

*"The Kingdom of God is not food and drink but righteousness, peace and joy in the Holy Spirit."
Romans 14:17*

This verse is nestled in a discussion of how to handle things that Christians argue about, but which are not the foundations of our faith. The example Paul wrote about in this chapter concerns food. In his day, there was a major issue about food, because of the widespread practice of idolatry and witchcraft. In many places, people would offer the food to idols before eating it. Even food purchased in the marketplace might be food somehow "sanctified" by idolatrous practice. Of course, for Jews of the day, this would be a big deal, since Jews followed very strict laws about food. Imagine the food arguments that might have escalated between new Jewish believers and new Italian believers! I think of words like "loud" and "louder"!

Anyway, Paul wrote that they not get into arguments about food. He wrote that opinions would differ: one man's conscience will allow him to eat everything, ignoring whether it was "blessed" by false gods; while another person may think it a sin to even touch such stuff. The goal would be love – not to offend each other over things that don't affect eternal life.

He then made the main point in Romans 14:17: Paul said that life with God (in other words, His kingdom) is not rooted in food or drink. Life in God's presence (again, that is His kingdom) is about more important things: being right with Him, and living in His peace, and in His joy. And He said this is all found in the Holy Spirit.

What is the main thing? Righteousness, Peace and Joy. And where are these found? In the Holy Spirit.

Let me describe righteousness in a non religious way: When you have it, you feel right on the inside. I know that it specifically means being right with God, but the effect of that is to feel right instead of wrong in your heart.

Peace and joy are easier to think of in a non religious way: everyone wants peace and joy, and we all know that feeling good is mostly about feeling peaceful and joyful.

From this simple view, we could say that everyone wants righteousness. In other words, no one wants to feel wrong all the time on the inside. In fact, if you feel wrong all the time, you will be really miserable. If you can't resolve it, you will become desperate to find some way to make that misery go away.

The same goes for lack of peace and joy. Everyone wants to feel peace and joy, and without it all you feel inside is misery. Without peace and without joy, you will feel depressed, angry, frustrated, fearful, anxious, and full of self pity.

It is amazing what people will do to feel "right" on the inside. Some people try to make themselves feel right by simply blaming everyone else for the problems. Yet, even most of those who accuse others about their mistakes still have a fight in their heart to feel right about themselves.

Many people work really hard to get their feeling of righteousness. They pour themselves into their careers or work accumulating things – to feel "right" inside; to feel peace and joy. Work hard, make money. Get a big house, get a motorcycle, go on a cruise. Win the prize; do the best job; get the highest grade. Run the fastest; beat everyone. Be number one.

High achievers rarely arrive at a feeling of righteousness, peace and joy. The trophies mount up, but the inward sense of peace and joy is momentary. The top job seems empty. Being best in your class is a great thing. But why don't you feel as good as you thought you would, once you were given "the key to the city", or some other honor you sought with all your energy? There is always a higher bar to leap over, a higher standard to achieve.

Prizes, honors, fame, bonuses, and compliments: these all ease the search for inward righteousness, peace and joy for a while. Then, in creeps the old awareness that you still are not yet good enough; your sense of rightness, peace and joy illusively melt away.

Many other people do not even try to strive for honor, success, or high accomplishment. They feel so bad about themselves they don't even begin. They have to find another way to bury that inward pain.

The fact is, to satisfy your need for righteousness, peace and joy, you will never get enough high grades. You can't build enough big houses. You can't run enough races. You can't outrun and outwork and outthink everyone else to find that inward condition.

For that reason, there is a global market of stuff to put in to your body to make you feel right, feel peaceful, and feel joyful.

The production of substances to make people feel right and peaceful and joyful is huge. It thrives in the legal marketplace and on the uncontrollable street trade. It even drives the medical world.

They say that half of Americans are taking tranquilizers. How much will people pay to get the feeling of peace and joy? Lots!

Drugs -- legal and illegal -- move billions of dollars. I am talking about drugs that make you feel good. If you run a business to make people feel good, you are guaranteed success. Just provide something that takes away the pain of failure, and makes people feel like everything is OK. Just make them feel peaceful and joyful, and you can be rich!

Take a pill, take a drink, take a smoke. If you feel really bad, you need something strong. If you can't get it legally, you may try to get it anyway you can. If that does not work, you may start thinking about ending your life. You can't exist long without some way to feel right inside, to feel peaceful, and to find some joy.

If someone offers you any way to get that feeling, you will probably take the offer. It is no surprise that people will swallow, smoke, sniff or snort something. It is no surprise that some will even shoot it into their veins themselves. Over and over, even until they die! Better to die feeling good than to live feeling miserable!

Some people will even kill to get something that makes them feel right...and peaceful...and joyful. It is no surprise why people get drunk or take drugs. Drugs and alcohol serve one purpose: to give you the feeling of righteousness, peace and joy.

But nothing out there gives you the real thing. Everything is a substitute, and many things that make you feel really good turn around to bite you or even kill you in the end.

There is a place to get it all. The kingdom of God is righteousness, peace and joy in the Holy Spirit. You were made by God to be filled up on the inside with righteousness, peace and joy. God made you to feel good. He didn't make you to feel rotten and miserable.

The closer to God you live, the better you feel. God's personality overflows with righteousness, peace and joy. His personality is called the fruit of the Spirit, and it also includes love, patience and kindness. This is the temperament of God. When you are around Him, this is what you feel. This is what you get.

Why do you suppose the worst sinners liked to be with Jesus? The prostitutes and the drunks and the failures of society were not repelled by Him. They enjoyed being with Him. Somehow, He overflowed with what they were always trying

to find. Somehow they felt really good when they were close to Him.

Jesus wanted to be with those sinners as well. He ate and drank with people whom the religious people would avoid.

Everyone wants this feeling of righteousness, peace and joy.

After describing the fruit (the temperament and personality) of the Holy Spirit, Paul writes in Galatians 5:23, "against such there is no law". No

one in the world – no king, no government, no one – would ever pass a law against righteousness, peace and joy. There are no laws anywhere against love and patience. The most evil government will never pass a law against love. Everyone wants this life. They at least want you to treat them that way!

This is what the Christian life is all about. Righteousness, peace and joy. The Bible calls this life "in the Spirit". It is called being "filled with the Spirit". In Romans 14, it is called the kingdom of God.

All of this comes to you in the presence of God. Righteousness, peace and joy are what you get by being joined to God through Jesus. Jesus Himself is your Righteousness; He is your Peace; and He is your Joy. He fills you up with Himself through the Holy Spirit. Only God can make you feel permanently right inside. He does this with the washing of the blood of Jesus. He does it by giving you a gift of righteousness. This gift is literally Him – inside of you.

His presence is what gives you permanent peace and joy. Nothing else will do this for you.

When you finally learn to get your joy from Him and from being with Him, your life will no longer be your enemy. People and circumstances will no longer be a threat to you. You will find that you no longer have to be rich to be happy, or to have everything around you be perfect. You will find that you can be at peace even with difficult people, and that you can even have joy when things go wrong. You will no longer look to your own success as the place of your righteousness, for you will have found the rock of your righteousness to be the Lord Himself in you.

From that point on you let Him live righteously through you. And you will find yourself reacting to life without losing your peace and your joy.

It begins to dawn on you that you are living in the kingdom of God. You are living in the Holy Spirit where you are smothered and overwhelmed by, and filled with, God's righteousness, peace and

joy!