

“The Spirit’s Fruit (Part 2): Joy” Psalm, 16; Galatians 5:22-23; Philippians 1: 12-26

One of the guys I went to seminary with between 2005-2008 started making jokes on Twitter. He was really funny. The next thing he knew, he had 100,000 followers. Every day, Ellie and I would check his twitter feed and laugh and laugh.

I especially loved his jokes about how great junk food is compared to healthy food. Cause I was a junk food fan. One time he tweeted this: “Have the people who say that fruit is nature’s candy ever tasted *actual* candy?”

The fruit of the Spirit is the real fruit. But there’s lots of candy. Lots of junk food. Stuff that kind of imitates the taste and look of the real thing, but which will not nourish anyone, and ultimately just poison us and kill us.

If the fruit of the Spirit is *joy*, then what’s the fake fruit? What does secular society suggest instead of the real thing? What does religion recommend instead?

The fake fruit of secular joy

“He who dies with the most toys wins.” Heard that one before? It’s the way we sometimes speak of our consumer society.

But as both Christian theologians and diverse philosophers have observed, “toys” are not really what people want.

Toys—cars, second homes, boats, clothes, bling—are just the symbols of the power that it takes to acquire them. The *power* is the thing. Money is not the thing either. Money is just the tool you can use to buy things to demonstrate to the world that you have power. Social psychologists have shown that even sexual assault is not really about sex. It’s about power. Paul says that there’s faith, hope, and love, but the greatest is love; we might say that there’s money, sex, and power, but the greatest of these is power.

As Andy Crouch points out, power is not itself evil or idolatrous. But in our contemporary culture, it seems to be our favorite good thing to make into an idol.¹

¹ See Andy Crouch: *Playing God: Redeeming the Gift of Power*

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Power was just as much an idol for ancient societies. In the Bible, we see power idolatry in the form of empires, and even among Israel’s rulers. And in our passage, Paul shows, ironically, the limited power of the idol of power. What does power not have the power to do?

The Roman Empire had conquered the mediterranean world. Now they wanted to cash in on their investment. At the time of Jesus, they were doing it. The *Pax Romana* was a two-century Roman period of peace prosperity that allowed the Empire to collect lots of taxes. Remember how the Gospel of Luke begins the Christmas story? “In those days Caesar Augustus issued a decree that all the Roman world should be taxed.” This is what empires do. Spend money to conquer through power. Gain money back through taxation. Secure power.

But Paul was preaching. His Jesus was a threat to the public peace. It created division within the minority Jewish population throughout the Empire. And of course his message was that, in the resurrection, Jesus, and thus not Caesar, is Lord. So Caesar used the power of the empire to suppress Paul’s movement, and to hold on to its power.

But, Paul shows us, it didn’t work. They’ve got him in chains, but his message is spreading in the prison where he’s chained! Spreading throughout the imperial palace guard! And the message is continuing to spread among other preachers (14) *outside*. Paul is captive, but this Christian gospel is free! The prison sentence has actually turned out to advance the gospel (12).
Oops!

The fake fruit of secular society—in the past or today—is power. And when power is the fruit of a society, it can never result in joy. This is true at the individual level, too. When you are grasping for power and control, you can *never* have joy. Not when you’re trying to get it; not when you actually do get it.

Why? Because power can be gained or lost. When you don’t have it, you’re worried about getting it. When you’ve got it, you’re worried about losing it. You’re either envious of others’ power or paranoid you might lose your own. That’s why even the most rich and famous people are rarely happy. It’s not because their toys didn’t satisfy them. It’s because the power they enjoy leaves them wondering when they’re going to lose it. That’s why the most powerful empires of the world nevertheless use surveillance, aggressive policing, and authoritarian intimidation: the idol of power makes you inherently vulnerable and creates paranoia.

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Individually, or as nations we are trying to grow power. Made into an idol— something you can’t live with and can’t live without— power can never result in true joy. Maybe fleeting and superficial happiness or comfort or admiration. Never joy.

The fake fruit of religious joy

Just like we saw last week with *love*, it’s not just secular people who are making themselves sick on the fake fruit of joy. Religious people, too, keep biting into the fake fruit of joy.

How? In our passage, while Paul is in prison, there are rival preachers running free throughout the region, preaching Paul’s message. And (15) they are motivated by envy and a sense of rivalry with Paul. To these people, what matters is not the substance of the good news they’re spreading. It’s the amount of recognition and prestige they can get by spreading it. It’s the feeling of wielding spiritual power and authority. Of having people listen to you. Of having people change their behavior and their beliefs because of your authority. They saw Paul doing his thing. They envied him. And now that he’s in jail, they think “This is our chance!”

And they *succeed!* Paul even says so. They’re tasting the power and prestige of authority. They’ve built their own little (pathetic) religious empires on the back of Paul’s imprisonment. It feels good. For a while. But since their pleasure in being in a position of spiritual authority is based on their ability to retain that authority and keep the converts coming, they have to go to bed every night wondering if they’ll be able to retain their power tomorrow.

If you’ve been around religious people for long enough, you’ve seen these pathetic little power grabs pop up. A charismatic pastor who uses his personality and persuasive power to push an agenda and pull together a party that will support them. A faction of elders who use their authority to yank the congregation in their direction. A bible study leader or a home group leader who seems knowledgeable and nice until their control over their group is threatened. A church council who covers up abuse in a church in order to avoid the painful process of repentance and accountability.

I could give you a list of pastors who lost their ministries because they’ve been living off the fake fruit of getting and keeping power. Who’ve been consumed and destroyed by envy and

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rivalry. Leaders who’ve had affairs. Committed spiritual abuse. Pastors who’ve taken their own lives after struggling with their own superficial success.

If you’re in the religion business, what matters to you is budgets and butts in the pews. Let’s say an epidemic breaks out. All your typical religious goods and services are no longer able to get to market. Maybe giving goes down. In-person gatherings are taken away. The social life you’ve enjoyed as a religious club can’t happen anymore. How do you feel? Annoyed. Angry. Despairing.

Covid-19 comes along and it poses the question: are we in the business of providing and consuming feel-good religious goods and services?? Have we just been taking advantage of the *Pax Europea* to grow for the sake of growing?

There is a false fruit in religion that tastes just a little bit like joy. But it’s spiritual junk food.

Does your faith sing in the cellar of a Roman prison? Does your faith sing under a Swiss quarantine order? If it doesn’t, then it’s religion. You can’t grow joy in the soil of religion.

The Spirit’s fruit of joy

I don’t want to be in a Roman prison with Paul. I want to live in a cozy village in Switzerland!

But if my faith is genuine, I will sing hymns with Paul even if I land in a Roman prison. Paul says (19) that he’s confident that God will bend everything that happens into the service of Paul’s deliverance. This “deliverance” here is the same word as salvation. In life or death, Paul is safe in Jesus’ hands, and he’s saved in Jesus’ hands. And this is the exact opposite of the fake fruit of secular or religious “happiness.” It’s joy. If you are growing in grace, then the Spirit *will* make you prepared to be joyful in the Lord in *any and every circumstance*.

A pastor in my denomination, in my local presbytery, in fact, Andrew Brunson, was a missionary in Turkey for two decades. He was falsely accused of being a dangerous terrorist and beginning in Oct 2016 was imprisoned for a year and a half. He testifies that he had to remember Paul in Roman prisons in the same region as him, for the same reasons as him, 2000 years earlier. He remembered Paul’s joy and his songs and his witness within the prison. And he

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begged the Spirit of God to produce the fruit of joy in his life, despite his imprisonment. And the Lord was faithful. Andrew had joy.

It’s important to understand, though, that joy doesn’t mean the absence of sorrow. When we’re dealing with fake secular or religious fruit, with happiness, you’re either happy or you are not. Happiness can’t exist alongside sadness. But the Spirit’s fruit of joy can and does emerge even in the soil of sorrow.

Is Paul glad that people are being envious and selfish? Is he rejoicing that he’s in prison? No! He’s got joy because he knows that *even though he’s in prison*, he belongs to Jesus, and he can see that the good news of Jesus is running free! Being a Christian does not mean that you never experience sorrow. Bearing the fruit of joy doesn’t mean you’re not sad. Having joy means that you are not *playing* the “whoever dies with the most toys wins” game. That you’re not an emperor with no clothes trying desperately to consolidate power. That you can not ultimately be imprisoned--neither by a jailer or by death itself.

If horrible things happen to you and you’re not sad, there’s something wrong with you. But if you are not able, finally, to say, in the midst of the sorrow, “the Lord gives, and the Lord takes away: blessed be the name of the Lord, who will not abandon me to death, and in whom I will be delivered, hallelujah!”, then you are not bearing the Spirit’s fruit.

Jesus the joyful fruit-bearer

The Lord Jesus is all-powerful, but did not need to overthrow the Roman empire to consolidate power. The Lord Jesus is rich, but did not need to accumulate toys. The Lord Jesus was ready to give up his power, and give up his riches, and give up his life. For the *what* set before him, he endured the cross? For the *joy* set before him. The joy of what? Of doing his Father’s will, of expressing his Father’s love, of saving his Father’s children, of reuniting the Father’s family. It was Jesus’ *joy* to do the Father’s will. The man of sorrows was also the man of joy. Even when he could not subjectively feel happiness, he put his life joyfully in his Father’s hands. And when he had died for our sins and been raised for our justification, he experienced the joy of his Father’s words: well done, good and faithful servant! And now what is the joy that Jesus sets his eyes on? Jesus sets his eyes on the joy he’ll have on the day when his church is raised like him to glory, and united with him forever.

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The Spirit of God set Jesus apart to bear the fruit of joy in his life. And Jesus, right now, for you and me, lives a joyful resurrected life. In him, you and I will one day— if we abandon the false fruit of power and embrace the joy of belonging to Jesus — we will have our joy made perfect and complete, forever.

And because we’ll bear the fruit of joy forever, we can and must, by the Spirit, and in Jesus Christ, bear it now.