

The Joy Gap
Presented by Mary Lowman
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Day One

Have you ever reached something you really wanted—an achievement, a milestone, even a season of life—and then thought, “I expected to feel happier than this”? I want to examine what I call the Joy Gap. Actually, Joy Gap is a term used today to define the space between what you think will bring you joy and what actually does.

For example, you may be experiencing a Joy Gap at work. That would be the gap between what you expect from your work or career, and what you actually feel. I was amazed to learn a recent study shows 61% of workers reported less joy at work than expected, which is a significant increase in the last few years. Furthermore, this Joy Gap at work is not limited to one type of job or career, but affects all industries, all company sizes, and all levels of organizations.

Then there’s the Joy Gap in relationships. That’s the length of time between moments of joy in a relationship. That could be a marriage, a family relationship, a friendship—those important relationships in your life you expect to bring you happiness, but those moments are fewer and fewer and further apart. That’s a Joy Gap.

We all have expectations. We think, “When this happens, I’ll finally feel content.” But then we arrive there—and the joy doesn’t quite match what we imagined—that gap can be confusing and discouraging. You might start to wonder, “What’s wrong with me? Why am I not happier?” But the truth is nothing is wrong with you. You’re just discovering something very important.

You’re learning the things you often depend on for joy were never designed to fully satisfy you—and that includes even the good things. That’s why this Joy Gap matters. It’s not a failure. It’s a signal that maybe you’ve been looking for lasting joy in temporary places.

The good news is there is a source of joy that doesn’t disappoint. A joy that isn’t based on everything going right.

Day Two

We are examining the Joy Gap—the difference between the joy we expect and the joy we actually experience. This Joy Gap has taken an identity of its own; people are noticing it and naming it and studying it.

What is this Joy Gap and why does it happen? You might be in a Joy Gap if you find yourself thinking: “I thought I’d feel happier when I got here,” or “Why am I still restless?” or “I have so much to be thankful for—so why don’t I feel joyful?”

The reason most often given for this Joy Gap is because of misplaced expectations. We tend to assign too much power to things, people, and circumstances. We think, “If this works out, I’ll be happy.” But no circumstance, no achievement—no matter how good—can carry that kind of weight. It’s an unrealistic expectation.

Another reason is comparison. It's so easy to look at someone else's life and assume they're happier, more fulfilled, more satisfied. But comparison quietly steals joy. It shifts your focus from what God is doing in your life to what you think he's doing in someone else's. Comparing yourself and your situation to others is a sure way to increase your Joy Gap.

And then there's fear—those "what if" thoughts. What if this doesn't last? What if something goes wrong? What if I lose what I have? You can't enjoy what you have for fear that you could lose it. That kind of fearful thinking can drain joy right out of the good things that are happening right now.

And sometimes, the Joy Gap comes from simple neglect. When you're too busy to stay connected to the Lord, your joy begins to fade—not because he moved, but because you did. But here's the encouraging part: once you understand why the gap exists, you can begin to do something about it.

I encourage you to think about what is stealing your joy. Satan loves to steal our joy. Ask yourself if you're allowing unrealistic expectations or comparisons or fear to create a Joy Gap in your life.

Day Three

The Joy Gap is that space between the joy we expect and what we actually feel. This term—Joy Gap—is becoming a noticeable phenomenon in our culture—not just in Christian circles. The world needs joy—the people you know at work, in your family, next door, they all want joy and most likely many are experiencing this Joy Gap, even if they don't recognize it. But the wonderful good news is that as followers of Jesus Christ, we have what is needed to close the Joy Gap.

Real, lasting joy is not found in circumstances—it's found in your relationship with Jesus Christ. That may sound simple, but it's profoundly important and totally true. If your joy depends on things going well, then your joy will always be fragile. One disappointment, one change, one difficult situation—and it's gone.

But when your joy is rooted in Christ, it becomes steady. It doesn't mean life is easy. It doesn't mean you're always smiling. But there's a deep sense of peace, confidence, and assurance that isn't shaken by what's happening around you.

The Bible calls joy a fruit of the Spirit. That means it's not something you manufacture—it's something God produces in you as you stay connected to him. C.S. Lewis' said: "Joy is the flag that is flown from the castle of the heart when the King is in residence there." Is the flag of joy flying from your heart, your face, your life, your words? Or is there a Joy Gap in your own life?

If you're feeling that Joy Gap, don't try harder to fix your circumstances. Instead, draw closer to the One who is your joy. Spend time with Jesus—just you and Jesus. Talk to him. Read his truth in the Bible. Refocus your heart.

Because the closer you are to him, the smaller that Joy Gap becomes.

Day Four

How can you close the Joy Gap? The Joy Gap is the distance between what you expect from life or from your job or your relationships, and what you are experiencing. It's the reality that even when things are good, when circumstances are favorable—even then they don't bring the joy and satisfaction you expected. There's a Joy Gap.

But we're not hopeless, we who are Christ-followers. We have the answer, but we have to put into practice what we know. Let me give you a few simple, practical ways to do that each day.

First, practice gratitude. Joy and gratitude are closely connected. When you intentionally thank God for what he's doing—even the small things—you shift your focus from what's missing to what's already been given. So often we just focus on the negatives, don't we? It's our sinful human nature that drives us that way, but we don't have to be victims of that any longer. Be thankful. Speak words of thanksgiving all through the day, even if you don't necessarily feel them. And refuse words of negativity. Be careful what you say to yourself.

Second, guard your thoughts. If your mind is constantly filled with worry, comparison, or negative "what ifs," your joy doesn't stand much of a chance. The Bible teaches us to bring every thought into captivity and make it obey Christ. Dear friend, I encourage you to take that literally. When your thoughts start down negative territory, grab them and refuse to allow them to remain.

Third, stay connected to God all day long. Just take time—every day—to talk with him, read his word, and listen. And all day long send up one-minute prayers for his joy to fill you. Focus on it all day. You'll find the Joy Gap closes the more you are aware of and practice the presence of Jesus.

And finally, live with purpose. When you're doing what God has called you to do—encouraging others, serving, loving well—there's a deep sense of joy that comes from knowing you're right where you're supposed to be.

And over time, you'll notice something beautiful. Joy becomes less dependent on what's happening around you and more rooted in what God is doing within you.

Day Five

The Joy Gap exists between what you expect, what you need or want, and what you're feeling. We've seen this gap can be caused by expecting too much of circumstances, successes and people, comparing yourself to others, and simply neglecting to do the things that close the Joy Gap, like increasing time with Jesus, who never disappoints.

But what about those times when the gap doesn't seem to close? When life is hard, when circumstances are heavy, when joy feels distant? It's important to remember this: joy is not the same as happiness.

Happiness is based on what's happening. Joy runs deeper. Even in difficult seasons—even in grief, uncertainty, or waiting—joy can still be present. Not as a loud emotion, not like throwing a party, but as a quiet confidence; a steady assurance that God is with you and he's going to be with you all the way through that tough time. You can be confident he is at work and he hasn't forgotten you.

Sometimes the Joy Gap remains for a while because God is doing something deeper than you can see. He's strengthening your faith. He's drawing you closer. He's teaching you to depend on him in a way you never have before. And in those seasons, joy may not feel obvious—but it's still there.

If you're in that place today, don't be discouraged. Keep trusting. Keep walking. Keep turning your heart toward the Lord. Remember that small steps can still walk miles. Take small steps toward the Lord, because even when you don't feel it, he is still your source of joy.

The precepts of the Lord are right, giving joy to the heart (Psalm 19:8).

You'll find joy in the Word of God. Start your day focusing on the unfailing love of Jesus, and you will be much more joyful all day long, I promise.

Reinforce some simple disciplines like this in your life and, in time, the Joy Gap will close. Not because everything around you changed, but because something within you did.