

# How to Love Your People

by John Piper

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**Scripture:** 2 Corinthians 1:23, Philippians 3:8, Hebrews 13:17, Psalms 119:18, Psalms 119:36, Psalms 84:11, Psalms 90:14

**Topics:** "Pastoral Love", "Joy in Christ"

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## Description

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## Transcript

Thank you very much, it's great to be with you. The reason I said yes to this invitation is because I want to come visit my dad. That's why I said that, and he's dead.

He died in March, and so I decided I'd come anyway, because I keep my word. But that's why I said yes, if you want to know how to get me to come to a breakfast. The second reason I came was now, because of these grits.

I don't eat breakfast, I only do grapefruit juice for breakfast, but that's not a breakfast, that's a phenomenon. At least for me, I don't ever see spreads like that anywhere. So I ate breakfast this morning, and I'm going to tell my wife, and she'll be very envious, she's from Georgia, and I'm from South Carolina, and they don't do grits in Minnesota.

In fact, they look at them and, why would you eat that? Like, foo-foo. Let's pray together. Father in heaven, thank you so much for these brothers and sisters who are here to focus not on me, or grits, or church even, but on Christ.

We want to see you more clearly, and we want to love you more dearly, and we want to follow you more nearly, and we want to do it day by day. And so help me now to open your word in a way that will encourage these pastors. Please guide me, Lord.

Help me to choose the things to say that would be an honor to you, and a strengthening to them. Help me to leave out the things that would be unhelpful, and so take over and make this profitable for us, and for your people through us, and for the lost through us, and for the nations. I pray that the ripple effect of this time together would be longer and deeper than any of us could imagine.

So you do more, Lord. You put your flame to this kindling now, I pray, and ignite a passion in us for your supremacy through Christ, I pray. Amen.

What I'd like to do is go to the word with you and encourage you to love your people in a way that brings them the most joy and brings God the most glory. Those are the two things that I care most about. I want to be happy, and I want God to look great in my life, and I want my people to be happy, and I want my people to live in such a way that God looks great in their lives, which means I don't believe in the prosperity gospel, because when you live for the prosperity gospel, you make things look great, and when you live a lifestyle that looks like prosperity doesn't count as much to you, then you make God look great, because something else besides stuff is giving you joy.

That seems to me what I see in the New Testament, that the way God gets glory is that he satisfies souls in the midst of suffering, and so I don't encourage people toward a prosperity gospel. So those two things, I want to encourage you and help you and inspire you to love your people in such a way that their joy is maximized in terms of its intensity and its length, which means it should last forever and be maximally intense. Any other kind of joy I don't think you should care much about producing in their lives, but that kind you should care infinitely about producing in their lives, that it lasts forever and that it be as deep as possible, and that you do it in such a way that they magnify God, that is, make God look really great.

That's why we're on the planet, is to make Jesus look great. Paul said, it is my eager expectation and hope that now, as always, Christ might be magnified in my body, whether by life or by death. So his whole goal in living and dying was to make Christ look magnificent.

That's why we're pastors, we want to make Christ look magnificent, and we want to produce a kind of people that make Christ look magnificent. So those are the two things I want to encourage you in. Love your people in such a way as to increase their joy so that it lasts forever and is deep and strong as possible, and do it in a way that God gets maximum glory off of their lives.

So if you have your Bibles, I encourage you to go with me to 2 Corinthians chapter 1, and if you don't, then just listen carefully. But let's go to 2 Corinthians chapter 1. We'll start here, spend most of our time circling around this text in 2 Corinthians, but launch out into a few other texts as well. Chapter 1, 2 Corinthians, let's read verses 23 down to chapter 2, verse 4. 2 Corinthians 1.23. But I call God to witness against me, it was to spare you that I refrain from coming again to Corinth.

Not that we lord it over your faith, but we work with you for your joy. That was my main text, as clear as a bell, didn't take any exegetical finesse to massage that into making my point. I get my point from there, I didn't come looking for the point.

I saw this text ages ago and got shaped by it. So, Paul said, we are literally workers with you for your joy. For you stand firm in your faith, for I made up my mind not to make another painful visit to you, for if I cause you pain, who's there to make me glad? There it is again.

But the one that I have pain. And I wrote as I did so that when I came, I might not suffer pain from those who should have made me rejoice. For I felt sure of all of you that my joy would be the joy of you all.

For I wrote to you out of much affliction and anguish of heart, with many tears, not to cause you pain, but to let you know the abundant love that I have for you. So in that text we have two of the things I'm after. He ended on the note of love, got that in verse four, see it? I'm talking what I'm talking now.

I'm writing this letter because I want to let you know the abundant love that I have for you. So what he's been describing here since verse 23 is how he loves them. And the way he loves them, according to 124, is not that we lord it over your faith.

We work with you for your joy. That's the way you love people. You become a worker, you stay up late, you get up early, you labor over your books, you get in the car and you go, you do what you got to do to make them glad in God.

This is a very complex text, extremely complex. The emotional ins and outs of verses one to four of 2 Corinthians 2 takes a while to sort out, so work on it with me for just a few minutes. We got clear in verse 24 that he considers his apostolic mission to be a laborer for the joy of his people, says that clearly.

But then, verse two of chapter two, for if I cause you pain, if I make you unhappy, who's there to make me glad but the one whom I have pained? Meaning, I think, I don't want to make you pained, I don't want to bring misery into your life because who's then going to make me happy? Because evidently, I mean, the assumption there seems to be your joy is my joy. If I ruin your joy, my joy goes down. Isn't that the implication of verse two? That's what I see.

If I cause you pain, who is there to make me glad but the one whom I have pained? I don't want to do that. So, add now to the fact that he works for their joy, that their joy is his joy. You got that? Their joy is his joy.

He delights in their delight. And then he flops it around, gets complicated again in verse three, like this, I wrote as I did so that when I came, I might not suffer pain from, I might not suffer pain, it was concerned about causing them pain, and he said, I wrote as I did that I might not suffer pain from those who should have made me rejoice for I felt sure of you all that my joy would be the joy of you all. So now it's not that their joy is his joy, verse two, but his joy is their joy.

Says it flat out in verse three at the end of the verse there. For I felt sure of you all that my joy would be the joy of you all. Okay, now we've got a description of what love looks like.

Verse four says, I want you to know the abundant love that I have for you. He's been describing the emotional dynamics of love. First, I labor for your joy.

Understand, verse two, your joy is my joy, so I'm laboring for my joy too, because if I make you glad and your gladness is my gladness, my gladness goes up when you're glad. And then verse three, and I want to be glad because I have the deep conviction that my gladness is your gladness. That's what it means for people to love each other.

When you're glad, I'm glad. When I'm glad, you're glad. And our gladness goes up together.

That's love happening. That's an amazing description. His whole apostolic passion in this text is we are workers with you for your joy.

Because yours is mine, mine is yours, and that's the way love works. Here's the missing piece so far. It's in the text, but I haven't drawn it out yet.

That sounds like one big colossal mutual admiration society and has nothing to do with Jesus. I haven't even mentioned Jesus. Where's Jesus? Where's the cross? Where's the gospel? Any group could be talking like this.

So, let's go back and not leave out a few pieces in verse 24 that I did leave out. Not that we lord it over your faith, but we are workers with you for your joy, for you stand firm in your faith. That's really strange because he's got these two words, faith, on either side of this joy piece, and it sounds like the middle piece should also be faith.

Let me read it that way. See, if that sounds like that's the way I would have written it if I'd been flowing like this, I would have said, not that I lord it over your faith, I work with you for your faith, for you stand firm in your faith. That's the way I would have written it.

But instead, he substitutes the word joy where I would have expected him to write faith. Not that we lord it over your faith, but we work with you for your, and you expect him to say faith, and he says joy. Now, I think the implication of that is, and I'm drawing some help here from Philippians 125, where Paul says there that he wants to go to heaven and be with Jesus, and he wants to stay here and work for the churches, I know that I will stay here for the advancement and joy of your faith.

A little faith. Joy of your faith, in Philippians 125. So I think here, if we were to ask Paul, why did you substitute joy where we expected you to say faith, he'd say, because that's part of the very essential nature of trusting Jesus.

This is really big. The place that joy will have in what you pursue in your people will hang on whether you agree with what I'm about to say, namely that joy is not only a fruit that follows faith, love, joy, peace, patience, goodness, kindness, meekness, is fruit of the Holy Spirit, it is also, in its essential nature, part of what faith in Christ is. Whatever gain I had, I counted as loss for the sake of Christ.

Indeed, I count everything as loss for the surpassing value of knowing Christ Jesus, my Lord. For His sake, I have suffered the loss of all things and count them as rubbish in order that I might gain Christ. Now that's a problem verse, Philippians 3.8, because it sounds like, well, don't you gain Christ by faith? You didn't mention faith.

Don't you gain Christ, what do you mean, in order that you might gain Christ? I count everything as rubbish, and I embrace the knowledge of Christ as my supreme value, that I might gain Christ. I think all he's doing there is simply expressing the nature of faith. Faith is an awakening to the supreme value of Jesus over all other ways of salvation and all other treasures in life.

And so faith is not one thing and enjoying Jesus another thing. Faith is what the heart does when the Holy Spirit awakens the heart to no longer look on Him as boring or stupid or false or a waste, but see Him for who He really is, namely the glory of God. Infinitely satisfying, infinitely beautiful, infinitely wise, infinitely

strong, infinitely everything that will satisfy the human heart forever.

Faith awakens to that. We don't experience it all the time. A little baby Christian wouldn't have the fullness of that enjoyment, but the seed of it is there or it is in saving faith.

If that's true, then our goal, when I say it should be to maximize the joy of our people, I'm not talking about an icing on the cake of Christianity. Like Christianity is one thing, and wouldn't it be nice if we had a happy people? That's not the way I think about it, because I don't think about happiness in terms of a response to circumstances. I think about happiness in terms of an awakening of the dead heart to see Christ for who He is and find Him the resting place for your soul.

I am the bread of life. He who comes to me will not hunger, and he who believes in me will never thirst. When you analyze John 6.35, those two halves, I am the bread of life.

He who comes to me will never hunger. He who believes, get the two words, hunger-belief, who comes to me, I mean come-belief, who comes to me will never hunger, he who believes. So coming to Him to have your hunger stilled and believing in Him to have your thirst stilled are the same.

This is the way John writes, right, these parallels. And so I'm arguing that the reason this is not what I just described in verses 123-24 is not a simple mutual admiration society where your joy is my joy, my joy is your joy, let's all get together and be happy with each other, and Jesus is not even in the picture. That's not what's going on here, because when he says, not that we lord it over your faith, he means faith in Jesus.

But we work with you for your, and he says joy, but he means what faith is as it attaches to Jesus in the awakened heart, for you stand firm in your faith. So brothers in the ministry, in the pastorate, let's labor for the joy of our people. I preached from Philippians 3, 1 to 16 on Sunday, past, two days ago, and verse 1 says rejoice in the Lord, Philippians 3, 1, rejoice in the Lord.

And I paused, and I said he was in prison when he wrote that, in fact he says I'm about to be poured out like a libation upon the altar of your faith, so he was back and forth as to whether he was going to die or get out. So he wrote that, and we know from 2 Corinthians 8 and Acts 16, as well as parts of Philippians, that this church is poor and they're afflicted, they're being persecuted. So, he's writing from prison to a persecuted people who are poor, they haven't gotten out of their poverty by this gospel, it wasn't an immediately effective prosperity gospel, and he says rejoice in the Lord, pause, that must mean then so value Christ that whether your circumstances are good or bad, your joy stands, because it's in him, not in your circumstances.

So that's what I mean, that's what Paul means by joy. It's not circumstantially rooted, it's Christ-rooted. It's a spiritual sight of Christ, 2 Corinthians 4, 4, the gospel of the glory of Christ who is the image of God.

So we've seen Christ, we've seen who he is and what he's done and how he reigns and how he's coming and how he's with us, and that's where our joy comes from. So when you labor, you're always thinking, how can I maximize my people's joy in Christ, in the glory of God? How can I wean them off of television? How can I wean them off of sexual pornography? How can I wean them off of wanting to be rich? How can I wean them off of their love affair with their family? How can I wean them off of their commitment to security? How can I make radical, risk-taking lovers of the poor and the lost and the suffering so that they don't cave to the American lifestyle and pour themselves out so that once upon a time we start looking like

the church and the world takes notice instead of looking just like the world? That's the goal. When I think joy, I'm not thinking of a little layer of happiness on top of the American lifestyle.

I'm thinking of subterfuge. I'm thinking of sedition. I'm moving into these people's lives to break the back of their love affair with what the world loves.

The only way to liberate people from their love affair with everything the world loves is to give them a stunningly superior satisfaction in a radically supernatural reality. That's an impossible job. You have an impossible job.

You know that. Getting people saved and getting people radically different, you cannot do. Only the Holy Spirit can do that.

But he uses people and he wrote a book. This is a very, very radical book. We so domesticate this book.

I can't get pastors who leave this book because they want to somehow interest their people like this is not interesting. If this is not interesting, nothing is interesting. Look, if this is not radical, compelling, life-changing, nothing is radically compelling and life-changing.

How any pastor can read a verse and then mainly use the newspaper or Newsweek or the internet and try to get some relevance here, I don't get it. I am totally not computing with such a pastor. He is out of touch with reality.

This is stunning reality and if you can just make it plain to people, they will be stunned. They will be awakened. This is the book that will do it.

So that's what we're after. Don't think, oh, Piper came here to tell us to make our people happy, like this just kind of rests like a little feather on top of all their materialism. I'm here to sever roots.

I want roots to be severed because the roots of our people are sunk down in the world so deep that if we don't start chopping these roots, then they won't ever have life flowing from another source and what severs the power of the pleasures of sin is a superior pleasure in Christ. The kingdom of heaven is like a man who found a treasure in a field and covered it over and in his joy, apokaros, from joy went and sold everything he had. So now from that little parable, Matthew 13, 44, how would you get your people to sell everything they had to follow Jesus? You show them a treasure.

That's the only way. You live for their joy. Apokaros, he sold everything that he had.

From joy in the treasure found in the field, he sold everything that he had. My job as a pastor week after week, every board meeting, every wedding homily, every funeral message, every banquet, every pastor's talk, every Sunday morning message is to make Christ look like a treasure superior to every single thing your people look for, live for, enjoy. That's an impossible task.

Turn to Hebrews 13. This gets real close to home with the pastorate in Hebrews 13. I want you to see it in another place besides 2 Corinthians 1. Hebrews 13, verse 17.

I want you to see what love is here for your people. What is love for your people? Obey your leaders. Now, you say, that's not talking to pastors, that's talking to the people to obey the pastors.

That's exactly what it's saying. Obey your leaders, submit to them, for they are keeping watch over your souls. Yes, we are, and we will be called to account for it.

As those who will have to give an account, let them do this, let those pastors, those leaders do this, keep a watch over your soul with joy and not with groaning, for that would be of no advantage to you. What an amazing verse. What an amazing verse.

I mean, don't you just love the Bible? I just love to explain things like this to my people. They read that and say, I think there's something there. Help me.

Help me see this. This is incredible what's here. It says, let the pastors, let the leaders watch over us with joy.

Now, this is talking, it's good for pastor appreciation, but let them do this with joy and not with groaning, because that, namely doing their ministry with groaning instead of joy, would be of no advantage for you. Now, I'm not preaching to the people, I'm preaching to pastors here. And so the implication of this for pastors, that last sentence says, if you do your ministry with groaning and not being thrilled at what God has called you to do, your people won't.

You know what it says? If you do this with groaning and not with joy, that will be of no advantage to them, which means at the top of your agenda for being loving, because it would be unloving not to be an advantage to your people, not to be a profit to your people, not to be a blessing to your people. You should want to be a blessing to your people. And this text says you won't be if you do your ministry with groaning instead of joy, which means at the top of your agenda for blessing your people is to keep your heart happy in God.

Number one, number one, if you go down, everybody goes down. George Mueller, great pastor, orphanage builder, last two centuries ago now in Bristol, England, said his main task every morning was first to get his heart happy in God. And that wasn't because of some kind of superficial little add-on to the real guts of Christianity.

It was because that was the way he could love his kids, 10,000 orphans over his lifetime. And then he said, after I got my heart right and happy and restful and content in my King, then I rolled 60 burdens onto the Lord every morning. So, 2 Corinthians 1.24, we are workers with you for your joy.

Your joy is mine, mine is yours, and the kind of joy we're talking about is joy in Christ. And so when I say your joy is my joy, I mean when I see in you a treasuring and a valuing of Christ, I'm glad. And when you see in me a treasuring and a value and a contentment in Christ, you're glad.

And so our mutual joy in each other is a radically Christ-centered, and I would add, Christ-exalting joy, which brings me real close now to my last third issue of glory. Remember I said I wanted you to love your people in a way that maximizes their joy and shows God to be great. Here's the way that works.

They're not two separate things. When you delight in something, enjoy something, are satisfied with something, you make it look valuable. That's the way Philippians 3 reads.

Whatever gain I had, I counted as loss for the sake of Christ. Indeed, I count everything as loss for the surpassing value of knowing Christ. You know, I and Rand, we're celebrating, nobody's celebrating, but I'm marking the 50th anniversary this year of the publication of Atlas Shrugged.

And she was an atheist and hated God, didn't believe He existed. And she said admiration was the rarest of pleasures. She couldn't see anything anywhere to admire.

She hated humanity, and Atlas, man, had shrugged, and so the world was only to be manipulated by a philosopher businessman. The tragic thing is Christ is infinitely—she was right that admiration is a rare pleasure. He is infinitely admirable.

And so when Paul says the surpassing value of knowing Christ Jesus, he meant here's where the greatest joy is found, and when your joy is found in the infinite admirableness of Jesus, that admirableness is magnified. So, joy in Him and glory to Him are the same. They're not separate things.

You can't undertake to glorify or magnify Christ and leave out delighting in Him, being satisfied in Him, resting in Him, enjoying Him, being content in Him, because this is what does this. He is most glorified in you when you are most satisfied. So, my two goals for my love of my people are not two goals, they're one goal.

I want to love my people in such a way as to maximize their joy in Christ, and I want to love my people in such a way as to maximize the effectiveness with which they make Christ look great. Glory of Christ, joy of people. And now I'm seeing, hmm, you mean if they really did delight fully, deeply, powerfully in Christ, that would be the way that He looks good.

That's exactly what I mean. If your people so loved Christ, so delighted in Christ, so rested in Christ, that their otherworldly loves began to fall away, a man would sit in front of his computer where he has for years been addicted to go look at naked women, and he'd sit there, and God has now awakened a passion to enjoy Christ. He's tasted it, and then he remembers, blessed are the pure in heart.

They will see God. If I go here, I defile my heart. I won't see Him.

I want to see Him. I will not do it. That man is going to start making Jesus look incredibly good, because people will wonder, how did you get over that? How did you get beyond that? I mean, that's a pretty powerful thing.

It's a powerful thing, and it doesn't have the power it once had. How did you do that? And his answer is going to be not, I obey Jesus. Well, that's true, but that's not the way it feels.

It's, I want to see Him. I want to know Him. I don't want to lessen.

I don't want to minimize my experience of joy in Christ, and I know that when I do this, it goes down instead of up, and so I want it to go up, and now I've tasted enough. It's going up, and I don't even feel the power I once felt there. And right on down the line, it's money.

It's career. It's the praise of men. It's having to have the approval of people.

All these bondages our people live in, if those start being broken by the supreme beauty of Christ, because our hearts have come to delight in Him, He's going to look really good. He's going to look really good. So, He's going to get the glory.

Your people are going to get the joy, and you will be able to lay down in your grave with a sense of having lived well. So, the implication for your own personal life, very simply, is you need to be there yourself. And brothers, it is a battle.

You don't arrive. You don't say, now I'm one who delights in God. Now I'm one who enjoys Jesus, and now is there another thing I could do? You're not there.

Not that I have already obtained or am already perfect, but I press on to make it my own because He has made me His own. You know, I write books, and got to be careful now, and look at the titles carefully. They're not called, Having Arrived at Fully Delighting in God.

They're called things like Desiring God, When I Don't Desire God, because I'm just after it. I don't have it fully. I just want it.

Taste and see that the Lord is good. Taste, and once you've tasted, you're on a track, and you're going after it. You're going to maximize this joy, this satisfaction, because you know it's the liberating power of your life.

It'll get you to the mission field. It'll break the power of pornography. It'll break the power of the love of money.

It'll break your craving for the approval of your people that's keeping you from preaching the truth. It'll do all kinds of stuff in your life. And so my main agenda, even though I've said the main point is I want to help you love your people in a way that maximizes their joy and glorifies God, I really want to leave you with go for it yourself.

Get up in the morning, and go for a walk, or get on your knees, and go wherever you have to go. Get over this book for an hour, about an hour, and just say, Lord, here's my little acronym. I'll leave you with this.

Maybe this is the most practical thing I could say. I have a little I-O-U-S, I-O-U-S. This is the way I do it.

I go to my Bible, and I say, I incline my heart to your testimonies. Psalm 118, verse 36. Psalm 119, verse 36.

Incline, I, incline, I. Incline my heart to your testimonies. Isn't that an amazing prayer for the psalmist? You mean, psalmist, you don't incline already? No, I don't. I feel like reading the newspaper, going to the internet, quick.

That's what I feel like. Would you please change that? I'm a pastor. I'm supposed to love the Bible.

Help me. Oh, open my eyes, that I may behold wonderful things out of your word. Psalm 119, verse 18.

So, here you are, okay, got enough inclination to at least get here, staring at it, feeling nothing, seeing nothing, thinking about the wife and the argument, and you plead, God, open my eyes. Don't let me be blank here. If I go blank, everybody goes blank.

Please, God, I need you for my own soul. Open my eyes to see glory and beauty and worth and value here. I owe you.

Unite my heart to fear your name, Psalm 84, 11, I think. What does that mean? Unite my heart. That means my heart is just fragmented.

It's all over the place. I got a piece of my heart over here thinking about grits. I got a piece of my heart over here thinking about bookstores.

I got a piece of my heart thinking about Talitha and her relation to me, that's my daughter. My heart's just everywhere, Lord. Unite it around you right here.

And then the last one, I O U S, Psalm 94, 90, verse 14, Psalm 90, verse 14. Satisfy me in the morning with your steadfast love. So, there's my battle strategy, morning after morning.

I do add another S. I say I O U S, we've got two S's. Send me. When I get up from my knees here with some measure of contentment in you, don't let me just drift.

Send me to be useful today to somebody. Father in heaven, do this now. We've talked.

Talk is easy. Talk is cheap. But change is your work.

It's one's sows and the other waters, but you give the growth. So, here I've sowed some seed and watered some seed. Now, please, Father, apply it to our hearts.

Help me to go hard after you and grant that these brothers and sisters would pursue you the way Paul pursued you, knowing you had taken hold of him and you had made him your own. So, he was stretching out to maximize his experience of you. Make our people glad in Christ and magnify your great name through Christ.

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