

It's My Pleasure!

by John Piper

Christian Hedonism teaches us to seek pleasure through worshipping God and loving others, which helps us stay humble and motivated by a desire for our own good.

Scripture: Proverbs 16:19, Isaiah 66:2, Matthew 5:3, Matthew 23:12, Mark 8:34, 2 Corinthians 9:7, Hebrews 12:2, 1 Peter 5:5

Topics: "Christian Hedonism", "Humility"

Description

John Piper preaches about Christian Hedonism, emphasizing the pursuit of joy as a proper motive for all actions, including worship and obedience to God. He connects joy in God to humility, highlighting the importance of humility as God's pathway to infinite pleasure and a guard against pride. Piper explains that Christian Hedonism aids humility by teaching believers to seek pleasure in worshipping God and loving others, leading to a lack of craving for compliments and praise.

Transcript

Those who know me best know that I am a Christian Hedonist. That means that I think my desire to be happy is a proper motive for everything I do. I do what I do because I think it will make me happier in the long run. In fact, I think that if I abandon this pursuit of joy, I will become incapable of worshipping and obeying God. For what is worship but the expression of delight in God, what obedience does God want but cheerful obedience? "Each one must do as he has made up his mind," Paul said, "not reluctantly or under compulsion, for God loves a cheerful giver."

The words of Flannery O'Connor are my words too. She said in a letter to a friend, "Picture me with my ground teeth stalking joy--fully armed, too, because it is a highly dangerous quest" (The Art of Being, p. 126). Or consider Jonathan Edwards, a man after my own heart. When he was in college in the early 1700's, he wrote 70 resolutions. Number 22 was this: "Resolved, To endeavor to obtain for myself as much happiness in the other world as I possibly can, with all the power, might, vigor, and vehemence, yea violence I am capable of, or can bring myself to exert, in any way that can be thought of." Now really, Jonathan! Violence? Surely, you have gone too far. And Jonathan responds, I only go as far as Jesus. Don't you recall His words? "If your hand causes you to sin cut it off; it is better for you to enter life maimed than with two hands to go to hell, to the unquenchable fire. And if your foot causes you to sin, cut it off; it is better for you to enter life lame than with two feet to be thrown into hell. And if your eye causes you to sin, pluck it out; it is better for you to enter the Kingdom of God with one eye than with two eyes to be thrown

into hell where their worm does not die and the fire is not quenched" (Mark 9:43-48). Make the joy of life in the Kingdom of God your aim. And if you have to cut off your hand and foot and gouge out your eye in order to gain that happiness, do it! A Christian Hedonist is a person devoted to maximizing his own happiness and who has learned how to do it from the Bible.

It is possible to talk about Christian Hedonism in relation to every aspect of Christian living, but this morning I want to focus only on humility and its relationship to Christian Hedonism. And I want to try to show how Christian Hedonism is a great guard against pride and a great help to humility. First I'll try to show the importance of humility, then the nature of humility and finally, how Christian Hedonism helps us stay humble.

First of all, why is it important to be humble? There were many Greeks in Jesus' day and there are many Americans in our day for whom humility is not only unimportant but positively repulsive. It is not the way to get ahead. How are you going to make it to the top if you regard lowliness as a virtue? But the Christian Hedonist, believing as he does in the Bible, says, "Which top do you want to reach? How high do you want to go?" Maybe, in hungering for power and prestige and possessions and sensual pleasure, you have traded your soul for a bowl of pottage. Maybe God really offers what your heart longs for most but your desires are too weak. Maybe, like C.S. Lewis says, we are like children satisfied to make the best mud pies in the slum because we can't imagine what a day at the beach is like.

Humility is important because it is God's pathway to infinite pleasure. Listen to what God has to say: Proverbs 16:19, "It is better to be of a lowly spirit with the poor than to divide the spoil of the proud." Better humble and poor than proud and rich. Really? Why? 1 Peter 5:5, "Clothe yourselves all of you with humility toward one another, for God opposes the proud, but gives grace to the humble." Poor humility is better than rich pride because God is against the proud. Even his riches will be a snare to bring him to ruin in the end. If God is opposed to you, to whom can you turn for help? But He gives grace to the humble. He is watching like a jealous lioness over all His lowly cubs. Isaiah 66:2, "Thus says the Lord, 'This is the man to whom I will look, he that is humble and contrite in spirit and trembles at my word.'"

And not only is He watching; He is close to the lowly and refreshes them when they are about to fall. He loves to magnify the height of His grace by condescending to the lowly: Isaiah 57:15, "For thus says the high and lofty One who inhabits eternity, 'I dwell in the high and holy place and also with him who is of a contrite and humble spirit, to revive the spirit of the humble and to revive the heart of the contrite.'" What a promise! You cannot be too insignificant for God to reach you; He loves to dwell with the lowly and contrite. That is bad news for the proud and self-reliant, but good news for broken sinners.

But the Bible goes right on singing the benefits of humility. In the words of Jesus:

Blessed are the poor in spirit for theirs is the Kingdom of Heaven...

Blessed are the meek, for they shall inherit the earth...

Unless you turn and become like children you will never enter the Kingdom of Heaven. Whoever humbles himself like this child, he is the greatest in the Kingdom of Heaven...

Whoever exalts himself will be humbled and whoever humbles himself will be exalted (Matthew 5:3,5; 18:3,4; 23:12).

The watchword of the 70's in America was "He who exalts himself will be exalted and he who humbles himself will be humbled." Whether this self-assertive tendency will last through the 80's I don't know. But since our culture is so fickle and since you have to say something new to write a best seller we will probably see the tables turned and hear some books entitled, "Lowly jogging: the Joy of Coming in Last"; or possibly a manual for burned out executives: "Is the Corporate Ladder Worth the Ulcers" subtitled "How to be Happy on the Bottom Rung"; or perhaps a new diet booklet entitled "Contrition Conditioning: How to get thin by laying aside every weight and sin that clings so closely." Well, the opinions of men about how to be happy may change from decade to decade, but God's word, like a sovereign sage endures from age to age and says "Whoever exalts himself will be humbled and whoever humbles himself will be exalted." So I conclude on the first point: it is very, very important to be humble. God opposes the proud but the poor in spirit enter the joy of His kingdom.

The second question is: What is the nature of humility? What is a person like who is humble in a Biblical way? Let's look at a few texts that depict humble people and then try to sum up what it involves. We will begin with 1 Corinthians 4:7. Here Paul puts a huge roadblock in the path to pride when he says, "What do you have that you did not receive? If then you received it, why do you boast as if it were not a gift?" The recognition that everything we have is a free gift from God is a great roadblock to pride. It is unreasonable to brag about a free gift. So the humble person is not stingy or miserly or overly possessive. Nor is he ostentatious about what he has, because he knows and feels that he is merely a trustee and that everything is really God's, loaned to him for his temporary use.

Another picture of Christian humility is given in Luke 18:9-14, a parable of Jesus.

Two men went up into the temple to pray, one a Pharisee and the other a tax collector. The Pharisee stood and prayed thus with himself, 'God, I thank Thee that I am not like other men, extortioners, unjust, adulterers, or even like this tax collector. I fast twice a week, I give tithes of all that I get.'

But the tax collector, standing afar off, would not even lift up his eyes to heaven, but beat his breast saying, 'God, be merciful to me a sinner!' I tell you, this man went down to his house justified rather than the other. For everyone who exalts himself will be humbled but he who humbles himself will be exalted.

A humble person is keenly aware of his sin and feels very sorry for it. He is not presumptuous before God or man. He knows he has no right in himself to approach the holy place or even lift his eyes to heaven. Before we spell out the implications of this attitude for our daily life, let's look at one more text. Luke 17:7-10, another parable of Jesus.

Will any one of you who has a servant plowing or keeping sheep say to him when he comes in from the field, 'Come at once and sit down at table'? Will he not rather say to him, 'Prepare supper for me and gird yourself and serve me, till I eat and drink; and afterward you shall eat and drink'? Does he thank the servant because he did what was commanded? So you also when you have done all that is commanded you, say, 'We are unworthy servants; we have only done what was our duty.'

We can never obey our way out of humility. "When you have done all that is commanded you, say, 'We are unworthy servants.'" No matter how much we grow in sanctification we will always be people for whom lowliness is fitting and proper.

Now how shall we describe the humble person? What manner of life flows from these texts? First of all Christian humility sees life and breath and everything as a gift of God and so is shot through with gratitude

instead of grumbling. But not only is all a gift. Because of our sin, all the benefits of life and the hope of eternity are utterly undeserved gifts. The Christian knows that his life hangs on a scarlet cord of mercy and mercy alone. Therefore, the humble person is not greatly inclined to demand personal rights, because he knows if he were treated like that his life would be over. He is not presumptuous or insolent but unassuming and meek. The humble person has the feeling that his natural place is to serve rather than be served; he takes the lowest seat. There arises in his heart a great uneasiness when he is unduly honored or praised. And even when he has done well the compliments he gets are a bit awkward for him, not because he artificially denies his competence, but because he feels so keenly that whatever he has accomplished is owing to grace, so that God should get the credit above all. The humble Christian does not crave the praise of men. He longs for God to be praised and thanked and for truth to be honored. And finally a person who has been humbled and secured by the gospel will manifest a willingness to acknowledge his error and a readiness to be corrected when wrong. Humility does not try to save face. It is quick to admit its own finitude and imperfection and stubbornness.

That is Biblical humility as well as I can sketch it briefly. That is the lifestyle we love if we are God's children. We don't attain it perfectly but we are on the way and we long to be further down the path. So the last thing I want to do is show how being a Christian Hedonist will help us get there.

I can remember January, 1979, sitting in a Mexican restaurant with my friend Steve Amador. He had just bought for me one of the best Mexican meals I have ever had. I looked at him and said, "Thanks a lot, Steve, that was really good." He lifted his hand and said, "It's my pleasure." And, being two sworn Christian hedonists we spent the next half hour talking about the meaning of the phrase "It's my pleasure" in that context. Why has the custom arisen to respond to compliments and thanks with the phrase, "It's my pleasure"? Why does "It's my pleasure" with the raised hand mean virtually the same as, "O, think nothing of it." I think the reason is more profound than we are aware of. Isn't it this: When you do something good for the pleasure there is in it, you don't feel the same craving for compliments that you do when you do something good out of a sense of external compulsion. If a person does not love mercy but acts mercifully anyway under a sense of compulsion (say, to avoid censure from his pious peers), then probably he will want to be paid for it, if not in money, then in sufficient praise. But the person who loves mercy and gets great pleasure from acts of kindness will feel amply rewarded in the fruits of his labor and so will not feel this craving for compliments. The compliments will seem superfluous and his way of saying, "You don't need to make much over me" is to say, "It's my pleasure." I've been amply repaid with pleasure.

Now the upshot of all this was that Steve and I saw Christian hedonism as a great aid to humility and hindrance to pride. Christian hedonism says, "Make pleasure your aim and seek it through worshipping God and loving other people." Humility, we have seen, does not crave compliments; it feels a bit awkward receiving praise because it desires God to be honored above all. So when we find that doing a loving act for the pleasure there is in it inclines a person not to seek praise, it seems obvious that Christian hedonism, which teaches us to seek that pleasure, is a great aid to humility. Christian hedonism teaches us to be motivated in such a way that, when our deed is done, we will feel no craving for the praise of men. And so Christian hedonism hinders pride and helps humility.

But someone may say, How can you talk as if it is right to be motivated by a desire for our own good? How can you say, Make pleasure your aim, when the Bible so clearly teaches we should deny ourselves and take up our cross? Listen, people, have I got good news for you if you think that's what Jesus taught. Let's read the whole passage (Mark 8:34-36):

If any man would come after me let him deny himself and take up his cross and follow me. For whoever would save his life will lose it and whoever loses his life for my sake and the gospel's will save it. For what does it profit a man to gain the whole world and forfeit his life?

The whole premise of this argument is hedonistic. Nobody wants to lose his life. There is no profit, no pleasure in that. So here is how to save your life and have infinite joy--lose it in a life of love. Every sacrifice Jesus asks us to make, he asks us to make because he promises something vastly better. Self denial? Sure: deny yourself the mudpie in the slum so you can have the day at the sea.

Jesus asked a rich young man once to deny himself, to sell everything he had, give it to the poor and follow Jesus. Now what do you think should have motivated that man to sell all his goods? Some kind of disinterested benevolence? The Bible does not know any such thing. Jesus told two parables to show what his motive should have been. Matthew 13:44-46. "The Kingdom of Heaven is like a treasure hidden in a field which a man found and covered up; then in his joy he goes and sells all that he has and buys that field." The rich young man should have sold all that he had because the prospect of following Jesus into the Kingdom was so exciting and so joyful that all his possessions were no comparison. "Again, the Kingdom of Heaven is like a merchant in search of fine pearls, who, on finding one pearl of great value, went and sold all that he had and bought it." The only reason Jesus asks us to renounce our little plastic beads of money and vain ambition and sensual pleasures is because he has a real pearl for us.

There is no such thing as ultimate self-sacrifice in the Kingdom of God. Even Jesus, whose love was purest at Calvary "endured the cross," as Hebrews 12:2 says, "for the joy that was set before Him." Christian hedonism is simply a fancy way of saying it is not the best when we do things under compulsion for it is cheerful givers, joyful lovers that the Lord seeks (2 Corinthians 9:7).

I conclude with a letter I wrote to one of my students who disagreed with me on this. He wrote me a note and said, "I disagree with your position that love seeks or is motivated by its own pleasure ... Are you familiar with Dorothy Day? She is a very old woman who has devoted her life to loving others, especially the poor, displaced and downtrodden. Her experience of loving when there was no joy has led her to say this: 'Love in action is a harsh and dreadful thing.'"

I wrote back the following response: You say of Dorothy Day: "Her experience of loving the poor, displaced, downtrodden when there was no joy has led her to say this: 'Love in action is a harsh and dreadful thing.'" I will try to respond in two ways.

First, don't jump to the conclusion that there is no joy in things that are "harsh and dreadful." There are mountain climbers who have spent sleepless nights on the faces of cliffs, have lost fingers and toes in subzero temperatures, and have gone through horrible misery to reach a peak. They say it is "harsh and dreadful." But if you ask them why they do it, the answer will come back in various forms: there is an exhilaration in the soul that feels so good it is worth all the pain. If this is how it is with mountain climbing, cannot the same be true of love? Is it not rather an indictment of our own worldliness that we are more inclined to sense exhilaration at mountain climbing than at conquering the precipices of un-love in our own lives and in society? Yes, love is often a "harsh and dreadful" thing, but I do not see how a person who cherishes what is good and admires Jesus can help but feel a sense of joyful exhilaration when (by grace) he is able to love another person.

Now let me approach Dorothy Day's situation in another way. Let's pretend I am one of the poor that she is trying to help at great cost to herself. I think a conversation might go like this:

Piper:

Why are you doing this for me, Miss Day?

Day:

Because I love you.

Piper:

What do you mean, you love me? I don't have anything to offer. I am not worth loving.

Day:

Perhaps. But there are no application forms for my love. I learned that from Jesus. What I mean is I want to help you because Jesus has helped me so much.

Piper:

So you are trying to satisfy your "wants"?

Day:

I suppose so, if you want to put it like that. One of my deepest wants is to make you a happy and purposeful person.

Piper:

Does it upset you that I am happier and that I feel more purposeful since you've come?

Day:

Heavens no! What could make me happier!

Piper:

So you really spend all these sleepless nights here for what makes you happy, don't you?

Day:

If I say, yes, someone might misunderstand me. They might think I don't care for you at all, but only for myself.

Piper:

But won't you say it at least for me?

Day:

Yes, I'll say it for you: I work for what brings me the greatest joy: your joy.

Piper:

Thank you. Now I know that you love me.

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