

Pursuing Joy in Good Gifts – 1 Timothy 4:1-5

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What Do We Do With This Stuff?

Are you in the “Christmas coma”? That dull sense of *blah* after a few weeks full of parties, cookies, awkward dinners with the in-laws, shopping, wrapping gifts, unwrapping gifts, cookies. Or are you fully transitioned to end-of-year reflections and New Year resolutions? Are you writing or reading all the “Best of 2014” lists?

This morning, I want us to think about how should we think about all these *things*—this stuff. How should we think Christian-ly about Legos, Princess Elsa dolls, tablets, gadgets, Christmas hams, job promotions, and year-end bonuses? In reflecting upon the past year, how should we think about the many gracious gifts God has poured out into our lives—a new home, a new baby, a reconciled relationship, a year of steady and sufficient grace? There are four responses I could think of that we could have to all this stuff: (1) Not even think about it and just keep on coasting; (2) Reject and deny all the gifts of 2014, whether physical Christmas presents or intangible blessings; (3) Make idols out of them—we could exalt the gifts over the Giver; or (4) Find our joy in the Giver increasing as we enjoy his gifts.

A friend who was here in May, Joe Rigney, has just published a new book called *The Things of Earth*. I had the chance to read an advance copy, and I have been *so* helped by this book. I’ve been so helped by working towards making my walk with Christ far *more* “earthy.” I have this physical body God created and this physical food that body needs and these physical kids and all this other physical stuff. And *all* of it comes in all these wonderfully diverse flavors and smells and experiences. And God is going to glorify this body one day to dwell in his physical presence in a physical place forever. So I’ve got to have a more “earthy” faith—I’ve got to understand how to interact with this stuff so that I’m not denying it or making an idol of it.

Enter stage right: 1 Timothy 4. In exhorting Timothy in his new pastoral work, Paul tells him that he will be a good servant of Christ if he teaches his church that everything that exists is for your enjoyment and the worship of God. Everything. Every. Thing. Tangible or intangible. Or to set it in our context: our mission as a church is to glorify God through the Spirit by pursuing joy in Christ alone that our neighbors and the nations worship him with us now and forever. So how do we pursue our joy in good gifts without compromising the pursuit of our joy in Christ alone? God didn't give you sweet potatoes, mom's Christmas cookies, or his sustaining grace for another year to wreck your holidays by having these things lead you into sin. No, God intends for you to enjoy every good and perfect gift that he has given you—to enjoy those gifts in a way that magnifies him as the Giver.

Asceticism: Demonic & Apostasy-Producing (v.1-3a)

Paul is getting right after it as we jump into this epistle. In v.1-3, he is coming down hard on the false teachers that Timothy must confront. The problem Paul is addressing is called “asceticism”—the belief that the most “holy” and “spiritual” thing to do is find no joy or pleasure in this life. But this isn't merely a pagan philosophy—the people Paul is countering are claiming to be followers of Jesus and worse, claiming to be teachers of Christian truth. There are two examples of their ascetic teaching that Paul mentions—these false teachers were saying it is “more holy” to *not* get married and to *not* eat certain foods.

Why these two? I think these two examples are not *all* that these false teachers were forbidding, but these are two prime examples of our physical-ness that these false teachers wanted to deny. “Don't get married,” they would say, “because then you'll have sex. And all sex is *bad*.” “Don't eat that food,” they would teach, “because then you'll enjoy that prime rib. And

that kind of physical enjoyment is *bad*. You can't be super-spiritual with marital intimacy and the enjoyment food."

Look at how strongly opposed the Apostle is to this teaching. The presence of these teachers is no surprise to him, for the Spirit said in Matthew 24:10-11 and Acts 20:29-30 that such false teachers would come. And their teaching—their asceticism and forbidding of marriage and abstaining from good food—Paul says is demonic and leads people away from truly following Jesus. Look at v.1, "Some will depart from the faith"—how?—"by devoting themselves to deceitful spirits and teachings of demons." V.2, this demonic teaching comes "through the insincerity of liars whose consciences are seared." The consciences of these false teachers have been *branded* by Satan—they are his.

And what is that they are hypocritically lying about? What is it they know to be false but teach as truth? What is that they have learned from demons? What is it that their overlord instructs them to twist and mangle and pose as "true life and holiness in Christ"? Nothing less than God's gifts, namely marriage and food.

Everything is Good & for Thanksgiving (v.3b-4)

Having offered this strong rebuke, Paul continues by providing the rationale. It is unChristian to affirm an ascetic lifestyle—to deny marital intimacy and good food—because God created these things. Paul says in v.3 that we do not deny such rich fare *because* "God created [it] to be received with thanksgiving by those who believe and know the truth." *God* made it and gave it as a gift to you—it is wrong to deny the gift.

Think of it in terms of gifts that you exchanged this past week. It would have been wrong of my daughter to tear apart the wrapping paper around the sled I gave her, look at it, and say, "Wow Dada! A sled! I'm going to honor you by leaving it in the garage and try my hardest to

forget about it!” No! That’s no way to honor a gift-giver—I want her to say, “A sled! Get the snow coat and pants! LET’S! PLAY!” God created your Christmas dinner, your New Year’s buffet, to be received gladly and with gratitude. That isn’t done by a somber “Why thank you, O Mighty God, for this gift. I humbly forsake it ... for you, of course.” No, it is “to be received with thanksgiving” and all the more for us who are in Christ.

I think Paul is getting at how our gratitude of gifts is amplified when we are found in Christ. He says this gift of food is to be “received with thanksgiving *by those who believe and know the truth.*” I don’t think that means only Christians are to enjoy food—food is a common grace. But when we are in Christ, there is no ceiling on our joy. We can enjoy food *more* because we feast on the Living Water and Bread of Life (cf. John 4:13-14, 6:35). No longer are our bellies our god, but food is gladly received that we might taste and see that the *Lord* is good, that we might understand more fully what it is to delight in him as our sustenance.

But food is not where such glad-hearted, grateful enjoyment ends. In v.4, Paul zooms out and says this is true for *everything*. “For *everything* created by God is good, and *nothing* is to be rejected if it is received with thanksgiving.” There is no *thing* in all the cosmos that is intrinsically or inherently bad, evil, or sinful. If it exists, God created it. If God created it, it is good. But that does not mean that *good things* cannot be used for *evil purposes*. For example, a bottle of alcohol is not evil or sinful as it sits on the shelf, but it is evil to be intoxicated by it. The thing doesn’t become sinful when used sinfully. The same is true of the tablet or toy you were given—it in itself is not sinful, but when you covet the newer model your friend received or when you’re jealous that your brother or sister is playing with it, then you sin in interacting with that gift—you’re not receiving it with thanksgiving.

So in these verses, Paul is steering us to avoid two ditches. On the one side is the ascetic, outright denial of God's gifts. On the other side is the idolatrous elevation of the gift, where we prize the gift over the Giver. The first ditch is avoided by gladly and joyfully and wholeheartedly receiving the gift. The second ditch is avoided by receiving the gift *with thanksgiving*—the gift points us to the Giver, not taking importance over him.

Set Apart for Praise By Word & Prayer (v.5)

This path of avoiding either ditch is what Paul commends in v.5. He tells us that every gift God gives us that is received with thanksgiving is “made holy by the word of God and prayer.” He is *not* talking about some sort of *hocus pocus* or magical transformation. We don't recite some verse and special prayer over God's gifts and—*POOF!*—they're made holy. No, the mention of the “word of God” is a reference to Genesis 1:31, where after creating all that there is in six days God proclaimed it all to be very good. So Paul is just underscoring what he has already said about the goodness of everything—it's *good* because God said it was. The Creator made such an affirming proclamation.

But these gifts that we are to enjoy are not made holy by God's decree alone; Paul says it is also by prayer. And specifically, a prayer of thanksgiving. This is *how* we receive God's gifts with thanksgiving, by pausing to give thanks to the Giver. That's not done in a legalistic sense, where you have a perfunctory prayer to recite every time you sit down to a meal or recognize a gift. No, this prayer of thanksgiving comes from the overflow of your heart. Are your eyes open to all the gifts God gives you in a day, an hour? Just think about getting ready to come here this morning and all the things that made it convenient—waking up to a house that has a precisely controlled temperature, checking the weather on your phone, taking a hot shower, brewing fresh coffee. Or think of the Exxon Mobil commercial that has been on that shows the whole industry

and production chain that goes into boiling an egg—that commercial makes my heart well up with praise and thanks to God for his provision.

It is such thankfulness that “makes holy” God’s gifts. But “made holy” in what sense? The word translated “made holy” is the same word for “sanctified.” God’s gifts are *sanctified* by his decree and our thankfulness. They are set apart for his purposes, namely his praise and adoration. Because of his creative decree and our thankful prayers, all that exists is turned from being in common, normal use and is made into an instrument of praise. This is the gospel-centered worship that we value—we worship in all aspects of life as we gladly receive God’s gifts that abound all around us and receive them in thankful praise.

We walk away from that encouraging conversation with an old friend and say, “Wow. God, what a gift!” We bite into that piece of bacon and say, “Wow. God, what a gift!” We hold that child in our arms and say, “Wow. God, what a gift!” We enjoy the gift with thankfulness to the praise of God. This is how we glorify God in what eat or drink or whatever we do.

So when you’re spending time with family this week, and you are just loving having everyone home around the table. Or you are so thoroughly enjoying the laughs or board game, press into it. Don’t feel like you have to put a governor on the joy you have in your family. Instead, put the pedal to metal. Let your joy deepen and expand all the more as you overflow in praise to God for the gift your family is.

Or this afternoon, as you yell at your TV during what is sure to be the best NFL game of the season, I hope your joy in the gift of an NFC North duel is increased as you receive it with thanksgiving to God. When Calvin Johnson makes a humanly impossible catch, I hope your joy in that moment does not terminate with him, but that it continues all the higher as you celebrate a God who gave such a gift. That doesn’t mean you pause or mute the game to lead your friends

and family in a prayer of thanks—I suppose it could—but it will look like you enjoying that play even more because you know it was given by a generous God.

Or maybe this week you're especially grateful for your health. You had medical issues this year, and you are so glad that they are resolved. The tests have come back positively and things are looking good here at year-end. Don't waste your good health by making your health your highest delight, but let your delight in your health be a means of praise. Go for a jog or take a deep breath or read over the doctor's letter again and rejoice in the health you have been given. Pursue your joy in your health for the sake of your joy in Christ. They are not mutually exclusive pursuits but are one pursuit along the same trajectory.

Two Objections: Loss & License

Now, maybe you're sitting there and thinking that all that I've been saying doesn't quite square with either your experience or Scripture passages that come to mind. Maybe one of two objections—loss and license—is what you're thinking of. Perhaps 2014 or this Christmas has been especially difficult and all this talk about joy and delight leaves a bitter taste in your mouth. Maybe you lost a loved one or your mother-in-law got a cancer diagnosis a week ago. Maybe you're thinking, “Yeah, pastor, well what do you do when the gift is taken away?”

Listen to how Joe Rigney addressed that question in writing to friends who lost their newborn to a terminal illness:

I take it as a given that Christ is supreme for you and your wife. I know that he's your treasure and your life. I know that faith in him runs deep in your bones, that your love for him is at the core of who you are. And I can imagine that at times like this your love for God and trust in his sovereignty produces questions like, “If God is taking our son to himself, is it okay for me to want to keep our little one in my arms for as long as possible? Am I resisting God in some way if my desire for my son is so real and so intense and so undeniable, and yet it is so clear that God is taking my baby from me?”

So I just wanted to affirm that, given the deep reality of your supreme and full love for God, your love for your dying son cannot be too intense. It is

impossible for you to feel too deeply for him, for you to want to hold him too much, for you to long for his health and happiness with too much fervor.

Let me say it again: You cannot love your son too much. This is because, as you've said to me over and over again, he is a gift to you. God has given him to *you*, as a gift, and you are receiving him as a gift. Your son is a work of God, an expression of God's glory and grace and love, and one that is customized for you and your family. You can only love him wrongly if you love him *in place of* God. But if you receive him *as a gift from God*, in all of his wonder and beauty and sweetness and fragility, then you cannot love him too much or prize him too highly, and you should feel no shred of guilt because you love him as you do and long for his health and desperately want to cling to him and know him and spend time with him for as long as you can.

So I just want to encourage you and your wife to plunge headlong into the gift. Savor every moment with that baby. Touch him, hold him, caress him, let the love that you feel for him surge through you. Let it provoke you to tears and sadness and that gut-wrenching feeling that you would do absolutely *anything* to make your son whole. Let your love for your little boy take you beyond the pain and sorrow to the indestructible joy of the God who gives good gifts *and is not threatened by them*.

It's as if God is saying to you, "You don't know how intense my love is for you, how deep my affections are for you. So I'm going to show you. I'm going to stretch your heart to the breaking point. It will feel like you are dying. But if you go with me, into the love, into the pain, into the sorrow and longing and desire, then when all is said and done, you will know that "as a father has compassion on his children, so does the Lord have compassion on you." (*The Things of Earth*, p.222-223)

So I in no way am trying to minimize your pain or sorrow. Rather, I want to encourage you to not shy away from the emotion you feel at the loss of that gift. Let the tears, let the grief go deep. Let it all be an expression of how grateful you are for having the gift as long as you had it. For as long as you see it indeed as a gift from God, it poses no threat to him.

Or maybe you're there thinking of passages like Matthew 16:24 where Jesus says, "If anyone would come after me, let him *deny himself* and take up his cross and follow me." Or when Paul writes in Colossians 3:2, "Set your minds on things that are above, not on things that are on earth." Maybe you're thinking, "Pastor, this sounds like *license*! People are going to hear this and become worldly. After all, thriftiness is next to godliness and we're about a 'wartime lifestyle.'" "

Paul is not contradicting himself or Jesus. As people who love and affirm the inerrant Word of God, we know there must be a way to deny yourself, to set your mind on things above, *and* to receive everything God created as a good gift for our enjoyment and his praise. Paul helps resolve this tension later in his letter. Look at 1 Timothy 6:17-19, “As for the rich in this present age, charge them not to be haughty, nor to set their hopes on the uncertainty of riches, but on God, who richly provides us with everything to enjoy. They are to do good, to be rich in good works, to be generous and ready to share, thus storing up treasure for the future, so that they may take hold of that which is truly life.”

In providing this exhortation to the rich, it is striking that Paul does not condemn their riches nor demands that they sell everything. He doesn't tell them to take a vow of poverty. He tells them to hope in God and not their riches—God's gifts, wealth or whatever, will not save you. God will.

So what do we do with the stuff? When we have been richly blessed, how do we “deny ourselves”? By using the gifts we've been given for the mission. The rich in this present age or to do good and be rich in good works, generous and ready to share. We are to reflect God's generosity in our own generosity. So don't forsake the feast—have a bigger party and invite more people. Buy another prime rib roast and have more friends over and give thanks before *and after* the meal. Use it as a platform to say, “That prime rib was exquisite. I'm grateful for how generous God has been to me. Let me tell you about how lavish God's love has been poured out on me, that he would send his own Son to die and rise again to redeem a sinner like me.”

The things of earth have been created by God and declared by to be very good. And nothing is to be rejected if it is received with thanksgiving. We have been given these gifts to find our joy in Christ *by* enjoying his gifts. We have been given much that we might make much

of him. He's been generous to us that we would be generous to others. A "wartime lifestyle" doesn't just go without for the sake of thriftiness; you go without in order that what you've been given can be repurposed for the war effort. And that effort starts in your own home. How are you receiving your spouse, kids, or roommate with thanksgiving as a gift of God? How are you communicating his glory through the generosity of your time, emotions, and energy?

But Wait, There's More!

There is much to be grateful for as we reflect on another Christmas season gone by. There is much to praise the Lord for as we look forward to 2015. But wait, there's more. If you feel like there is a whole new horizon, a whole new world for you to enjoy with thanksgiving, wait until next week as JJ hones in on what really is most glorious in Psalm 73.