages the church of Christ is protected by its Lord. 'I saw Satan falling from heaven like Lightning,' Jesus declared,

The second part of Jesus' response, though, is surprising. Having agreed with them and intensified their

observation, he tells them, 'Your experiences are not as important as you think. Your experience of the power of God is not ultimately strong enough or consistent enough. You are not able to use the sense of dominion you feel as a source for joy.' I believe Jesus is inferring here that none of us can use such occasions to build a sense of self--worth and self--esteem. We cannot live on them. They cannot be the sources of our joy.

The problem is this: we are soldiers in a war. From his vantage point, Jesus could see Satan falling from heaven, but we cannot see that. Far from being always exciting, our soldiering is sometimes boring. There are times when we are dry, when we are hurting, when we are afraid, when we feel isolated. There are times when we have the excitement of being used by God, but at other times it seems as if God has forgotten us utterly. While the church is always victorious, individual soldiers sometimes suffer setbacks and fears. That should teach us that we cannot base our sense of well--being, our joy, on those occasions when everything goes right, when the demons are, in fact, subject to us. We cannot let our sense of dominion be the thing that grants us well--being.

Jesus goes on to point out that there is another basis on which we can always rejoice. There is a truth that never fails, a truth that does not change, and it is this: 'Rejoice that your names are recorded in heaven.' The simple declaration being made here is that we belong to Jesus Christ. He would say later to his disciples, 'In my Father's house there are many condominiums [as Ron Ritchie puts it]. If it were not so I would have told you. I go to prepare a place for you that where I am you may be also.' Jesus said that there is reserved for us a place in glory with him. Our names are recorded in heaven. We have been granted by him a relationship that cannot fail. Whether things are going well for us and we are exercising dominion, or whether they are going badly for us and we see no dominion whatever being exercised through us, what does not change is that our names are recorded in heaven. We are his and he is ours. That relationship is the basis for joy that will not fade, and that is what Jesus commends to us as the basis for believing that we are valuable, the basis of our hope and confidence in life. 'Jesus loves me, this I know; for the Bible tells me so.' That is a profound and necessary foundation for life.

It is interesting to notice that when people are in deepest need, those who minister to them don't spend any time discussing the nature of the millennium, the relationship of the Renaissance to modern humanism, or any one of a hundred subjects that seem to occupy us in less fearful times. No, when people are dying what they want to hear about is Christ's love for them and their identity in him. When people are facing deep fears and depression it is the simplest things--the love of Christ for his people, the commitment of our Lord to know us, the certainty of the fact that our names are written in heaven, the inability of anything this world throws at us to shake that essential relationship--those are the things that come up when times are hardest. 'Rejoice that your names are recorded in heaven.'

So in this first section, Jesus teaches his disciples what should be the true basis for their rejoicing. Next, he models for them how they should rejoice. Verse 21:

At that very time He rejoiced greatly in the Holy Spirit, and said, "I praise Thee, O Father, Lord of heaven and earth, that Thou didst hide these things from the wise and intelligent and didst reveal them to babes. Yes, Father, for thus it was well--pleasing in Thy sight. All things have been handed over to Me by My Father, and no one knows who the Son is except the Father, and who the Father is except the Son and anyone to whom the Son wills to reveal Him." And turning to the disciples, he said privately. "Blessed are the eyes which see the things you see, for I say to you, that many prophets and kings wished to see the things which you see, and did not see them, and to hear the things which you hear, and did not hear them."

I love to picture this scene. There are perhaps 75 or 100 people sitting around Jesus at this point. They are in an out--of--the--way corner of Judea, perhaps even the wilderness of Trans--Jordan. Their Master is in their midst, 'rejoicing greatly in the Holy Spirit.' I picture the Lord with his arms crossed, throwing his head back and laughing to himself, utterly caught up with a sense of joy that his Heavenly Father has arranged things as he has. A band of 75 to 100 renegades, a gang of people the world paid no attention to whatever, led by a rabbi who was considered dangerous and rebellious, hear Jesus say, 'I thank Thee, O Father, Lord of heaven and earth, that Thou didst hide these things from the wise and intelligent and revealed them to babes.'

By 'these things,' Jesus is referring to the truths he has just spoken of and those he will speak of in the next verse. He says quite clearly that authority over the forces of evil are in his hand. He knew that it was he and he alone who could command the darkness, alleviate human suffering and degradation and grant to his followers authority over the enemy. The wise and intelligent people, shrewd men and women who assimilate the economic, scientific and philosophical evidence of ancient history to the present have not been able to figure this out. People can predict the trends of tomorrow and make economic forecasts, they can call the political choices that the masses will make, but the wise and sagacious men and women of this world do not know and cannot find out by their wisdom that Jesus Christ is the one who has the power over evil. And the ones who will be involved in the business of really setting humanity free, beating back the forces of evil and finally crushing them under heel are those who know Jesus. That cannot be discovered by the wise and intelligent people of the world. Jesus thought that was terrific. It struck him as wonderful that God had made the world that way.

Further, Jesus declares that the command of righteousness to be victorious over unrighteousness is not all that resides in him. Facing the other direction, knowledge of God is his alone to give. Verse 22: 'All things have been handed to Me by My Father, and no one knows who the Son is except the Father, and who the Father is except the Son, and anyone to whom the Son wills to reveal Him.' It is Jesus' choice which men and women will know God, and only by Him comes knowledge of God.

Here is a quotation from J. I. Packer's wonderful book, 'Knowing God':

Once you become aware that the main business that you are here for is to know God, most of life's problems fall into place of their own accord. The world today is full of sufferers from the wasting disease which Albert Camus focused as Absurdism ('life is a bad joke'), and from the complaint which we may call Marie Antionette's fever, since she found the phrase that describes it ('nothing tastes'). These disorders blight the whole of life: everything becomes at once a problem and a bore, because nothing seems worth while . . . What makes life worth while is having a big enough objective, something which catches our imagination and lays hold of our allegiance; and this the Christian has, in a way that no other man has. For what higher, more exalted, and more compelling goal can there be than to know God?

Jesus is saying that there are prophets and kings, men and women who have won Nobel Prizes, people who have written treatises that have altered the course of nations, people who have commanded armies, who have owned industrial complexes that spread across the globe, kings and prophets who were made to know God and do not know him. In their inner hearts they long to hear the things that these renegades, sitting in the Judean wilderness, heard plainly from their Master.

Jesus extends that word, I believe, to his disciples in this room. Ordinary people, people who have resources, people who do not have resources, those with educated backgrounds, those without education, the Lord is saying here that knowledge of God comes through him; the conquering of the forces of evil comes through him. It does no one any good to be wise and sagacious, to be shrewd and powerful, to be at the pinnacle of human endeavor. It is only through Christ that we have the things that every heart longs to have. We were made to know God, and we only know God by the choice of his Son.

This is a remarkable lesson in joy. One of the discipleship training efforts that Jesus made was to say, first, our joy ought to be based on a relationship, not on the effects of the relationship; not so much on what God does through us as through who we are in Christ. Our names are recorded in heaven. That is the first verity. Secondly, Jesus says that it is in him, it is through him that God can be known. We are privileged, we ought to believe ourselves privileged and live as ones privileged over those who own things and run things, those who speak and the world listens. 'Jesus turned to the disciples and said privately, 'Blessed are the eyes which see the things you see, for I say to you, that many prophets and kings wished to see the things that you see, and did not see them, and to hear the things which you hear, and did not hear them.'

At Valley Forge, George Washington commanded a small army of men who were so poor they had to wrap their feet in rags to make it through the winter. For all they knew, they were facing defeat at the hands of the

strong forces of the powerful British Empire. But that small band of men succeeded in founding the greatest nation in history.

Jesus, too, was at the head of a small band of his presence and that his servants would be the renegades; only he could see what would happen. He told instruments of God to bring life to the world On the basis them that their knowledge of him and their commitment to of these truths, we too are commanded to rejoice.

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