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Cheerfulness (Chapter 6 from Morning Resolve: To Live a Simple, Sincere and Serene Life)

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Cheerfulness

The principles of living greatly include the capacity to face trouble with courage, disappointment with cheerfulness, and trial with humility.

—THOMAS S. MONSON

Introduction

I GREW UP IN a church tradition that emphasized being happy. We were all to have and share with others the “joy of the Lord.” It would show the world that we were different. I remember singing, “I’m so happy and here’s the reason why, Jesus took my burdens all away.” Now, as a grade schooler, I’m really not sure that I carried all that many burdens, but I was glad that they were gone and sang the song with gusto nonetheless. Probably my favorite song was “I’m Happy All the Time.” In fact, according to the lyrics of the song, I was not just to be happy but “in-right, outright, upright, downright happy all the time!” The song came complete with hand motions, and we sang the song through three or four times, each time a bit faster than the time before. It was fun, and in some ways, it did make me happy. To this day, I still love to sing—but not necessarily that particular song. At the same time, the not-so-subtle message I received was that Christians were to be happy—all the time. The trouble was, I wasn’t, and I didn’t see happiness all the time in those around me either.

Part of the problem, it seems to me, is that we confuse and confound a cheerful spirit with being happy (all the time), or funny, or even giddy. How many times have we been told to put on a happy face, even in the midst of deep pain and anguish—and especially in church? We sing praise songs, but selectively choose the texts. Everyone loves Psalm 23 (“the Lord is my shepherd, I shall not want”). So do I, but admittedly Psalm 22 hits much closer to home at times (“My God, my God, why has thou forsaken me?”). We never sing about that. Sadly, the results of such mandatory happiness are devastating, leading many to see congregational life as plastic and worship as irrelevant—and perhaps irreverent, too. That is, everyone wears a mask, our feelings, hurts, and struggles hidden. We’re simply not honest with each other.

And we know that merely acting happy has a very short shelf life, too. We’re not after spiritual mirth here. Going through the day with a fake smile and an insincere joviality can dry you out like an old leaf. So, can we develop the kind of cheerfulness that provides daylight for our spirits and serenity for our souls? I believe we can, but it takes practice and hard work. Cultivating isn’t the most fun part of gardening, but seeing the fruits of your labors certainly is. In this chapter, we’ll look at the habits and attitudes that can bring cheer to your spiritual life along with a closer examination of cheerfulness and some realistic strategies to develop and sustain it. As we have in the first five chapters of this book, we’ll also consult Scripture for perspective and insight. Then, I’ll end by offering some practical advice and posing some questions for discussion and reflection. Let’s get to work!

Attitudes and Habits

We certainly know the opposite of cheerfulness. We see it all the time—woe, gloom, and misery—the glass is more than empty tribe. Folk with this outlook on life are just not happy, and not fun to be around either. So, why are some people so cheerful and others so gloomy? Is there a natural disposition to be one or the other? Probably. Is it a learned behavior? Partly. And if so, can you unlearn gloom? Hopefully. Maybe all that is needed is a positive mental attitude. Well, maybe. Of course, there is nothing wrong with a PMA, but I don’t think you can just reason yourself into happiness any more than you can reason yourself to be a foot taller. No, it takes more than just thinking a few good thoughts—but I do know that we can work on our attitudes. Like so many things in life, I have come to believe that

cheerfulness is a result of strenuous discipline. Strenuous discipline—that sounds a bit like cultivating a garden, doesn't it? Well, it is. It is work, hard work, but honest work brings contentment, and I also see a distinct connection between contentment and cheerfulness. We'll explore that connection later in this chapter.

For now, let's focus on this: cheerfulness is a habit that is formed by practice. Not a gimmick, not a quick fix, not acting happy, happy, happy all the time, but an intentional practice that over time will shape and form not only how you see the world, but how you live in it, too. We don't deny that there is darkness in the world. Of course there is, but we can choose not to live in it. So, how does one cultivate cheerfulness?

Cheer-full-ness

Optimism

To cultivate cheerfulness, being full of cheer, starts with developing an optimistic spirit. Of course, things do not always go as we would like. Circumstances can be good or bad, and usually somewhere in between. Things don't always go as we plan. That's life. In all circumstances, however, we can have a spirit of optimism. It's a choice we make. I want to be clear about this; it is a spiritual choice we make. You can't choose what happens to you, but you do choose how you react. You choose what disciplines you put into practice, and one of the most basic practices for spiritual growth is to see the good in all things, to be optimistic. And with practice, you do get better at it. For a few of us, it comes natural, but for most of us, it is a learned discipline.

Delight

Those who practice cheerfulness take a certain delight in life. It is as though they see life through a special pair of glasses. Maybe they do, but delight can be learned, too. There are two aspects to taking delight—the first is finding joy and the second is being playful. In all our lives, there are things that bring us great joy—things that fill our spirits. One of those things for me is playing guitar and singing, and another one is fishing. It is important to be intentional about such things, to know what they are, and to enjoy them often. It is a spiritual practice to do so, a way of cultivating cheerfulness. And

along with finding joy, it is important to discover or rediscover our sense of play. Being around children helps, of course. They give you permission to join in. I recommend it highly. Just play with them. Be silly. Be active. It renews your spirit and brings you delight. Yes, it is delight-full.

Celebrations and Surprises

Another avenue to being full of cheer is through celebrations and surprises. Some of us don't like to be surprised, but most of us do. And even those who dislike surprises are usually in when it comes to celebrating others, their accomplishments, their promotions, and their good work. What if we made it a habit to celebrate someone and something each week? What a difference it would make in how we see the world, what we look for in each day. It is a practical and purposeful way to practice cheerfulness, to be cheerful. Just find excuses to celebrate those around you, and if you have the insight and instinct, throw in a surprise or two. It doesn't have to be much. Sharing even a coffee cake at work or with a neighbor can be a great surprise. If asked what the occasion is, just tell them that you are putting your morning resolve to cultivate cheerfulness into practice. That should start an interesting conversation.

Contentment

I believe that there is also a profound connection between cheerfulness and contentment. They are not the same thing, but they are related. One shapes the other. Those who are cheerful seem to have found a deep peace, a certain contentment with life that escapes easy explanation. They have a sense that they are in a good place, the right place. They have a sense of neighbor and community, and see themselves as a helpful part of it. In addition, contentment comes from having a sense of purpose, that what you are doing has some significance for yourself and others. In a way, there is a sense that you are on a mission, that you are here in this place at this particular time for a reason, even if the reason is not perfectly clear. Some have joked about being on a mission from God. Honestly, I think we are. Having a deep contentment that we are on a mission at this time in this place gives rise to a kind of cheerfulness that goes way beyond mirth. It is daylight for the mind and serenity for the soul.

Laughter

Not everyone is a comedian, having the gift to make people laugh. It is truly a wonderful gift. However, I am convinced that those who are cheerful have developed the ability to see humor in life, and to have a good laugh or two. They particularly have the ability to laugh at themselves. Isn't it fun to be around someone who can say to you, "You wouldn't believe what I did today," and then goes on to tell about some mistake or silly thing that happened? We laugh with them. Their joy, even in their mistakes, rubs off on each one of us. It's contagious!

Cheer-for-ness

I think I've invented this word. One of the ways to cultivate cheerfulness is to turn the focus away from our own selves and toward others. Start the practice of cheering for others. It is an outward orientation that lifts the human spirit. Find at least three things to cheer for each day. Be on the lookout—a neighbor's first volleyball match, the first or last day of school, learning to swim or drive, running a race, mowing the lawn for the first time in spring, or picking the last batch of zucchini. All of these and many more are opportunities for cheering and celebration. And in the midst of it all, you will be cheerful, too.

Scripture

In all the chapters of this book, I have tried diligently to refrain from simply quoting a verse or two from Scripture to prove my point without regard to the context of the passage; something called "proof texting." In the case of cheerfulness, I have to admit that it is tempting. The Bible does not comment often on cheerfulness. The most often quoted verses are Proverbs 15:13, "A happy heart makes the face cheerful;" Proverbs 17:22, "A cheerful heart is good medicine;" and perhaps the most often quoted verse about cheerfulness, Romans 9:7, "God loves a cheerful giver." Of course, cheerfulness does come from the heart. It is good medicine, and I'm sure that God does love a cheerful giver—so do I. However, I think there is a deeper principle to be explored. Let's look at the relationship between Saul and David.

You may remember the story of David and Goliath, the Philistine's giant warrior. David killed him with a slingshot and some smooth stones,

to the great relief of the men of Israel. No one wanted to fight Goliath, who had been mocking the army of Israel for forty days and nights. When David slew Goliath and Israel won the war, a massive celebration erupted. In all the towns along the return route, women danced in the streets and sang: “Saul has slain his thousands, and David his tens of thousands” (1 Sam 18:7). At this point, we see how Saul reacted to the cheering: “Saul was very angry; this refrain displeased him greatly” (1 Sam 18:8).

As long as folk were cheering for Saul alone, he was fine. But as soon as the cheering included someone else, he didn’t like it. Rather than being cheerful, he was fearful. Oh how things might have been different if Saul had joined in the cheering for David, too. David was deeply loyal to Saul. It could have been a wonderful partnership. Instead, the relationship went south and ended in tragedy. This is truly sad, but not terribly uncommon. In leadership training, we teach that it is important (even critical) to surround yourself with those who are better at key tasks than you are. The talents of others need not threaten you. In fact, you should cheer for them! Only a very sick soul insists on being the very best at everything, hiring only weak talent and pushing out those who have stronger skills. Those who do insure their organization will be mediocre at best. Remember, cheerfulness includes cheer-for-ness. Cheerful or fearful—it’s a choice with interminable consequences.

Some Practical Advice

As we end this chapter, here are some practical points to employ as we seek to cultivate cheerfulness. The first step is to make practicing cheerfulness a high priority. This may almost seem silly, but it is important to remember that we are shaped by what we intentionally practice. Optimism, contentment, and delight are learned states. As we consciously focus on being cheerful, we will get better at it. Serenity is a plant to be tended. If we begin to think about the ability we have to grow what we nurture, understanding it as a gift from God rather than thinking that serenity is somehow beamed down to us while we do nothing, we’ll see that there is work to be done.

The second step is to make cheerfulness a daily practice, not an occasional activity. There is no substitute for repeated effort. Earlier I wrote that God does not expect us to be perfect, but he expects us to be faithful. In this case, being faithful means keeping at it. That is one reason why we

read “A Morning Resolve” each and every day. It is a reminder that there is work to be done *this* day.

One way to make cheerfulness a daily priority is to imagine that God has appointed you to be a cheerleader. As you go through each day, look for opportunities to cheer for others at work, at play, in the neighborhood, or in church. And what would it mean if you were somehow appointed to be the captain of the cheerleading squad? Who would you recruit to be part of the squad? What would you do? In San Diego, there was a group called Women of Purpose. They would get together each week and ask, “Who can we help this week?” I greatly admired their work, and I must say that they were cheerleaders, too. What if you brought a small group together each week and asked, “Who can we cheer for this week?” I bet you would have more opportunities than you could shake a stick at.

Another way to make cheerfulness a daily priority is to celebrate the small victories in life. I use the word *small* intentionally. I urge you to celebrate the small victories because major victories are so few and far between. Oh, of course, celebrate the major victories like promotions, graduations, marriages, and such, but also celebrate the small victories, too—a new bird feeder, a good week at school, learning to swim, a wonderful meal, or the first strawberries of the season. Getting into the habit of looking for small things to celebrate will bring cheerfulness to the fore. And we can celebrate forward in the same way we pay forward. Just think of times when someone has celebrated you, and how special it made you feel. Why not do the same for someone else, and tell them to pass it on? Celebrate it forward!

Finally, spend your time with cheerful people. In the long run, you become like the people you hang with, so why not seek out cheerful people? It’s really that simple. Ask them why they are so cheerful, where the contentment and optimism come from. Most will take it as a real compliment that you are interested enough to ask and will give you a thoughtful answer. When they do, listen and learn from them. Learning to get the word “I” out of conversations and asking questions is an honest spiritual practice. If you ask the right questions, you can learn more than you can imagine.

Conclusion

In this chapter, we have focused on how to cultivate cheerfulness. It isn’t the same thing as being happy all the time, but joy, contentment, and optimism do play an important part in your spiritual growth. It is important

to understand that cheerfulness can be intentionally practiced, that cultivating cheerfulness *is* a spiritual practice, and that the fruits of this labor are deeply rewarding. Cheerfulness is a wonderfully fragrant plant in any spiritual garden. It makes the other plants more enjoyable, too. It never crowds them out.

Questions for Discussion and Reflection

1. When you really need to restore your spirit, what do you do? What kinds of activities bring you the most joy?
2. Who do you know that is the most fun to be around? What makes them so? What can you learn from them and put into practice?
3. What aspect of contentment is most difficult for you right now—having a sense of right place, a sense of right purpose, or a sense of right timing? What might you do about it?
4. Think about the last time someone celebrated something in your life. How did it make you feel? Could you return the favor or “celebrate forward?” How?
5. Your assignment is to be a cheerleader for someone this week. Can you think of a way to do this that is unexpected—even fun? And who could you recruit for your cheerleading squad?

I will try this day to live a simple, sincere, and serene life, repelling promptly every thought of discontent, anxiety, discouragement, impurity, and self-seeking; cultivating cheerfulness . . .