



## An Open Letter to Youth Ministers – Matthew Croasmun

Matthew Croasmun, Associate Research Scholar for the Yale Center for Faith and Culture writes to youth ministers.



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## REJOICING IN THE LORD ALWAYS AND THE MODERN DUTY TO BE HAPPY

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Each semester, I have the privilege of discerning the shape of the good life with fifteen or so 18-22 year-olds. We gather twice or three times a week to try to catch a glimpse of what is most central in our lives but at the same time so elusive: the nature and character of flourishing life—the life most worth living for ourselves, our communities, and our world. We ask questions like: How should we live? What should we hope for in the world? How does a good life feel? Year after year, that last question sticks with students. Its answer—usually, some sort of happiness, they are convinced—persistently proposes itself as the reason for the sake of which the rest of the good life is desirable in the first place. Why hope for your life to go well? Because a life going well feels good. Why lead your life well? Because, the research is in: serving others makes you happy. Happiness—or “life satisfaction” or whatever synonym is in vogue at the moment—is for many of my students the pearl of great price: that for the sake of which it is worth selling everything, that without which, nothing held back would compare in value.

Happiness is their goal, their prize.

It is also their duty—their impossible task.

Pascal Bruckner describes this predicament well:

They launch out into life eager to exercise their rights and first of all to construct their lives as they see fit, sure that each of them has been promised everything. From their infancy they have been told: Be happy, because nowadays we no longer have children in order to transmit to them values or a spiritual heritage but rather to increase the number of fully realized individuals on Earth.

Be happy! Beneath this apparently amiable injunction, is there another, more paradoxical, more terrible? The commandment is all the more difficult to elude because it corresponds to no object. How can we know whether we are happy? Who sets the norm? Why do we have to be happy, why does this recommendation take the form of an imperative? And what shall we reply to those who pathetically confess: “I can’t”?

In short, for our young people, this privilege quickly [be]comes a burden: seeing themselves as solely responsible for their dreams and their successes, they find that the happiness they desire so much recedes before them as they pursue it. Like everybody else, they dream of a wonderful synthesis that combines professional, romantic moral, and family success, and

beyond each of these, like a reward, perfect satisfaction. As if the self-liberation promised by modernity were supposed to be crowned by happiness, as the diadem placed atop the whole process. But this synthesis is deferred as they elaborate it, and they experience the promise of enchantment not as a blessing but as a debt owed a faceless divinity whom they will never be able to repay... They are angry with themselves for not meeting the established standard, for infringing the rule... We now have every right except the right not to be blissful. (Perpetual Euphoria, 2-3)

Admittedly, especially as Bruckner describes it, this is a “first-world problem,” profoundly marked by privilege. I have my Yale undergraduates, the suburban New England youth I ministered to as a youth pastor, and, indeed, my own high school peers on the North Shore of Chicago (the land of Ferris Bueller and Mean Girls) in mind as I write. But that sense of privilege only deepens this sense of responsibility. With so many resources at their disposal—education, youth, unparalleled freedom, etc.—they have no one to blame but themselves if they do not achieve their ultimate end: “perpetual euphoria.”

And, while there is no doubt that this burden to be happy is felt differently by different communities of young people, its roots are found in slogans we foist upon all young people: “You can do anything you set your mind to.” This is the basic American orthodoxy of self-determination, no less present in the charter schools of the inner city than in suburbia.

The root of the challenge, regardless of socioeconomic location, is the saliency of the question of affect, of emotion, of feelings. As modern human beings, nothing is more immediate to us. Nothing dominates our attention like our own pain and suffering. Nothing attracts our gaze like the promise of delight and pleasure. The great philosophers of modernity and the marketing mavens of Madison Avenue alike know this all too well. Even if we work hard to consider the lives of others, it is their pain or pleasure, their suffering or satisfaction that most of all demand our attention. To suggest that anything else other than alleviation of suffering ought to take priority as we consider what it would mean to do right by someone strikes us as monstrous.

There’s a real challenge here. What should our young people hope for and expect—for themselves and for others—when it comes to the affective or emotional dimension of life? “Perpetual euphoria” is too high a bar; some suffering is unavoidable—maybe even constructive, according to some. But neither would it be right to suggest that God doesn’t care about our subjective experience of life. Surely a miserable life isn’t what Christ had in mind when he promised “life abundant.” (John 10:10)

And then there is the witness of St. Paul: “Rejoice in the Lord always; again I will say, Rejoice.” (Phil 4:4) There is good news here: an assurance that God is, indeed, concerned with our emotional well-being. But have we discovered here the biblical version of Bruckner’s modern demand that we be happy? Read a certain way, Paul would be demanding precisely

the emotional heroism—the mastery of one’s own feelings—that modernity lays upon Bruckner’s youth.

Whatever our initial impressions of Paul’s command to rejoice in the Lord always, his vision of emotional flourishing is quite different than the burdensome modern command to “be happy.” Rather than holding up happiness as the supreme goal and then turning us loose to grope our way toward it, Paul sets emotional flourishing within the context of a definite, holistic vision of the good life. Rather than inviting his hearers to strive for an ideal that inevitably recedes before them, Paul distinguishes between “ultimate” flourishing life—life in the perfect world of love—from flourishing in the here and now. Conceding that the conditions of this life are unfitting to ultimate human flourishing, Paul then holds up emotional truthfulness and solidarity, commending an emotional life that always rejoices but does not only rejoice. If we can offer our young people this vision of emotional flourishing, we can at once affirm their intuition that their emotional lives matter to God while also rescuing them from an impossible, burdensome, and counterproductive quest for a life of pure bliss.

## A HOLISTIC VISION OF FLOURISHING LIFE

We can get a handle on Paul’s vision of flourishing life by considering carefully his definition of the kingdom of God in Romans 14:17: “The Kingdom of God is not food and drink, but righteousness, peace, and joy in the Holy Spirit.” Paul insists, first of all, that the good life is not only a matter of food and drink, making clear that flourishing is more than sustaining the body. These are (requisite!) means to the good life, but not (alone) the good life itself. The fully flourishing human life consists not merely in these material goods, but in righteousness, peace, and joy in the Holy Spirit. Taken together, these three describe the Christian substance of what we might call the three aspects of flourishing life: agency (righteousness), circumstances (peace), and emotions (joy). The image here is of a single, integrated life in which all three aspects of life flourish together. This is a life in which righteousness, which, for Paul, is always cashed out in terms of love (Rom 13:10), brings about a set of peaceful circumstances over which one ought rightly rejoice. It is also a life in which peaceful circumstances—right relations with God, with one’s neighbors, and with the creation as a whole—provide a context in which just agency finds its full expression not in the heroic actions of an individual, but in the flourishing collaboration of a world at peace and living into joy. It is equally a life in which joy conditions the will, producing love not as diligent labor, but as “fruit” of a life at peace with God, with God’s people and all people, and at home in God’s world.

Righteousness (or “justice” or love), peace, and joy: these three, woven together, and each contributing to the substance of the other, comprise the content of flourishing life for Paul. Joy does not stand apart as a demand apart from the invitation to pursue the good life. And the object of that pursuit—the Kingdom of God—is described by Paul most often as an inheritance—something we receive by virtue of God having adopted us as God’s children

(1Cor 6:9-10, 1Cor 15:50, Gal 5:21). These are not tasks to be accomplished, but gifts of a God who loves us profoundly, to be experienced in relationship with God: “in the Holy Spirit.” Joy is a gift, not an achievement, part of a holistic vision of flourishing life that is itself a gift, a space into which God invites us to enter: “Enter into joy!” (Mt 25:23)

In sum, in contrast to the modern demand to “be happy,” joined only to an open-ended invitation to unbounded freedom in the pursuit of happiness, Paul offers an integrated account of the good life in which joy plays a part, but is always interwoven into a holistic account of flourishing. This account points the individual beyond their private pursuit of fulfillment to a whole world transformed in the presence of the divine Spirit: a whole world at home in having become God’s home. Set within this framework, the invitation to the life of joy is immediately cast in a radically different light than the modern demand to be happy. There are guides along the way: pursue the way of love (1Cor 13); be peacemakers (Rom 12:18). But not at the exclusion of your well-being.

## FLOURISHING LIFE HERE AND NOW

Now, we need to pay close attention: Paul’s ultimate picture of flourishing life isn’t a matter of tips or tricks or “life hacks.” It’s a vision of an entire world remade—of new creation. And that means that, when it comes to life in the here and now—in “this age” as opposed to “the age to come,” in Paul’s language—things are complicated. We live our lives under conditions both fitting and unfitting to full, final flourishing. On the one hand, we live in God’s good creation (a fitting condition); on the other hand, this creation isn’t yet what it will be at the capital-E End of all things (an unfitting condition). Likewise, the world as we experience it is being redeemed by God’s work through the Holy Spirit and the Church, but it is nevertheless marred by Sin. These two sets of unfitting conditions—the not-yet-perfected nature of the creation and its being marked by the dominion of Sin—place serious limits on the extent to which we can expect to experience fully flourishing life in the here and now. Nevertheless, because of the two sets of fitting conditions (that the world is God’s good creation and that God is at work redeeming the world) and because of Paul’s hope that new creation is not just a pie-in-the-sky ideal but the world’s definite historical destiny, the ultimate vision he offers is to some extent realizable, and serves as a practical ideal for human life in the time between the times.

Discerning how to live toward fully flourishing life under conditions partially unfitting to it is no easy task. On the one hand, fully flourishing life simply is not a possibility for us here and now: in a world marked by much that is not love, we cannot expect to live only ever at peace and with joy. But we were created for that fully flourishing life and so that life lays demands on us: we are called to lives of love, called to be peacemakers and to do what Willie Jennings calls the work of joy.

Particularly when it comes to the flourishing of their emotional lives, what adolescents need from the church is help in this difficult work of discernment. For Bruckner’s youth, our culture

may have given them unrealistic expectations both about the happiness they can expect to experience and about the extent to which they have the power to realize this “perpetual euphoria.” A sober recognition of the conditions under which we live can provide relief from unreasonable expectations and release from the burden of failing to achieve bliss. For others, considering the fittingness of the creation and of God’s redemptive work in the world may offer new hope for joy in a life where joy is otherwise absent.

## DISCERNING EMOTIONAL FLOURISHING IN THE TIME BETWEEN THE TIMES

The task of the Christian, then, is to improvise life toward an ultimate vision of flourishing under conditions partially unfitting to that vision. This requires discernment (Rom 12:2). The hermeneutical key Paul offers for this work of discernment is love, the virtue which underwrites the continuity between this creation and the new creation (1Cor 13:8). Because love serves as this ground of continuity between this world and the world to come, in this life, all aspects of flourishing are shaped by their subservience to demands of love in a world that is not (yet) fully flourishing. Now, to be sure, even love takes different forms across the divide. In a fully flourishing world, Christian love is a love that “dances”; in a world such as ours, Christian love is often a love that suffers. So, the Christian life is always and only a life of love—sometimes a love that dances, often a love that suffers—but the Christian life is not always and only a life of joy. For Paul, the Christian in some sense always rejoices, but does not only rejoice.

The primacy of love has two important consequences when it comes to discerning the shape of our emotional lives here and now: First, joy must be indexed to the truth and resistant to injustice. Second, joy has to be responsive to the emotional life of the communities in which we participate—paradigmatically, the Church—in what we might call the practice of emotional solidarity.

Love, Paul insists, “does not rejoice in wrongdoing, but rejoices in the truth” (1Cor 13:6). Here Paul addresses the possibility of perverse joy: rejoicing in falsehood or injustice. We see this sort of perverse joy in our world: the joy of crowds at Nazi rallies in Nuremburg, the joy of white supremacists in Charlottesville, etc. But we might also think about the joy we experience over goods that come to us by virtue of systems of exploitation and oppression. In fact, it may be that in a world not simply marred by sins, but in fact under the dominion of Sin (e.g., Rom 5:21), all our natural reasons for joy are entangled in wrongdoing in this way and therefore require that our joy, should it be marked by love, be mixed with mourning. Alexander Schmemmann describes this dynamic well when he insists, that, in light of the brokenness of the world, joy persists as “the tonality of Christianity that penetrates everything,” but does so “as a bright sorrow.” (Journals of Father Alexander Schmemmann, 137) Aligning our joy to love requires that our joy pay attention to the truth of the justice and injustice of the world around us, critical of the grounds of our joy. Nevertheless, rejoicing in

the hope of justice that has not yet come to be can itself be a mode of Jennings' "joy work."

Paul's second rule for joy discernment in this life has to do with our being placed in communities of love that constitute social bodies. The paradigmatic social body for Paul, of course, is the Body of Christ. Membership in this body means participating in a collective emotional life that, while it does not erase our individual emotions, does involve becoming open to the emotional lives of others. "If one member suffers, all suffer together with it; if one member is honored, all rejoice together with it." (1Cor 12:26) For Paul, this fact of life becomes a rule of life: "Rejoice with those who rejoice, weep with those who weep" (Rom 12:15).

Emotional solidarity of this sort flies in the face of much in our world that invites us to see emotional pain not as something to be entered into in genuine empathy, but rather as a sign of weakness to be exploited. The social media world in which our young people live pushes especially hard in this direction. Twitter invites us to rejoice over those who mourn, scoring social points by calling out the failures of others. Instagram and Facebook invite us to mourn over those who rejoice, seeing in the joy of others an indictment of our own failure to achieve the perpetual euphoria displayed by our "friends."

In contrast, Paul invites us to enter into emotional solidarity with the church, including, most importantly, those who are likely to be coded as "weak" (1Cor) and our enemies (the immediate context of Rom 12:14). In learning this emotional solidarity, communal practices of mourning and lament are crucial. We need to invite young people to recognize the emotional pain of those in our communities, on the margins of our communities, and outside our communities. As we genuinely listen to the experiences of those who are suffering and learn to mourn together with them, we enact the unity of the Body of Christ and anticipate the unity in love of the world become God's home in the new creation.

Now, this emotional solidarity, too, can be perverted when love hasn't done its work. Adolescents are only too familiar with this dynamic, as emotional solidarity can become a mechanism of social closure, reinforcing the cohesion of a group precisely by means of excluding others. Emotional solidarity is only good if it is first aligned with truth and justice. Young people need to be trained to be discerning about the emotional lives of the social bodies to which they belong and encouraged to be courageous in moving against the grain of communities when the lives of these bodies make it harder to rejoice with those who are rejoicing in the truth and to mourn with those who are mourning injustice.

## REJOICING IN THE LORD ALWAYS

With this complex picture of emotional flourishing, we can be truthful with young people about the emotional possibilities of any life of love—any life genuinely invested in truth and in justice. This is not a life of perpetual euphoria. It is a life of joy and sorrow in solidarity with God's people and all people. But it is also a life of rejoicing in hope (Rom12:12).

It is also, Paul insists, a life in which we can, in some sense “rejoice in the Lord always.” As I suggested at the beginning, on its face this can be a difficult biblical teaching that, if we’re not careful, would only intensify the social burden teens feel to “find their bliss” and project it into the world. In what sense, then, are we able at all times to “rejoice in the Lord”? This cannot be a perverse joy in the face of injustice. Nor can it be a callous joy in the face of tragedy in the lives of others. It is a joy “in the Lord” in at least three senses.

First of all, in a world created good by God, there is always in every moment a possibility of joy in the goodness of God’s creation. This requires that we practice seeing the world as God’s creation. When we see it this way, the world takes on the character of a gift and as a result, as Miroslav Volf suggests:

each thing in the world is now a relationship marked by love. Each distant star and every gentle touch, each face and every whiff of the freshly plowed earth, in sum, literally every good and beautiful thing shimmers with an aura both vibrantly real and undetectable to our five senses. Each thing in the world is more than itself and just so a source of deep and many-layered pleasure. (Flourishing, 204-205)

The world construed this way provides unending opportunities for rejoicing in the Lord from whom we receive the world as a gift. Now, these gifts nevertheless come to us also entangled in wrongdoing and therefore requiring that our joy be mixed with mourning. Paul’s command is rejoice in the Lord always—not only.

Second, there is the possibility of joy in the Lord as Karl Barth’s “nevertheless.” This is joy in hope of the fully flourishing life that lies before us in the world to come, the world at home in having become the home of God. This is not escapism or a naïve pining for the sweet by and by. Were it not deeply invested in a truthful construal of the world, it would not take the form of a “nevertheless.” But this is genuine joy—rejoicing in hope of God making all things new.

Finally, there is the possibility of joy precisely in the sorrow we enter into in emotional solidarity. This, too, I take it, is a “joy in the Lord” that is the brightness of the sorrow in mourning together, the brightness of the anger in resisting injustice and falsehood together. This is the joy we experience when mourning in solidarity. There is a joy in truly being present to the sorrow of another. The sorrow is not full flourishing, but the love in the presence in the midst of pain and loss is. And that love shapes our emotional lives, it moves us and marks even our mourning, even our sorrow, even our lament, with the joy of community. In the pain, there is joy in feeling that pain together. There is a joy in standing against injustice, rejoicing “nevertheless.”

[STORY of the ECV memorial service]

This account of rejoicing in the Lord suggests a set of practices for helping young people cultivate lives of joy that are nevertheless honest about the world as it is. First, there is joy to be found in learning to see the world as a good gift from a God who is love. Second, there is





joy to be found in hope of a world made new: the world at home in becoming the home of God. Finally, there is joy to be found in practices of emotional solidarity: communal lament, protest, and empathy on scales both large and small, opportunities to experience the bright sorrow that accompanies love in a fallen world.