

[return to religion-online](#)

The New Being by Paul Tillich

Paul Tillich is generally considered one of the century's outstanding and influential thinkers. After teaching theology and philosophy at various German universities, he came to the United States in 1933. For many years he was Professor of Philosophical Theology at Union Theological Seminary in New York City, then University Professor at Harvard University. His books include Systematic Theology; The Courage to Be; Dynamics of Faith; Love, Power and Justice; Morality and Beyond; and Theology of Culture. The New Being was published by Charles Scribner's Sons in 1955. This material was prepared for Religion Online by Ted & Winnie Brock.

Chapter 19: The Meaning of Joy

When the Lord restored the fortunes of Zion, we were like those who dream. Then our mouth was filled with laughter, and our tongue with shouts of joy; then they said among the nations, "The Lord has done great things for them." The Lord had done great things for us; we are glad. Restore our fortunes, O Lord, like the water-courses in the Negeb! May those who sow in tears reap with shouts of joy! He that goes forth weeping, bearing the seed for sowing, shall come home with shouts of joy, bringing his sheaves with him.
Psalm 126.

Truly, truly, I say to you, you will weep and lament, but the world will rejoice; you will be sorrowful, but your sorrow will turn into joy. When a woman is in travail she has sorrow, because her hour has come; but when she is delivered of the child, she no longer remembers the anguish, for joy that a child is born into the world. So you have sorrow now, but I will see you again and your hearts will rejoice, and no one will take your joy from you.
John 16:20-22.

These things I have spoken to you, that my joy may be in you, and that your joy may be full.
John 15:11.

The Bible abounds in admonitions to rejoice. Paul's word to the Philippians, "again I will say, Rejoice," represents an ever-present element in Biblical religion. For the men of the Old and New Testaments the lack of joy is a consequence of man's separation from God, and the presence of joy is a consequence of the reunion with God.

Joy is demanded, and it can be given. It is not a thing one simply has. It is not easy to attain. It is and always was a rare and precious thing. And it has always been a difficult problem among Christians. Christians are accused of destroying the joy of life, this natural endowment of every creature. The greatest of the modern foes of Christianity, Friedrich Nietzsche, himself the son of a Protestant minister, has expressed his judgment about Jesus in the words, "His disciples should look more redeemed." We should subject ourselves to the piercing force of these words and should ask ourselves, "Is our lack of joy due to the fact that we are

Christians, or to the fact that we are not sufficiently Christian?" Perhaps we can defend ourselves convincingly against the criticism that we are people who despise life, whose behavior is a permanent accusation of life. Perhaps we can show that this is a distortion of the truth.

But let us be honest. Is there not enough foundation for criticism? Are not many Christians—ministers, students of theology, evangelists, missionaries, Christian educators and social workers, pious laymen and laywomen, even the children of such parents—surrounded by an air of heaviness, of oppressive sternness, of lack of humor and irony about themselves? We cannot deny this. Our critics outside the Church are right. And we ourselves should be even more critical than they, but critical on a deeper level.

As Christians we know our inner conflicts about accepting or rejecting joy. We are suspicious of the gifts of nature which contribute to joy, because we are suspicious of nature itself, although we confess that it is Divine creation, knowing what God has spoken about His creation: "Behold, it was very good!" We are suspicious of the creations of culture which contribute to joy because we are suspicious of man's creativity, although we confess that God has commanded man to cultivate the garden of the earth which He has made subject to him. And even if we overcome our suspicions and affirm and accept the gifts of nature and the creations of culture, we often do so with an uneasy conscience. We know that we *should* be free for joy, that as Paul says, "all is ours," but our courage is inferior to our knowledge. We do not dare to affirm our world and ourselves; and if we dare to, in a moment of courage, we try to atone for it by self-reproaches and self-punishments, and we draw upon ourselves malicious criticism by those who never have dared. Therefore, many Christians try to compromise. They try to hide their feeling of joy, or they try to avoid joys which are too intense, in order to avoid self-accusations which are too harsh. Such an experience of the suppression of joy, and guilt about joy in Christian groups, almost drove me to a break with Christianity. What passes for joy in these groups is an emaciated, intentionally childish, unexciting, unecstatic thing, without color and danger, without heights and depths.

It is difficult to deny that this is the state of things in many Christian churches. But now we hear the question from both the Christian and the non-Christian sides: "Is not joy, as observed in the Bible, something completely different from the joy of life, which is lacking in many Christians? Do not the Psalmist and Paul and the Jesus of the Fourth Gospel speak of a joy which transcends the natural joy of life? Do they not speak about the joy in God? Is not the decision to be a Christian a decision for the joy in God instead of for the joy of life?"

The first and simplest answer to these questions is that life is God's, and God is the creative Ground of life. He is infinitely more than any life process. But He works creatively through all of them. Therefore, no conflict is necessary between the joy in God and the joy of life. But this first answer, great and joyful as it is, is not sufficient; for "joy of life" can mean many things.

Joy seems to be the opposite of pain. But we know that pain and joy can exist together. Not joy but pleasure is the opposite of pain. There are people who believe that man's life is a continuous flight from pain and a persistent search for pleasure. I have never seen a human being of whom that is true. It is true only of beings who have lost their humanity, either through complete disintegration or through mental illness. The ordinary human being is able to sacrifice pleasures and to take pain upon himself for a cause, for somebody or something he loves and deems worthy of pain and sacrifice. He can disregard both pain and pleasure because he is directed *not* towards his pleasure but towards the things he loves and with which he wants to unite. If we desire something because of the pleasure we may get out of it, we may get the pleasure but we shall not get joy. If we try to find someone through whom we may get pleasure, we may get pleasure but we shall not have joy. If we search for something in order to avoid pain, we may avoid pain, but we shall not avoid

sorrow. If we try to use someone to protect us from pain, he may protect us from pain but he will not protect us from sorrow.

Pleasures *can* be provided and pain *can* be avoided, if we use or abuse other beings. But joy cannot be attained and sorrow cannot be overcome in this way. Joy is possible only when we are driven towards things and persons because of what they are and not because of what we can get from them. The joy about our work is spoiled when we perform it not because of what we produce but because of the pleasures with which it can provide us, or the pain against which it can protect us. The pleasure about the fact that *I* am successful spoils the joy about the success itself. Our joy about knowing truth and experiencing beauty is spoiled if we enjoy not the truth and the beauty but the fact that it is *I* who enjoys them.

Power can give joy only if it is free from the pleasure about having power and if it is a method of creating something worthwhile. Love relations, most conspicuously relations between the sexes, remain without joy if we use the other one as a means for pleasure or as a means to escape pain. This is a threat to all human relations. It is not an external law which warns us about certain forms of these relations, but the wisdom born out of past experiences which tells us that some of these relations may give pleasure, but that they do not give joy. They do not give joy because they do not fulfill what we are, and that for which we strive. Every human relation is joyless in which the other person is not sought because of what he is in himself, but because of the pleasure he can give us and the pain from which he can protect us.

To seek pleasure for the sake of pleasure is to avoid reality, the reality of other beings and the reality of ourselves. But only the fulfillment of what we really are can give us joy. Joy is nothing else than the awareness of our being fulfilled in our true being, in our personal center. And this fulfillment is possible only if we unite ourselves with what others really are. It is reality that gives joy, and reality alone. The Bible speaks so often of joy because it is the most realistic of all books. "Rejoice!" That means: "Penetrate from what *seems* to be real to that which is *really* real." Mere pleasure, in yourselves and in all other beings, remains in the realm of illusion about reality. Joy is born out of union with reality itself.

One of the roots of the desire for pleasure is the feeling of emptiness and the pain of boredom following from it. Emptiness is the lack of relatedness to things and persons and meanings; it is even the lack of being related to oneself. Therefore we try to escape from ourselves and the loneliness of ourselves, but we do not reach the others and their world in a genuine relation. And so we use them for a kind of pleasure which can be called "fun." But it is not the creative kind of fun often connected with play; it is, rather, a shallow, distracting, greedy way of "having fun." And it is not by chance that it is that type of fun which can easily be commercialized, for it is dependent on calculable reactions, without passion, without risk, without love. Of all the dangers that threaten our civilization, this is one of the most dangerous ones: the escape from one's emptiness through a "fun" which makes joy impossible.

Rejoice! This Biblical exhortation is more needed for those who have much "fun" and pleasure than for those who have little pleasure and much pain. It is often easier to unite pain and joy than to unite fun and joy.

Does the Biblical demand for joy prohibit pleasure? Do joy and pleasure exclude each other? By no means! The fulfillment of the center of our being does not exclude partial and peripheral fulfillments. And we must say this with the same emphasis with which we have contrasted joy and pleasure. We must challenge not only those who seek pleasure for pleasure's sake, but also those who reject pleasure because it is pleasure. Man enjoys eating and drinking, beyond the mere animal need of them. It is a partial ever-repeated fulfillment of his striving for life; therefore, it is pleasure and gives joy of life. Man enjoys playing and dancing, the beauty of nature, and the ecstasy of love. They fulfill some of his most intensive strivings for

life; therefore, they are pleasure and give joy of life. Man enjoys the power of knowledge and the fascination of art. They fulfill some of his highest strivings for life; therefore, they are pleasure and give joy of life. Man enjoys the community of men in family, friendship, and the social group. They fulfill some fundamental strivings for life; therefore, they are pleasure and give joy of life.

Yet in all these relations the question arises: Is our way of having these pleasures right or wrong? Do we use them for pleasure's sake or because we want to unite in love with all that to which we belong? We never know with certainty. And those of us together with those in the past history of Christianity who have an anxious conscience, prefer to renounce pleasures although they are established as good by creation itself. They hide their anxiety behind parental or social or ecclesiastical prohibitions, calling these prohibitions Divine commands. They justify their fear to affirm the joy of life by appealing to their conscience, calling it the voice of God, or to the need of discipline and self-control, and selflessness, calling them the "imitation of Christ." But Jesus, in contrast to John the Baptist, was called a glutton and a drunkard by His critics.

In all these warnings against pleasure, truth is mixed with untruth. Insofar as they strengthen our responsibility, they are true; insofar as they undercut our joy, they are wrong. Therefore let me give another criterion for accepting or rejecting pleasures, the criterion indicated in our text: Those pleasures are good which go together with joy; those are bad which prevent joy. In the light of this norm we should risk the affirmation of pleasures, even if our risk may prove to have been an error. It is not more Christian to reject than to accept pleasure. Let us not forget that the rejection implies a rejection of creation, or as the Church Fathers called it, a blasphemy of the Creator-God. And every Christian should be aware of a fact of which many non-Christians are keenly aware: the suppression of the joy of life produces hatred of life, hidden or open. It can lead to a self-destruction, as many physical and mental diseases prove.

Joy is more than pleasure; and it is more than happiness. Happiness is a state of mind which lasts for a longer or shorter time and is dependent on many conditions, external and internal. In the ancient view it is a gift of the gods which they give and take away again. In the American Constitution, "the pursuit of happiness" is a basic human right. In economic theory the greatest happiness of the greatest possible number of people is the purpose of human action. In the fairy tale, "they lived happily ever after." Happiness can stand a large amount of pain and lack of pleasure. But happiness cannot stand the lack of joy. For joy is the expression of our essential and central fulfillment. No peripheral fulfillments and no favorable conditions can be substituted for the central fulfillment. Even in an unhappy state a great joy can transform unhappiness into happiness. What, then, is this joy?

Let us first ask what is its opposite. It is sorrow. Sorrow is the feeling that we are deprived of our central fulfillment, by being deprived of something that belongs to us and is necessary to our fulfillment. We may be deprived of relatives and friends nearest to us, of a creative work and a supporting community which gave us a meaning of life, of our home, of honor, of love, of bodily or mental health, of the unity of our person, of a good conscience. All this brings sorrow in manifold forms, the sorrow of sadness, the sorrow of loneliness, the sorrow of depression, the sorrow of self-accusation. But it is precisely this kind of situation in which Jesus tells his disciples that His joy shall be with them and that their joy shall be full. For, as Paul calls it, sorrow can be the "sorrow of the world" which ends in the death of final despair, and it can be Divine sorrow which leads to transformation and joy. For joy has something within itself which is beyond joy and sorrow. This something is called blessedness.

Blessedness is the eternal element in joy, that which makes it possible for joy to include in itself the sorrow out of which it arises, and which it takes into itself. In the Beatitudes, Jesus calls the poor, those who mourn, those who hunger and thirst, those who are persecuted, "blessed." And He says to them: "Rejoice and be

glad!" Joy within sorrow is possible to those who are blessed, to those in whom joy has the dimension of the eternal.

Here we must once more reply to those who attack Christianity because they believe that it destroys the joy of life. In view of the Beatitudes they say that Christianity undercuts the joy of *this* life by pointing to and preparing for another life. They even challenge the blessedness in the promised life as a refined form of seeking for pleasure in the future life. Again we must confess that in many Christians, joy in this way is postponed till after death, and that there are Biblical words which seem to support this answer. Nevertheless, it is wrong. Jesus will give His joy to His disciples *now*. They shall get it after He has left them, which means in *this* life. And Paul asks the Philippians to have joy *now*. This cannot be otherwise, for blessedness is the expression of God's eternal fulfillment. Blessed are those who participate in this fulfillment here and now. Certainly eternal fulfillment must be seen not only as eternal which is present, but also as eternal which is future. But if it is not seen in the present, it cannot be seen at all.

This joy which has in itself the depth of blessedness is asked for and promised in the Bible. It preserves in itself its opposite, sorrow. It provides the foundation for happiness and pleasure. It is present in all levels of man's striving for fulfillment. It consecrates and directs them. It does not diminish or weaken them. It does not take away the risks and dangers of the joy of life. It makes the joy of life possible in pleasure and pain, in happiness and unhappiness, in ecstasy and sorrow. Where there is joy, there is fulfillment. And where there is fulfillment, there is joy. In fulfillment and joy the inner aim of life, the meaning of creation, and the end of salvation, are attained.

Viewed 325095 times.