

## The Kingdom of Joy

Romans 14:17c

Sermon Transcript by Rev. Ernest O'Neill

For several Sundays we have been studying a certain verse in this book. Maybe you'd like to turn to it, loved ones. It's Romans 14:17: "For the kingdom of God is not food and drink but righteousness and peace and joy in the Holy Spirit."

Would you step back for a moment from the whole subject and think, what is your definition of the kingdom of God? What do you think of when a person says to you "The kingdom of God"? I think some of us may think, "Well, isn't it the influence that we're having in bringing the kingdom of God to earth? The influence we're having politically and legally, the laws and decisions we're beginning to have passed in Congress that make for a more moral nation? Now, isn't that the kingdom of God? That's God's kingdom spreading in our present society." Well, that has something to do with the kingdom of God, loved ones. If you like to look at it, it's in Matthew 13:33: "He told them another parable. 'The kingdom of heaven is like leaven which a woman took and hid in three measures of flour till it was all leavened.'"

Well, that's what we're talking about there when we vote and are responsible citizens. It's what we mean when we run for Congress, if God is guiding us to do that, when we are taking part in the legal and political system of our country, we are acting like leaven in the society. And to the extent that we are acting like yeast, we are in some way exercising our restraining influence on sin, so that at least there is a little more peace for God's Holy Spirit to work in people's hearts. So, that in a way is something to do with the kingdom, but don't you see that that leaven is not the kingdom. That's a result of the operation of the kingdom of God in society but that operation itself is not the kingdom of God. So, that's something we should all do, but that is not in fact the kingdom of God. In fact the kingdom of God will only be set up on this earth cataclysmically when Jesus returns and sets up his millennial kingdom.

Look at Matthew 13:47: "Again the kingdom of heaven is like a net which was thrown into the sea and gathered fish of every kind; and when it was full, men drew it ashore and sat down and sorted the good into vessels but threw away the bad. So will it be at the close of the age. The angels will come out and separate the evil from the righteous, and throw them into the furnace of fire; there men will weep and gnash their teeth." Maybe you think of the kingdom of God that way. The kingdom of God is a future event. It's what will take place at the end of the age, when there will be the great judgment and God will separate those who accept him from those who reject him. The kingdom of God is something that is going to take place in the future.

You know that's wrong, do you? I don't blame us all thinking of it that way but that's wrong, loved ones. There were some people in Jesus' own time that thought that way and I'll show you what he said to them, it's in Luke 17. And they were saying the same thing: the kingdom of God is something that is going to take place in the future. Luke 17:20: "Being asked by the Pharisees, when the kingdom of God was coming, he answered them, 'The kingdom of God is not coming with signs to be observed; nor will they say, 'Lo here it is!' or 'There!' for behold, the kingdom of God is in the midst of you.'" And actually the Greek word for "midst" is "entos" and if you follow that little 'Z' there you see the footnote and you follow it down to the bottom of the page, you see the right translation of "entos": "within you". Jesus said "No, the kingdom of God is not something that is coming in the

future with signs that you can observe and get ready for, the kingdom of God is within you."

In other words, there is no place for you and me saying, "Well, I am a bit of a mess now, but I am working on it and when the kingdom of God comes, I'll be ready." You can't do that. Jesus says, "The kingdom of God is within you today. And if it's not within you today, it's unlikely that it'll be within you 20 years hence or 40 years hence." The Bible, loved ones, knows nothing of that "pie in the sky when you die" approach to the kingdom of God, it doesn't. It just knows nothing of that. Jesus said, "He who believes in me has already passed from death to life. He has eternal life."

John 5:24

In other words, if Jesus is ruling in your heart and life now, then it is likely that He will be ruling when he comes again and sets up his kingdom on earth. If Jesus isn't ruling in your heart and life this morning -- I know it sounds terrible, but the chances are that he will not be ruling when he comes to set up his kingdom. Why? Because of the well known psychological, human, life commonsensical principle -- "as now, so then." Think of all the things you have promised that you would change. Think of the things you are resolving to do, that you haven't yet done. Think of how long you have been resolving to do those things.

Loved ones, Jesus says, "The kingdom of God is within you." And you see that's what our verse is saying, that we are studying. The kingdom of God is not food and drink, it's not things that men do, it's not acts of men. The kingdom of God is righteousness and peace and joy in the Holy Spirit. It is the state that is made by God's spirit within your heart. It's a state that God brings about within you. Do you see another reason why it's hard to say, "I'm going to be different, when the kingdom of God comes."? It's because we're talking about a state. It's a state of your heart. And the state of your heart just grows and grows each time you live in that state. Each day you live the way you are this morning, that state becomes more and more part of you, until you actually don't even know it's part of you. It's just your nature. And that's why it's so important what you do this morning.

As you listen to these words, you have to decide if the kingdom of God is going to be within you. Or, if it's going to continue to be the kingdom of self. Because that's what it is. A kingdom is the domain of a king. It's a place where a king rules. Now, if you rule in your life at this moment, you rule your life and you continue to rule it. Then you'll probably rule it for the duration of your life and for eternity. If Jesus rules in your life this morning, then probably he'll continue to rule if you continue to obey him. But you have to decide this morning which rule is going to be in your life. Is God ruling in your life or are you ruling?

How do you know which is taking place? How do you know whether you're ruling or whether God's ruling? Well, if you're ruling, you are at the mercy of happiness. That's right. You are at the mercy of happiness if you rule your life; you may say, "Well, I'll put up with that, that's one of my inalienable rights, the pursuit of happiness; I think I'll take that." Except that happiness comes from a root that means lucky or fortunate. It means a person who is lucky or fortunate and that root in its turn comes from a verb that all of us know "happen; to happen". And of course we would know it especially through "happenstance". So when we talk about a thing happening, we are talking about a thing coming about by chance or by luck. And if you rule your life, you are at the mercy of happiness. That is, the only happiness you have results from the things that happen to you. That's your only happiness.

And you are committed to trying to make as many good things and nice things happen to you as

possible and you are at the mercy of that. And the tragedy is that if you are trying to make something nice happen to you, there is somebody else trying to make something nice happen to them, and if you are both after the same girl or the same job, then their happiness is going to mean your unhappiness. So, that's why you are at the mercy of happiness. But, it is even more serious than that, because there are four billion other people who are also trying to make nice things happen to them too. And a lot of the things that they do are having bad effects and sending bad forces against your life and so you are having lots of forces come against your life that you are trying to make bad things happen to you. And that's what I mean when I say you are at the mercy of happiness. You are at the mercy of making as many nice things happen to you to make you feel happy as you possibly can. And everybody else is trying to do the same in their life, so there are bound to be all kinds of collisions.

You may say, "Oh well, I mean, it's the 'principle of liberty', isn't it? I mean, I have to exercise my liberty, but not in such a way that it limits somebody else's liberty. So, obviously, I mean, if I am going to make something pleasant happen to me, that's going to cause somebody else unhappiness, well I'll limit my happiness, I'll limit my liberty." Except that you know fine well, if you are ruling your life, you are very reluctant to limit your liberty in that way. When it comes to whether he gets the girl or you get the girl or whether you get the job or he gets the job, you'll find there is something within you that doesn't want to limit your liberty. And that in a sense contributes even more to your unhappiness, because you sense there is something wrong inside me. I am trying to get myself happy all the time and yet there is something ugly inside me in doing that. And so, the problem of making enough things happen to you that are pleasant occupies a lot of your time. Of course, there is one dreadful tragedy about the whole experience. That is, that you know finally, you won't be able to keep this up.

Finally you can't keep this up. Why? Because finally you know fine well, that there is an event that's going to take place in your life that once and for all stops all possibility of any other nice things happening to you. Whether it's by a slow illness or by a fast illness, you know fine well, that there will come a time when no matter how many nice suppers you have made for yourself to make yourself feel happy, how many new cars you have bought yourself to make yourself feel good, however many good marriages you have had to make yourself enjoy life, there's going to come a time when all that ceases. And death cuts it all off and no longer are you able to make nice things happen to you. Now, that's what you are at the mercy of, if you rule your own life.

Joy is different. Joy is different from happiness. Happiness depends on outside circumstances and events occurring to you that are pleasant. Joy wells up from within you. It comes up from within you. Happiness is caused by outside things; joy is caused by the kingdom of God within you. The kingdom of God is righteousness, peace and joy in the Holy Spirit. Joy is a different thing. Joy comes up from within irrespective of what is coming from outside. What is joy? How I can tell you? Because I know it so well. When you see a little dog, rolling over and over and over, when its master says, "Go for walk?" and you see that little thing, full of life and full of delight. Or you see a little baby, with sheer joy, banging his feet, up and down on the floor like that and laughing at its mother; or when you see the sun rising morning after morning, because actually joy brings consistency and regularity, that's why the little baby does that so regularly, when it's joyful. It brings regularly. When you see the sun coming up morning after morning, you are seeing the results of the joy that is at the center of our universe. There is a joy at the center of our universe that comes from a Father's love of his Son, that's it.

There is a great Creator, a dear Father who has a dear Son and they love each other so much that

it's continual joy. That there is a joy that flashes from their friendship and that joy flashes throughout the universe and it sends the stars scattering across the sky. It brings the sun up every day in our planet and it brings joy to the swallows that soar in the sky and to the little baby that beats its feet on the floor and to the little dog that rolls over. That joy is joy that comes from the very heart of our Creator and his relationship with his Son. Now, when you allow the kingdom of God to come within you, when you allow the King to rule your life, when you allow the Creator to rule your life, you put yourself into the stream of that joy and that joy begins to well up from within you. That's just the feeling of rightness, you just sense it, and you begin to sense the delight and the wonder of the spring mornings, even in the middle of winter. You begin to sense you can't understand where the joy is coming from. It's coming from that dear Father and his Son and from their delight in each other and you don't understand why it's there, but it's welling up from within you the moment you begin to let God rule your life.

Loved ones, you don't rule your life anyway, you are asleep a third of the time, you have missed a third of it. Doesn't matter how long you live, you still missed a third of it. You don't know, why you came here, you don't know where you are going after you leave. We aren't the kings of our own lives, we aren't. We are just accepting a great bluff that we are kings of our own lives. Most of you would agree you don't even start to be a king even until you are 14-15 years old. And it ends surprisingly soon, doesn't it? I don't know what the men here think, but it's a very short period of time when you are in the up and up and you can control it. Very soon you find yourself in the same position as Peter. There comes a time when you are carried you know not where and you can't control it. There is really very little ruling of our own lives and the truth is that God is the king of your life. Whether you allow him to be or not, he is the king and the ruler of your life. It's simply that if you believe that, you immediately put yourself into the stream of reality and the joy that he has with his Son begins to dwell up from within you.

Of course that intensifies as you begin to believe what he has done for that desire to be king within you. When you begin to realize that that desire to be king that rules your life that you can do nothing about, that part of you that makes you want your way whatever, has been put into his son, Jesus. And God just destroyed it there and he looks upon you as his own dear submissive son and he loves you like that. A new joy of salvation begins to well up with from within you and you cease to have the fear or the latent guilt about what you are really like. You begin to know, my God loves me, because he has destroyed this in his son Jesus, and he regards me now as his son, Jesus. He thinks of me in that way and his smile is upon me. And joy begins to well up from within you as you sense you are at peace with the Father of the whole universe. That joy is deeper than any happiness. It's amazing but it actually is consistent with trouble. Most of us have known some of that. It actually continues even in the midst of trouble. I'll show you there is a bit in the New Testament where it says that. It's in Acts 17:5. And this is the description of the people in Thessalonica when the Gospel was preached to them.

So this is the external chaos they were in. "But the Jews were jealous, and taking some wicked fellows of the rabble, they gathered a crowd, set the city in an uproar and attacked the house of Jason, seeking to bring them out to the people. And when they could not find them, they dragged Jason and some of the brethren before the city authorities, crying, 'These men who have turned the world upside down have come here also, and Jason has received them; and they are all acting against the decrees of Caesar, saying that there is another king, Jesus.' And the people and the city authorities were disturbed when they heard this. And when they had taken security from Jason and the rest, they let them go." That was the chaos that the Christians faced.

Now here is Paul's description of how they received the Gospel. It's in 1st Thessalonians 1:6. It was in that situation that this occurred. "And you became imitators of us and of the Lord, for you received the word in much affliction, with joy inspired by the Holy Spirit." So even in the midst of affliction like that, the joy continues. Why does it continue? Because you suddenly begin to realize that God destroyed not only your miserable self and your sins on Calvary, but he crucified the world on Calvary. Galatians 6:14 says, "The world was crucified with Christ." And you begin to realize that God has destroyed the world's ability to destroy your life and whatever happens to you, God has already changed that around and turned it around. And that your life is experiencing the same thing as Joseph says, you remember when the brothers came to him and were afraid because they had sold him originally into slavery. Remember Joseph said, "You meant it for evil but God meant it for my good."

And as you allow the kingdom of God to begin to work within you, you begin to believe more and more the gospel. You see that the things that happen to you have, in fact, been filtered through God's hand on the cross and he allows to come through to you only the stuff that you can handle by his grace. And that's why joy continues. So you are like David filled with joy and then suddenly there is a mountain of a man (Goliath) in front of you just going up and up like a tall skyscraper. There is Goliath right in front of you. And David's joy continues unabated because he knows that God has already dealt with that Goliath. God has already destroyed the power of that Goliath to destroy his life or his happiness and he moves straight on with the joy welling up from within. That's it, loved ones. The joy is not just a dumb joy in suffering. It is not just a dumb joy and masochism. It is a joy that continues to rise up because you know that every event that is coming against you God has already dealt with in Calvary, has filtered through his loving hands and will allow to come to you this coming week only the bits that you by his grace can face.

That's why the joy is unaffected by affliction and is unaffected by unpleasant things happening from without. Do you see what a deliverance it gives you for the week? And I don't know how many of you are like I was -- you know what you do. You look down the week and you try to foresee where the trouble is going to occur and you try to fix what days are going to be the good days because at least nothing bad will happen -- and what days are going to be agonizing days -- and what days should I have a bad cold on. And you begin to look ahead and that's the way you face your week. It's torture. It isn't life at all because anything could fall upon you. Because you feel you are utterly unprotected.

But as you begin to let God rule in your life, as this morning, you say to him, "Lord God, I want you to rule my life. Come into my heart and rule my life and setup your kingdom in my heart." Then joy will begin to rise within you. A joy that comes from the dear Father's love of his Son and from his love of you and then the joy that comes from the realization that I am not at their mercy anymore. I am not at the mercy of my boss, I am not at the mercy of my colleagues, I am not at the mercy of somebody who wants to fire me, I am not at the mercy of cancer and I am not at the mercy of the economy. My God has crucified this world in his Son Jesus. He has taken the sting out of any of the things that would come against me, and I know that I will only receive this coming week the things that by his grace I am able to handle through exercising faith in his kingdom. Then your life begins to be smooth.

I never really fully understood my old grandmother and her love of this Psalm. She was an old Salvation Army officer. I never really understood her love of this particular song but I understand it now, because this was the way she lived. It's simply what happens to everybody who allows God to be God in their life -- who allows God to begin to rule their life. It's Psalm 91:1-8.

"He who dwells in the shelter of the Most High,

who abides in the shadow of the Almighty,  
will say to the Lord, 'My refuge and my fortress;  
my God, in whom I trust.'

For he will deliver you from the snare of the fowler and from the deadly pestilence; he will cover you with his pinions, and under his wings you will find refuge; his faithfulness is a shield and buckler.

You will not fear the terror of the night, nor the arrow that flies by day, nor the pestilence that stalks in darkness, nor the destruction that wastes at noonday. A thousand may fall at your side, ten thousand at your right hand; but it will not come near you. You will only look with your eyes and see the recompense of the wicked."

That's the way it works. Even the bad things that happen, God takes them and turns them around and works them for your good as He did with Joseph. That's another reason why, in fact, it's not only consistent with affliction, but often actually affliction can increase your joy. That's a strange one, you know, but maybe it's the last verse if you'd look at it. It's in James 1:2, loved ones. "Count it all joy, my brethren, when you meet various trials, for you know that the testing of your faith produces steadfastness. And let steadfastness have its full effect, that you may be perfect and complete, lacking in nothing."

Actually trials can increase your joy. Because the truth is, loved ones, it doesn't matter how many nice vacations you have; it doesn't matter how many wonderful spring days you have where you feel so fit and so strong; there's going to come a day when you cough out your life. There's going to be a day when everything isn't going to happen right. This world is limited in the nice things that can happen, and finally there is going to be a very un-nice thing that's going to happen.

And the only real joy and the only joy that lasts is the joy that is passing between the Father and the Son, the Creator and his dear Son at this moment. He is able to pour it into your heart as you allow him to rule your life and he is able to increase it within you. And the strange thing is that the more you depend upon that, the more that joy increases. I don't want to make you all miserable but in a way the more you depend on outward things to make you happy, there is a tendency for that to wilt. Indeed the more outward things are unpleasant and hard the more that joy within increases; and there you know we're all on the same wave length. Because there isn't one of you who will not admit that the closest times to God are the times when your mum died or when your wife died or you lost your job, or when the bottom fell out of your finances. We all know that not one of us will disagree with that.

All of us will say the closest times we've had to God have been the times when we've turned completely away from the external things that happened, and we've turned to Him and we've found a joy that is beyond anything we could describe. And that's why "count it all joy when you enter into various trials." None of us respond naturally to them with a welcome but on the second thought you can say to yourself, "Lord, you have control of this, you are already controlling it for my good and I thank you for it, and Lord, I trust you as I turn to you now that you well up within me in joy."

Finally after all the explanations there is something just inexplicable about the joy. It's just a wonderful thing that runs through the heart of the universe and just blasts out of anybody who allows God to rule their life, that's it. Finally there is something inexplicable about it. It just bursts out from inside you at times when you don't expect it. It's just God's joy bursting out inside you, and it lives forever and it's yours. You just say to God this morning, "God, come and be king in my life and my heart. Come and set up your kingdom in my heart." Then you'll begin to sense

the joy of the kingdom of God starting to well up within you this coming week, because you are just in the stream of reality at last. Let's pray.

Dear Father, the cares of this world have so often grown up around us, and choked the early delight that we had as children. Lord, we see that we've missed that early delight and now we realize that it was a little sign from you of the way you meant us to live forever. And that we as very tiny, little children, we were allowing somebody else to rule our lives; and we therefore experienced a little of the joy that is your will for us today.

Lord, we cast away these cares of the world. We stop trying to manipulate it all for our happiness. We turn away from the hopeless task of making the circumstances around us to match our needs. Lord God, we'd ask you, will you come in and will you be king in our hearts and our lives? Will you set up your kingdom in our life? Will you come inside us now, Lord; so that the kingdom of God can be within us? And will you rule our lives now from this day forward? Lord, we ask you to do that; and to bring all the benefits of your kingdom, as you please, within us. We ask you for Jesus' sake. Amen.