

## **“Schadenfreude”**

**John 1:43-51**

**August 4, 2019**

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### **INTRODUCTION:**

You may not yet have come across the word that I have chosen for the title of today’s sermon. It is a German word that has come over into English usage, mostly because English has no equivalent. Schadenfreude is a combination of two different German words, one meaning joy and the other harm. So it means “pleasure derived from another person’s misfortune.” The next quality of love in our summer study of 1 Corinthians 13 says that love does not find pleasure in this way. “Love does not rejoice at wrongdoing, but rejoices with the truth.”

The word that is common to both parts of our verse is the word “rejoice.” To rejoice means to have a good feeling about something. For example, your favorite football team wins the national championship and it feels deeply satisfying. You rejoice in your team’s good success. Such rejoicing is good and natural. It turns dark when it gets confused about the object of rejoicing. To stick with the sports analogy, to rejoice in your team’s success is acceptable. To rejoice in the injury to a rival team’s star player is an example a schadenfreude. There have actually been studies done on this. A 2011 study involved New York Yankees and Boston Red Sox fans. Through MRIs, it measured the response in the pleasure part of the brain when something bad happened to the other team, something like one of their players striking out. There was a clear increase in pleasure when something bad happened to their rival. Any Auburn or Alabama fan understands this, and maybe it’s permitted in sports. But when it carries over into our relationships with people, it is not loving. So let’s explore this further by considering each of the two parts of this verse and then look at a story from early in the Gospels that illustrates this quality of love.

### **I. Rejoicing at Evil**

Love does not rejoice at evil. The word for evil is a general word that means unrighteousness, injustice or wrongdoing. There are different kinds of evil. There is personal evil that we normally refer to as sin. When a religious leader falls into sin, it is not uncommon for unreligious people to respond by expressing some sick pleasure in the leader’s fall. Love does not do that. Christians can do the same thing when they speak of God’s judgment against sin. They can do so in a way that feels very much like they enjoy the prospect of God’s judgment upon others. Love does not do that. Jesus did not do that. Do you remember his response to sinful Jerusalem, a city that was about to

crucify him? When he considered their coming judgment, he did the opposite of rejoicing. He wept over the city (Luke 19:41).

But this word could also refer to the consequences of evil, even extending to general calamities that result from living in a broken, sin-sick world. We are not to rejoice at those either. So, for example, a friend of yours has a child who excels in everything, and you are just a bit jealous. And then you hear that this child was injured while playing soccer and will be out of commission for a year while recovering. While expressing your condolences and speaking all the right words to your friend and her child, you can't deny an element of joy in your heart that this rival has been at least temporarily sidelined. That too is a rejoicing at evil.

When I first started thinking about this verse, I was having a hard time finding other places in the Bible where it is addressed. But the more I thought about it, the more I started seeing it throughout the Bible. For example, it appears in the book of Proverbs. **“He who is glad at calamity will not go unpunished”** (17:5). Or again, **“Do not rejoice when your enemy falls, and let not your heart be glad when he stumbles, lest the Lord see it and be displeased, and turn away his anger from him”** (24:17-18). Derek Kidner, in his commentary on Proverbs, has an important insight about these verses. “Your glee may well be [in God’s sight] a more punishable sin than all the guilt of your enemy.”

Rejoicing at evil is something that happens at a heart level. This rejoicing describes a deep-seated feeling. Are there specific actions that flow out of this kind of heart? When I considered that question, my view of this sin and how common it is began to expand. For example, the sin of gossip is an external manifestation of the sin of the heart in rejoicing in another’s calamity. Gossip is the sharing of a bad report about another person. It may or may not be true. The thing that fuels gossip and makes it so compelling is the experience of delight in hearing or telling of something bad about another. It is a rejoicing in evil. It is a powerful anti-love force. Proverbs 16:28 says that gossip has the power even to separate close friends.

What lies at the heart of this sin? It comes from the kind of pride that is filled with self-justification. It starts with a guilty conscience or a sense that there is something significantly lacking in my life. The biblical answer for that is to trust in Jesus as my substitute. He died in my place that my sins might be forgiven, and he lived in my place that his righteousness might be credited to me. But the one who rejoices in evil lives as if that hasn’t happened and it is all up to him to deal with this brokenness. So his pride leads him to deal with it by comparing himself to others. Other people are viewed as competitive rivals, and the easiest way to feel oneself superior to a rival is not actually to be superior, but to see your rival falter. It’s the old joke about not having to outrun the bear chasing you and your friend, but only having to outrun your

friend. So when you detect in your heart a little joy at bad news about another, repent not just of that sin, but also of the sin beneath the sin. That deeper sin is proud unbelief. It is living as if Jesus did not live and die as your substitute.

## **II. Rejoicing with the Truth**

This second part of the verse is a little unexpected. We would expect to read that the contrast to love not rejoicing in evil is that love does rejoice in goodness. But it doesn't read that way. It says that love rejoices with the truth. Further, why that preposition *with*? We would expect it to say that love rejoices *in* the truth, not *with* the truth. So what does this mean?

I think its primary meaning is that love rejoices with the truth of what a Christ-like version of another person would look like. We all have different personalities and different sets of strengths and weaknesses. That is part of being human and limited. But when Jesus sanctifies us, he gives us the Christ-like qualities God always had in mind for us. An example will help, I think. Let's take someone who has a task-driven personality. There's nothing wrong with that, because that's the way God made that person. But there's a dark side to being task-driven, and that is when the task-driven person isolates him or herself from other people by taking refuge in getting things done. The Christ-like use of being task-driven is to accomplish tasks as an act of love for God and others. So to rejoice with the truth is to see your task-driven friend and long for, pray for and rejoice in the development of this quality.

Two applications come to mind. First, in order to rejoice with the truth of what a Christ-like version of your friend will look like, you have to start with the truth of where they are now. It's similar to being able to give people directions to a geographical spot. If someone calls you on the phone wanting to know how to get to your house, what's the first question you will ask them? "Where are you now?" You can't tell them how to get where they need to go without knowing where they are currently. There is a realism required for loving people well. What we often do instead is to love the version of another person that we need them to be. This happens in marriage all the time. A man or woman will see a quality in a prospective spouse that they find they want. They become drawn to that one quality and fail to see the rest of the person, a blindness that can have devastating results.

The second application is to pray that God might give you a vision of what a Christ-like version of this person looks like. Then you hold on to that, rejoice in and affirm the parts of the person that are conformed to that vision and quietly grieve the parts that are still lacking.

## **III. A Story of Love**

A story of what this might look like will help, and I've chosen this story of Jesus' interactions with a man who would become one of his twelve disciples, Nathanael. Jesus' interactions with Nathanael begin with Jesus displaying his supernatural knowledge of Nathanael. Jesus says that Nathanael is an Israelite with no guile. What Jesus means is that Nathanael was one of those types who shoots straight and is even a bit blunt. You can see his bluntness when Philip tells him that they have found the Messiah, Jesus of Nazareth. Nathanael responds, **"Nazareth! Can anything good come from there?"** In a way, Nathanael is rejoicing in evil. He is viewing himself as superior to Jesus merely because of the faults he finds in Jesus' place of origin. Apparently, Nazareth was on the wrong side of the tracks. When Jesus says this about Nathanael, he is probably alluding to the account of Jacob. Jesus is saying to Nathanael that he is no Jacob. Jacob was a schemer and Jesus is saying that Nathanael is just the opposite. What you see is what you get with him. Nathanael wonders how Jesus knows this about him, and Jesus says that he saw him under the fig tree. Because of Nathanael's reaction to Jesus' statement, I take this to mean more than Jesus saw Nathanael under a fig tree. Jesus was revealing special knowledge of Nathanael. Perhaps Nathanael had just been meditating about Jacob, and Jesus' allusion to Jacob lets Nathanael know that Jesus knows what he has been thinking. Whatever is meant by Jesus' statement in verse 48, Nathanael concludes that Jesus is the Son of God and King of Israel.

Jesus then says that he will see even greater things. He will see angels ascending and descending on him. This is a reference to the dream Jacob had at Bethel that we call Jacob's ladder. Jacob was fleeing the wrath of his brother Esau, who had pledged to murder Jacob as soon as their father Isaac died. Jacob had stolen the blessing of the firstborn from Esau and Esau wanted his revenge. Jacob traveled over forty miles in one day and arrived exhausted and alone at this place. He is so tired that even though he makes a stone his pillow, he falls asleep and has this dream where angels are coming to him from heaven. What Jesus is saying to Nathanael is that Jesus himself is the ladder. Notice that he doesn't say that the angels will ascend and descend *to* him, but *on* him. He is the one who opens the door to heaven so that God's angels come to us in order to protect and bless rather than bringing a curse and judgment. So Jesus is saying to Nathanael, "Nathanael, you are impressed that I know you and conclude that I am the Son of God. You are right about that, but you have only begun to see what I can do for you. I can marshal all the forces of heaven on your behalf."

Before we can love with a 1 Corinthians 13 love, we must be loved by that kind of love. Jesus loves us like that. He sees the full truth about us, just as he did with Nathanael. He sees us as we are, warts and all, and loves us still. Is it more impactful when someone who barely knows you professes to love you, or when someone loves you who has known you for years and who has seen both

the good and bad? The answer is obvious, isn't it? Jesus is that person. He knows you better than you know yourself, and loves you still.

## **CONCLUSION:**

Here's the conclusion of the matter. If we are going to love people well by rejoicing with the truth, we need to take them to Jesus. They can only be all they were created to be through him. And how do we take those we love to Jesus? Notice how Philip did it for Nathanael. After Nathanael asked, **“Can anything good come out of Nazareth?”** Philip simply said, “Come and see.” That's the second time that language has been used in John 1. Jesus used it in the previous paragraph when two disciples asked him where he was staying. He said to them, “Come and you will see” (v. 39). That's a very low pressure invitation, isn't it? Jesus, and later Philip, make it easy to say “No.” As Jesus' followers who want our friends to come to faith in Jesus, we make a big mistake when we put pressure on people to believe in Jesus. We sometimes do that through trying to argue people into heaven. Others might attempt it through emotional appeals. Still others might do so through trying to scare people into heaven. The answer is much simpler. Come and see for yourself. You will find in Jesus one who knows everything about you and loves you still.

Peter had a similar experience with Jesus, described just prior to this passage about Nathanael. After spending the day with Jesus, Andrew was convinced that he was the Messiah. So he told his brother Simon about it and took Simon to meet Jesus. Jesus looked at Simon and used the meaning of his name to bring a message to him. The name Simon means a listener or hearer, and Jesus points out how Simon is properly named because he was constantly listening to what was going on around him, and he didn't mean that in a positive sense. You can see this quality in Peter's life much later when Paul had to rebuke him in Galatians 2 because he was listening to the Judaizers and stopped eating with the Gentiles because of their non-kosher diet. But Jesus renames Peter and says that he will be Cephas, which is the Aramaic version of Peter and means “a rock.” Jesus is saying that he will transform Simon's weakness into a strength. Jesus saw into the core of Peter's life, perceiving his great weakness and then saying to him that by his grace such a weakness would be transformed into a strength. Jesus sees what a sanctified Peter would be and speaks that truth into him. Let us ask God to give us a vision for what people we love will look like when Jesus transforms them, and let us take them to Jesus that such transformation might be brought about!