

Sermon for Sunday, November 11, 1979, by Andrew A. Jumper, D.D., Pastor
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"JOY RIDING WITH JESUS"

Hebrews 12:1-2, II Corinthians 8:1-9

Text: "Looking to Jesus the pioneer and perfecter of our faith, who for the joy that was set before him endured the cross, despising the shame, and is seated at the right hand of the throne of God." Hebrews 12:2

Prologue to the Sermon

Last Sunday I made some comments about tithing and apparently said it in such a way that I gave a wrong impression. Some understood me to say that if you didn't tithe, you wouldn't go to heaven! Well, of course I don't believe that. I departed from my notes and in doing so, said something in an inadequate way. What I was saying was something like this: when judgment day comes and we stand before the Lord, some of us are in for a surprise. Jesus will say something like this to us, "Did you love me down there on earth?" And we will reply, "Yes, Lord, you know I loved you." "Well, in my word to you, written in the Bible, I said to you, 'If you love me, keep my commandments.' Do you remember that?" "Oh, yes, Lord, I remember that very well." "Well, if you loved me as you said, did you keep my commandments?" "Lord, I really tried hard to do that." "Fine. One of my commandments was that you love one another. Did you do that?" "Well, Lord, most of the...uh, some of the...uh, well, Lord, that's not easy to do but every now and then I loved others." "I see. Did you keep the ten commandments--always?" "Lord, those were really good commandments. I kept some of them--uh, some of the time." "I see. Well, I told you to pray constantly, to give thanks in all circumstances. Did you do that?" "Well, Lord, you didn't really expect...uh, the fact is I didn't pray nearly as much as I meant to and no, Lord, I must confess I wasn't thankful always." "You said you loved me so surely you were meek and lowly of heart, you didn't get anxious about tomorrow, and surely you cut off your right hand if it offended you and plucked out your eyes if you looked on someone in lust. Did you do that?" "Well, Lord, surely you didn't really mean all those things...did you?" "My disciples were instructed not to have wrath or anger, not to gossip and be malicious. Did you follow those orders?" "Uh, Lord, I sure tried, but then I failed a lot." "I see. Look, did you do anything--for example I instructed you to tithe. Did you do that?" "Actually, Lord, I always meant to, but there were so many other expenses--things I wanted or needed."

So it will go. What will Jesus say to us? Worse still, what will we say to him? He promised us if we loved him, he would give us his Holy Spirit to help us live for him. In spite of that promise, many of us will look back and realize we never did let His Spirit control our lives and we never did do the things he commanded us to do. What do you suppose he will say to us? Will he say, "Depart from me, you cursed, into the eternal fire prepared for the devil and his angels; for I was hungry and you gave me no food, I was thirsty and you gave me no drink. I was a stranger and you did not welcome me, naked and you did not clothe me, sick and in prison and you did not visit me..."

So, what I was trying to say--and said so poorly--last Sunday was that a lot of us are going to be surprised when we come to the judgment day and discover that while we said we loved Jesus with our minds, we never really loved him and obeyed him with our hearts. I was trying to say that we need to take the commands of the Lord in the Bible a lot more seriously than we do because judgment is going to be a lot more serious than we suspect.

So, if you understood me to say last Sunday that you won't go to heaven if you don't tithe, I apologize. However, if you love Jesus--really love him--and if his teaching for us is to tithe, let me ask you this: why wouldn't the Christian tithe? Now, the other side of that question is this: if you do tithe, does that

mean you will go to heaven? And that reminds me of a story! A very rich man was on his deathbed and his young pastor had come to visit him and to pray with him. "Pastor," said the dying man, "if I leave a million dollars to the church in my will, will I go to heaven?" The pastor thought for a moment and then replied very cautiously, "well, I can't promise anything, but it sure won't hurt to try!"

"Joy Riding With Jesus"

In our scripture this morning we read of two incidents involving Jesus on the one hand and some Christians from northern Greece on the other hand. In both cases, what we read about them was not very pleasant. The incident involving Jesus spoke of shame and it spoke of the cross. As regards the Macedonians, it spoke of their severe affliction, of their poverty. Yet, strangely enough, in both cases the Scripture spoke of their joy. Does that strike you as passingly odd? How can you link joy and suffering, joy and sacrifice, joy and shame, joy and affliction?

It occurs to me that we can learn something about joy from this. The first thing I would like for us to notice that joy is not dependent on external things. That may come as a surprise to us. I suspect most of us have the idea that if we had certain material things we would have joy. Some of us think that if we had achieved certain things, that would bring us joy. Others of us think that if certain human relationships were perfect, we would be happy and have joy.

Actually, the kind of joy those things bring is temporary and short lived. We are much like a certain little girl I know who thinks that if she gets certain things for Christmas she will have joy. But that joy is short-lived. Soon the newness of a toy or gift wears off and too frequently it lies unused and unloved. The joy it brought is greatly diminished and then she begins to think of other things that would bring her real joy--like a hamster (of which I have absolutely no intention of bringing into the house!)

Isn't that true in your life? Think back to the early years of your married life when you knew you would have joy if you had a home of your own. But when you finally got it, the joy was soon diminished and many of us are now guilty of wishing for a newer or a bigger or a different home. Or remember that first new car your heart yearned for--but when you finally got it, before too long its joy was diminished and its newness was worn away to a second-hand automobile. In so many areas of our lives this is true. The things we yearn for and desire with all our hearts soon grow old and the joy they brought soon diminishes.

So, real and lasting joy does not lie in external things. When we get them we either grow accustomed to them, take them for granted, or their joy diminishes. The second thing we learn is that joy is internal. Here were the Macedonians--poor, persecuted and afflicted--yet we are told they had joy. And here was Jesus, facing the cruel persecution of ridicule and crucifixion, yet had joy. But it follows, doesn't it, that if joy is not external it is internal? And the real question is, how does joy occur? If it does depend on external things and, indeed, can exist even when the external world is caving in on us, how does this joy come?

The answer is very simple. The joy comes in doing the will of God. The joy comes when we act to be in God's will. Frankly, I'm not sure how well I have always known that. At least, I have not really consciously articulated it in just that way until just the other night. It happened this way. I was talking with a good friend who is having some real difficulties. There is a great deal of unhappiness in his life. Yet, he is a very successful professional person. He has an outstanding reputation among his peers, but that has not brought him joy. In addition, he has done quite well financially, but that has not brought him joy either. The relationships within his family are very bad and he was indicating

that he would have joy if those problems could work out. Later on, I thought a lot about that conversation and God began to reveal to me in a fresh new way that even good family relationships would not bring him lasting joy--or me either, for that matter. No, in spite of those broken relationships in the home, he could still have joy. He could not depend on either fame or money or a good family relationship to give him joy and at the same time, he could have joy with or without those things. How? By living his life in the will of God.

You see, when a person does that, no matter how badly things are going all around him, he will have the joy of the Lord. But isn't that exactly what the Bible teaches us? The Bible says that when we are in God's will, when our lives are being controlled by his Spirit, something happens to us, something happens in our lives. Do you remember how the Bible puts it? It says, "But the fruit of the Spirit is love, joy, peace, patience," and a lot of other wonderful things. Yes, the fruit of the Spirit is joy!

But be careful! You see a lot of us try to do God's will and then we expect things to change. We expect our children to be better, or our spouse to become more wonderful because we are doing the right things, the Christian thing, God's will. But that's dangerous! That's all wrong! That means our motive for doing God's will is to get others or circumstances or life to change or be different. And if those things don't happen we lose our joy--we get disappointed or discouraged. Does that happen to you? Have you ever done the right thing, done the thing you knew was God's will, but when things didn't change or get better you were disappointed. Well, I know I've done that. But that's all wrong, isn't it. We do it because it is God's will. That's the only motivation we can have. And as long as we do what is right or just or demanded of us because God wills it, then we will have joy.

Does that make sense to you? Now take this whole business of tithing and even going beyond tithing to make a gift to the Lord--why would you do that? Would it be to impress your fellow Christians with your generosity? Would it be because you expect to get something back from it or because you expect a blessing from the Lord because you did? But that would be all wrong, wouldn't it? We do it because tithing is God's will for his people. We do it because a glad and generous heart is God's will for his people. We say, "This is God's will for my life and I will be obedient." And when we do that, we have that incredible inner joy, that inner glory. Do you remember how St. Peter described that feeling? He called it the joy unseekable and full of glory." Do you know, of all your money, the dollars that will bring you joy are the ones that you give in his will.

Isn't that rather incredible? Some of you may feel you cannot afford to tithe or you are not willing to because you have other uses and other needs for that money. But however you spend it, the joy it brings will be fleeting and temporary at best for the joy will diminish. But when you are obedient to the clear will of God for your life, you will have such a joy that its glory will not diminish--a joy that will last for all eternity.

Back when I was a young teenager it was not very often that anyone in my crowd had access to an automobile. But when some one did manage to get the family car for a few brief hours, we did a thing we called "joy riding". We were not going anywhere specifically--we had no particular destination. No, we just rode around for the sheer pleasure of riding, for being in an automobile, for the giddy power of being able to go wherever we wanted. And we called that "joy riding". Did you ever do that? But, oh, how short lived was that joy! Especially since gas was an incredibly high .15¢ a gallon!

Well, there is a ride we can take that never comes to an end. A ride that brings us that incredible joy unspeakable and full of glory. It is the joy ride we take with Jesus when we are doing the will of God.

Are you doing the will of God this morning? You may not like God's will for your life. You may wonder and complain because you will discover that things in your world are not working out the way you wanted or hoped or thought they would. But real joy comes in doing God's will.

What is God's will for you this morning? I'm sure there are a lot of things in your life where you know you are not in God's will. Is that true for you? I know it is for me. But real joy will come to us when we do what is right--not because we necessarily want to or feel we can afford to, but because it is right and that is God's will for us.

As we come to make our financial commitment to God this morning, what is God's will for you and your family? What does God really want you to do? How much does he want you to give? Do you believe it is God's will for every Christian to tithe? Well, I suspect we both think that because that's what the Bible teaches. One thing we can be sure of: our money will not bring us true or lasting joy unless we are in God's will with our money.

So, you can make whatever choice you want to make this morning about your stewardship. I've made my choice. I have decided for the joy ride with Jesus. I have decided to be obedient to the will of God, not only to tithe, but to go beyond the tithe for a gift beyond the tenth. I don't expect any rewards or anything else. I just know I want to be in the will of God, for when I am in his will, I have joy. How about you--how happy in Jesus do you plan to be?