



“What does JOY mean as a fruit of the Spirit – including in the context of work – and what can be done to make it actionable?”

The fruits of the Holy Spirit are the signs and actions that the Holy Spirit is alive within us and helping us live by faith in our daily lives.

“What does JOY mean as a fruit of the Spirit – including in the context of work – and what can be done to make it actionable?”

This was the focus of the inaugural session of the 2022 BELIEVES season held on Tuesday, January 11, 2022, with Jim Eckstein, Executive Vice President for the Georgia Center for Opportunity.



Eckstein, who was born in Muncie, Indiana, raised in the Midwest, and is a graduate of the University of Cincinnati, said his career has been heavily focused on founding, building, and selling companies in the Financial Services and FinTech areas ever during the 30+ years he and his wife, Tammy, and their family, have lived in Atlanta. In addition, to starting and leading companies, Eckstein also has served on various Boards. Today, he is the Executive Vice President for the Georgia Center for Opportunity.

“I work with great people at the Georgia Center for Opportunity,” Eckstein said. “We focus on improving the ability for people below the poverty line to flourish. My role there is to manage their day-to-day operations like all the accounting, operations, and back-office work.”

So, what does Joy mean as a fruit of the Spirit to Eckstein?

“Can there be any doubt that the first two commandments would lead to joy?” Eckstein asked everyone. “Why would we doubt?”

He then commented, “I feel the most joy when I am loved or loving – both with God and my neighbors.”

Eckstein went on to explain that joy is more than temporary happiness.

“It’s a state. It’s a great peace. Something that’s with you or not with you,” he said. “It becomes with you in a deep relationship with God. It’s an active choice. It’s an attitude that all things come from God.”

So, how does this fit within the context of work?

“Proverbs 3:5-6 says, ‘Trust in the Lord with all your heart and lean not on your own understanding; in all your ways submit to him, and he will make your paths straight,’” Eckstein exclaimed. “It’s straightforward.”

The hard part, he said, is to declutter and separate from the world.

“It’s easy to say, but hard to do.”

One book he mentioned he has been drawn to in his journey to live out joy is *Interior Freedom* by Jacques Philippe. In the book, Eckstein related that Philippe defines freedom as “spiritual poverty and utter dependence on God.”

“Until we’re utterly dependent on God, we’re not free,” Eckstein said personally.

Questions Eckstein shared he constantly tries to reflect on to be in utter dependence on God are:

- What is my disposition to God in my interactions?
- Can I pull myself away in these interactions to put God first?
- How can I serve Him?

Key in all this is if we can empty ourselves, he stated.

“My life has had great moments, as well as calamity. If I turn all to God, then I can have joy.”

Eckstein expounded to share that the way he does this is through prayer – prayers of praise and thanksgiving.

“In moments of crunch time, the last thing I am thinking of is prayer. Maybe it should be the first.”

He went on to add that often we really only know what we need when everything is taken from you.

“In the 1990’s I started a business that became the #4 fastest growing company in the *Inc. 500*. I initially thought God had given me joy via a company,” he recalled.

Ultimately, however, he said it was from knowing God was taking care of he and his family and that all would be OK in the end.

“The key is – joy is not ours to have without Him.”

Though Eckstein had shared how he found joy in his life and his career, the truest joy he’s observed was actually that of another – his Aunt Marie from Notre Dame.

“She was sent to the convent at age 14 by her parents during the Great Depression,” he recalled. “They didn’t have enough food to eat. She taught at schools in Chicago. By our standard, she was poor, but that was not the case. In all things, Aunt Marie found God.”

When reflecting on how all that he shared about the meaning of joy – in general and in the context of work – could become actionable, Eckstein, turned back to prayer.

“It’s just prayer,” he said. “If only I could take 80% of what I just said and do it consistently.”

To the extent there’s wisdom in what he shared, Eckstein said all of it comes from God.

“All glory to God for any wisdom here. It comes from Him through prayer these last few days to discern the words to say.”

Eckstein was then asked if he could think about what he had shared in context of situations where people have to be let go professionally.

Thinking back on experiences where he was faced with having to let go of people he said, “When I can get me out of the way, then it works out. Many people have flourished after I let them go.”

One particular anecdote he shared had to do with when he was on a Board and the CEO had to be let go.

Eckstein knew him, so those involved thought it would be best for him to communicate with the CEO about the decision to let him go.

“It took two weeks of conversations,” he retold. “Everyone was fine that the CEO would be OK. The concern was around what would happen to the organization, but in the end it was OK.”

Eckstein once again pointed out that there can be joy found in situations even as tough as these if we involve God to “do what he asks us to do and love Him and love others.”

However, without prayer going into the meeting, Eckstein said you are just not ready.

“They are difficult conversations. You have to get to the heart of the conversation and be transparent.”

Eckstein was then asked by another attendee who owns multiple businesses if he could define prayer and share what it is to him and how it manifests in his life.

Eckstein responded by saying, “Prayer is anything you can do to have a conversation with God. Everyone has their own way. I woke up this morning and prayed. Then I took a shower, and I prayed.”

The state of being Eckstein hit on again involved emptying oneself.

He recommended that, if at all possible, at least one or two times a year you need to go off in the woods and spend 24 hours with God. If you can’t do a formal retreat, then he said you need to do something independent.

Eckstein also said that when he grew up Catholic, he learned all the prayers.

“However, sometimes I need 32 seconds of Our Fathers and sometimes I need 8 days of Our Fathers. Why? All the noise.”

He added, “I’ll tell you, right now I am struggling with prayer life in the last two years with the pandemic. I have more time now than ever, but I’m struggling.”

Then he said specifically, “If you find a situation where you need God, don’t think you need a rosary, or need to go to Mass, or something of that sort. You don’t. Getting to the ‘need nothing but God’ stage is all that is needed. This could be at the computer screen, for 60 seconds, for an hour, whatever.”

The job in leadership, Eckstein mentioned, is to get the soul into this second disposition.

Having shared this, one other attendee had the chance to reflect and speak up in the discussion, sharing that he had been laid off twice in his career, and it was difficult to see God in those situations.

He added, “I wish I had a Christian in the room in those situations. Instead, I just got, ‘Here’s your things, get out.’”

Eckstein’s response?

“I think you’ve been let down and this world will let us down, but God won’t let us down. Stick to your prayer life. What you have right now is the love of God. You have to turn to Him, trust Him, let Him support you. It is difficult. Stick to the prayer life. Stick to relationships. Love people and people will love you.”