

Finishing with Joy

by John Piper

This sermon emphasizes the importance of pursuing God's pleasure and satisfaction above fleeting earthly pleasures, drawing examples from the lives of Paul, Moses, and Jesus. It highlights the radical, joy-filled pursuit of God as the key to impactful Christian living, mission work, and glorifying God. The message stresses that God is glorified when we are most satisfied in Him, and that faith is coming to God to be satisfied with all that He is for us in Jesus.

Scripture: Acts 20:24, Hebrews 13:20, Hebrews 11:6, Luke 14:33, Philippians 3:8, Hebrews 12:2

Topics: "Pursuing God's Pleasure", "Joy in Christian Living"

Description

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Transcript

I want to pick up where I left off this morning and pose for you these two pictures again. And this is a partial effort to answer Landa's indictment of the Evangelical Church and to pose a possible remedy. The two pictures were one from Paul and one from Reader's Digest.

And the one from Paul was this. I'm going up to Jerusalem and I do not know what is to befall me there. I only know that in every city the Holy Spirit testifies that afflictions and imprisonment await me.

But I do not count my life of any value if only I might finish my course and complete the testimony to the grace of God which Jesus has given to me. So in the face of affliction and imprisonment, Paul wanted to finish well more than he wanted to live. And then over against that was the Reader's Digest version where a couple retired at 59 and 51 and through remarkably shrewd investment strategies and brilliant planning wound up cruising on their trawler, playing softball and collecting shells.

And I pose the question as to whether or not finishing like Paul or finishing like these folks might have something to do with whether the Evangelical Church makes an impact in Malawi or America. And I think it does. I think when we become and are sustained in being the kind of person speaking in Acts 20-24, our churches will feel the difference and our vocational associates will feel the difference.

Our schools will feel the impact and the world will feel the difference as well. And I argue that in order to become that kind of person, there would be no finishing without a fight. And I went to Hebrews and argued that the whole book is written to help us fight.

And when I described fight for what, I opened up something that I did not finish and would like to try to make another step in tonight. I said that the fight is a fight to glorify God and the fight is a fight to satisfy your own soul and that these two are not two but one. Fight.

And I used the sentence that God glorifies Himself as God by satisfying our souls in God. I'll say it again. The reason they are not two fights but one fight is that God glorifies Himself as God by satisfying our souls in God.

And that's the fight. Because almost nobody is satisfied in God. But in their cars and their new computer programs and their marriages and their children and their health and their houses, both of them and their retirement plans and vacations.

And therefore the great battle is to be satisfied in God. Now, do you have a Bible with you? I hope you will now open it with me to Hebrews 13. And we'll pick up in this verse where we left off this morning.

In case you're wondering, this relates to any of those books back there. This is all I have to say in all those books. If you understand what I say tonight, you don't need to buy any of them.

Or if you've read one, you've read them all because I only have one message and I've just given it to you and everything else is application and explanation. But it does seem that it takes a few hundred pages to get this across to people for 20 years or so because we are wired very differently. Let's read this benediction in Hebrews 13, 20 and 21 again.

I argued this morning that this was the writer's answer to why when we have fought with all of our might to finish well, we won't get the glory, but God will. The answer to that is given in these two verses. Now, may the God of peace, who brought again from the dead our Lord Jesus Christ, the great Shepherd of the sheep by the blood of the eternal covenant, do two things.

May this God do two things. May He equip you with everything good that you may do His will. So if you do His will, it's because He has equipped you with everything good needed to do that will.

And then He gets very specific with a theologically explosive statement to bring it to a point. Not only in general equips you with everything good to do His will, but may He also work in you that which is pleasing in His sight through Jesus Christ, to whom be glory forever and ever. And I argued that the reason this writer and God inspiring him thinks this way, namely that God is the one who works in you the ability to do His will.

He equips you with everything good to do His will doing, the two Greek words there, do His will is poieo and working in you is poieo. And the RSV that I'm reading here misses it by using different verbs in English. But let's just get the point real clear.

May He equip you with everything good that you may do His will doing it in you. This is said over and over again in the New Testament. Philippians 2, 12 and 13 Work out your salvation with fear and trembling, for God is the one who is at work in you to will and to work for His good pleasure.

1 Corinthians 15, 10 I worked harder than any of them, nevertheless it was not I, but the grace of God that was with me. Romans 15, 18 God forbid that I would speak of anything except what Christ has brought through me to win the obedience from the Gentiles. It's over and over.

Galatians 2, 20 I am crucified with Christ. It is no longer I who live, but Christ who lives in me. And the life which I now live in the flesh, I live by faith in the Son of God who is the one who is working in me.

This is all over the place in the Bible. This not I, but Christ. You work, and when you come to the end of the day, give Him the glory because He enabled the working.

And that's exactly the reason He says through Jesus Christ, to whom be glory forever and ever. So the reason God is working in you and able you to do His will in missions and finishing well and do the fight of fight that I talked about through Jesus is so that Jesus gets the glory. If it depended on you, you'd get the glory.

If it depends on Jesus, He gets the glory. The giver gets the glory. The finisher gets the glory.

The fighter gets the glory. And I believe most of you in this room want Him to get the glory, and so I am praying earnestly that this mystery of the Christian life will be experienced, if not understood. You do know that's possible, I hope.

It is possible to experience things we cannot account for rationally. Thank God. Otherwise, everybody would have to be a flawless theologian to be an obedient Christian, and they don't often, and I'm tempted to say usually, go hand in hand.

Now, here's the new thing for tonight in this verse. What He is working in you is that which is pleasing in His sight. Now, in the book of Hebrews, that word pleasing should cause you to think of another verse which becomes very important in my unfolding this statement that God glorifies Himself as God by satisfying our souls in God.

And it's Hebrews 11, verse 6, which many of you know by heart. It goes like this. Without faith, it is impossible to please God.

Actually, this is the verb. That was the adjective form. It is impossible to please God.

Which means now, let's just stop right there before we read the rest of the verse. It means that in 13.21 where it says He works in you that which is pleasing in His sight, if it is impossible to please Him without faith, He cannot mean He's working in you something other than faith. Because that would be displeasing to the Lord.

Every ounce of attempted obedience outside faith is displeasing to the Lord. Romans 14.23, that which is not of faith is sin. The only thing that pleases the Lord is faith and its fruit.

That's all. Period. Nothing else.

Faith and that which is the obedience of faith as Paul calls it in Romans 1.5. Therefore, what must be worked by God in verse 21 to the glory of Christ is faith and its fruits. Therefore, what I want to know is if that's the special thing that brings glory to God, what's the nature of faith being wrought here? And that's what the rest of verse 6 in chapter 11 tells us. It goes like this.

Without faith, it is impossible to please Him. For, whoever would draw near to God must believe that He exists and that He rewards those who seek Him or that He is the rewarder of those who seek Him. Now that's an amazing statement about what faith is.

To come to God pleasingly, and nobody would want to come any other way, to come to God pleasingly, you must believe two things as you come. One, you exist. Two, I get reward when I come.

Therein is birthed Christian hedonism. You cannot please God without coming to Him to get. If you try to come to Him as a benefactor and not a beneficiary, you blaspheme and turn Him into a needy beneficiary.

He will not be the beneficiary. He's the giver. He's the doer.

He's the finisher. He's the fighter. Because He will get the glory.

Therefore, what I see in verse 6, amazingly, is that in this writer's mind, the heart and essence of saving faith is a coming to God as one who will satisfy the soul. That's the way I interpret rewarder. Now you might say, well, how do you know that's what the reward is? How do you know it's not golf or restoration with your mother in heaven? Or healing from a disease? Or the resurrection of the body? My answer to that is, as I have read this book of Hebrews over and over and over, if you're wondering why I'm speaking from Hebrews, everybody speaks out of their situation.

And I've lived in this book for about three years. Preached on it for 18 months at my church. And I'm living in it again in preparation for this conference.

And what I have found, for example, is I re-read the whole book, asking what's the reward? You say we must come to You in order to please You for a reward. We must be the getters. You must be the rewarder if we're going to please You.

So tell me, I don't want to come for the wrong reward. I don't want to be mercenary in coming. I want to come for the right reward.

What is it? And the answer coming back from this book is it is Me. Period. Not my gifts.

For example, chapter 8, verse 10 when He's talking about the New Covenant, He brings it to a climax. I will be their God and they will be My people. That's the reward.

I'm going to be their God. I'll be there in the New Covenant for them. Or, chapter 3, verse 12 when He exhorts that we should be vigilant and take care and beware lest we fall away from not the gifts, but the living God.

That's the great danger that we might lose God. Not that we might lose some gift of God. Or, chapter 10, verse 19, the Gospel is presented here as a priestly deliverance from sin and an opening of holies into the heavenly sanctuary where who but God dwells.

Nobody else. And finally, chapter 12, verse 14 says, pursue the holiness without which no one will see the Lord. There's no doubt.

The Lord is the reward. Therefore, based on Hebrews 11, verse 6, my definition of faith, and I believe His definition of faith is faith is a coming to God to be satisfied with all that He is for us in Jesus. That's the definition of faith.

Look back up to verse 1 of chapter 11 if your Bible's open there. Now faith is the assurance of things hoped for and the conviction of things not seen. There it is again.

As your heart explodes with longing, faith is the assurance that that longing is going to be satisfied. Faith is the assurance of things hoped for and they are given in God. He is the sum of all that is good to hope for.

And faith is that hope. Now, the point of making such a big deal about faith here is that you will notice the whole of chapter 11 is built on obedience flowing from faith. Verse 8, By faith Abraham obeyed... and then right on through the chapter, By faith so-and-so obeyed.

By faith so-and-so went out. By faith so-and-so did this. In other words, this reality that I've just described as faith is the root of all the fruit of obedience and mission in the Christian life.

Now we're real close to an explanation of how it is that God is most glorified in you when you are most satisfied in Him. Because if all radical, missionary, risk-taking obedience in the second half of a life flows from faith defined as a coming to God to be satisfied in all that He is for us in Jesus, and that obedience magnifies God, then the pursuit of joy in God magnifies God. This is really not hard to understand.

It's very simple. If you delight in something or are satisfied with something so much that you are willing to let goods and kindred go, this mortal life also, in order to get it, everybody watching you will see that that thing has unbelievable value. But, if you try to pursue obedience to God out of some higher, nobler, philosophical conception of duty rather than the superior satisfaction of God, they will not see your good works and give glory to God, but to you as a heroic figure.

It is hedonists who get glory for God. People who are so ravished by God that they let anything go in order to have God and walk with God and know God and fellowship with God that call attention to the value of God in the way they live their lives. And I'm very eager to call attention to God in the way I live my life because that's why I'm on planet Earth is to call attention to God.

So, we are to fight for two things in order to be the finishers like Paul rather than Reader's Digest. The glorifying of God and the satisfying of our souls which are one because God is most glorified in me when I am most satisfied in Him. Therefore, I say things like it is your supreme duty every day of the rest of your life to pursue maximum and most enduring pleasure.

That's your duty. It's not optional. It's not a caboose at the end of the train.

It is essential that you become the kind of person who is radically bent on maximizing your pleasure in God. Anybody who says, well, I don't think that's a very high motive and goes about trying to obey Him another way will dishonor Him greatly. Now, what I want to do is give you in the remaining time that we have illustrations of this from the book of Hebrews and how it works to get you to the mission field or to get you into risk-taking for the sake of love.

I want to show you something that is for many people and maybe most of you absolutely paradoxical. Namely, that your radical, relentless, unremitting focus on the pursuit of your pleasure will make you the most radically loving person possible. And the forsaking of that pursuit will destroy love in your life and ruin all worship.

Alright, some illustrations from the book of Hebrews. Let's go first to chapter 10. We don't have time to look at all of them.

From chapter 10 through 13, all he's doing is giving illustrations of this point. Fleshing it out. Hebrews 10.

32-34 Recall the former days when after you were enlightened you endured a hard struggle with suffering, sometimes being publicly exposed to abuse and affliction, sometimes being partners with those so treated. Let's just stop and get the situation clear. Evidently in the early days of their conversion, not an unusual thing at all in a hard country, there arose a persecution of some kind, a hard struggle it's called, with sufferings.

And the lines were divided not only between Christian and non-Christian, but between two groups of Christian. One group became publicly exposed to abuse. In fact, we're going to see that they went to prison in verse 34.

The other group was not yet in prison and had to make a choice whether to love them or not at risk to their lives and property. Okay, you got the situation? Some Christians have been thrown into prison. Prison's not pretty in those days.

No TVs, no heat, probably no food unless your friends brought it. This is dangerous. This is life-threatening.

Families divided. A lot of tears, a lot of pain, a lot of shuddering at night. Will Mommy get out? And the rest had to decide, do we go visit them and thus identify with them, or do we lay low and let them fend for themselves? You see what's at stake here? Love is at stake that gets you from an easy place to a hard place.

How did this happen? Let's read it. It's very plain. Any of you could finish this message by just reading texts and saying what they mean here.

Verse 34, You had compassion on the prisoners and you joyfully accepted the plundering of your property. Now just stop there. What is the source of love here? Answer, joy.

The capacity to rejoice at the plundering of your properties is an atom bomb of power. And that's what you should pursue. Will you become the kind of people in this posh hotel who would rejoice to lose your homes for Christ? That's the kind of people Lunda was looking for.

That's what's missing in the evangelical church. We want more houses. We don't have any capacity to rejoice at the plundering of our property.

We love our property. Joy in God freeing you from the love of things is power for mission. Mission and love, that's what it says.

But we're not done. Where does the joy come from? Keep reading. You joyfully accepted the plundering of your property since you knew that you yourselves had a better possession and an abiding one.

That's faith. That's coming to God and finding Him and all that He promises to be for us in Christ Jesus satisfying. That's enough.

If I have that assurance that I have a better possession and an abiding one, take those two words and let them sink in. Let's let Psalm 16:11 fill them up. Thou dost show me the path of life.

In Thy presence is fullness of joy. At Thy right hand are... Now take the word forevermore and fullness and lay it on this verse. And does it not coincide with the words better and abiding? The answer is, folks, God is that possession.

The better and abiding possession than the house that just got burned is God. Thou dost show me the path of life. In Thy presence is fullness, fullness, fullness of joy.

At Thy right hand are... Don't water down this word into just its joy. It's not pleasure. Don't do that sort of thing.

Don't say to me, I think you're talking about joy, not happiness. Or I think you're talking about joy, not pleasure. I think you ought to be careful with your terminology.

Look, the Bible is not careful with its terminology. It is lavish with what it means to know God. It is lavish with what it means to belong to God and have Him as our God.

The church is full of people who love their houses and are happy, happy, happy, happy with their houses and have nothing corresponding that emotion in relationship to God. Nothing! And using the twisting and spinning of vocabulary a la Washington, D.C. to justify their carnal, even dead souls. Because you don't need to be happy in God.

Just joyful. It is something who knows what, but has little bearing on how you respond when your house is burned down. We're talking radical Christianity.

That is normal Christianity here. This is not second level discipleship. There is no such thing as second level discipleship.

He who would come after Me must renounce all that he has. Luke 14:33 Period. And He means joyfully.

Do you remember the parable of the treasure hidden in the field? The kingdom of heaven is like a man who found a treasure hidden in a field and for his joy he covers it over and goes and sells all that he has and buys that thing. That's step one Christianity. That's entering the kingdom.

Landa and everybody. The reason Christians are not making a great impact is because there aren't many Christians. The way is broad that leads to destruction and many there be that go there and the way is narrow and hard that leads to life and few there be that find it even in the church, I fear.

This is not picking and choosing texts. This is pervasive. You give me ten more days with you, we could talk on and on and on about this kind of life.

Let's go to the next story. We'll pass over the various ones in the first part of chapter 11 and go to Moses in Hebrews 11:24. Now, stop right there. By faith, that is, if my definition is right, by means of coming to God to be satisfied with all that God was for him, by that, Moses, when he was grown up, refused to be called the son of Pharaoh's daughter, choosing rather to share ill treatment with the people of God.

Now, there's a choice, exactly like the choice in 10:33. This author is bent on getting this point across. You were partners with those so treated. You had compassion and went to the prison.

You risked your life. They plundered your house. That's what happened to Moses.

He chose it. He embraced it. I remember one time when Richard Vernbrand came to our church, took his shoes off and sat on the platform and taught us to embrace suffering.

When a person like that teaches you, you listen. By faith, Moses, when he was grown up, refused to be called the son of Pharaoh's daughter, choosing rather to share ill treatment with the people of God rather than to enjoy the fleeting pleasures. Oh, mark that word fleeting.

Mark that word fleeting. Because he chose the word fleeting to say I'm after another kind. He didn't put it there to say the pursuit of pleasure is evil.

What's evil is the pursuit of fleeting pleasures. That's evil. That's evil.

God designed your heart to pursue maximum blue chip 20% yield high security pleasures. And we sell our souls for 1% boondoggle pleasures that peter out before the weekend is over. Not to mention eternity.

He considered abuse, this is verse 26, suffered for the Christ, listen to this, amazing. He considered abuse, suffered for the Christ, greater wealth. This guy is crazy.

Amen. I'm trying to create crazy people, just crazy, biblically normal, radical, everyday, run-of-the-mill, risk-taking, lay-down-your-lives Christians which is the only kind the Bible knows. He counted the Christ greater wealth than the treasures of Egypt.

Now here's the phrase that corresponds to 1034. For, how did he get to be this way? How did he become a crazy person like that? What is the answer to Lunda's question? For, he looked to the reward. That is, he had faith in God as a superior rewarder than everything the castles of Egypt could offer.

Now, for you, facing a choice in your life, hearing the still small voice of God to leave something precious in earthly terms, the issue boils down to not can you hedge yourself about with enough protections, but when you look to the reward, namely God, is He and His way and His sweet fellowship through it all, whether by life or by death, more to be desired than anything. More to be enjoyed than anything. More pleasure to be found in Him than anything.

Let me give you one more story. My time is up here. I'll do it quickly.

Chapter 12, verse... Let's read both 1 and 2. Therefore, since we are surrounded by so great a cloud of witnesses, let us also lay aside every weight and sin which clings so closely. Let us run with perseverance the race set before us, looking to Jesus, the pioneer and perfecter of our faith, who... and here He drops His atom bomb, because surely if anybody in the universe should have higher motives than hedonism, it should be Jesus. And He doesn't.

Mark it. He doesn't. Because He's out to glorify His Father who for the joy that was set before Him endured the cross.

Now do you sense a motif or what? 10, 34. 11, 26 and 27. 12, 3. And there's more.

I'll pick it up tomorrow morning in chapter 13. 13. There's an easy verse to remember.

Two unlucky verses. Or an unlucky chapter and an unlucky verse. 13, 13.

Get yourself ready, because tomorrow comes an issue and a call that Jesus gives in that chapter that is simply built on the pursuit of pleasure. Maybe I should say in closing, the highest, most loving, most mission-mobilizing, soul-saving, God-glorifying, self-sacrificing act that was ever performed in the history of the world, namely the cross of our Lord Jesus Christ, was performed in the power of the pursuit of a superior pleasure. The restoration of Himself with the Father surrounded by a redeemed people from every tribe and tongue and people and nation, all of them in one great crescendo, praising God as the benefactor of the world.

Oh, beware, my brothers and sisters, of trying to serve Him any other way than for the joy that there is in Him. Because God is in the business of glorifying Himself as God by satisfying your soul in God. Let's pray.

Oh, God. Oh, God. Oh, God.

Words, words, words, I fear, unless You would come. And I ask You to come. Just come.

Just right now. Do something more than I can do. I've done all I know to do.

I've said what I've known to say. And I ask You to come with a match on the tinder of the Word and make it place. You're the best thing in the world.

We don't have anybody besides You. We agree with Paul in Philippians 3. I count everything as loss for the surpassing value of knowing Christ Jesus, my Lord.

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