

Journey to Joy

by John Piper

This sermon delves into the concept of Christian hedonism, redefining it as a pursuit of pleasure in God rather than worldly desires. It emphasizes finding superior pleasure in God to overcome sin and achieve holiness, highlighting the transformative power of joy in God. The speaker shares personal experiences and insights from influential figures like C.S. Lewis and Jonathan Edwards to illustrate the connection between joy in God, glorifying Him, and loving others selflessly.

Scripture: Psalm 16:11, Philippians 2:15, 1 Corinthians 10:31, Acts 20:35, John 15:11, Jeremiah 2:13

Topics: "Christian Hedonism", "Joy in God"

Description

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Transcript

I call what I said this morning Christian hedonism. Christian hedonism. Some people pronounce it hedonism.

Now I know that the word hedonism has a very negative connotation for most people, which it probably should, because it refers to things like worldliness, sensuality, selfishness, egotism. And I don't mean any of those things when I use the word. When I put Christian on the front of it, I want it to be transformed.

So years and years ago, when I was considering, do I want to call this message Christian hedonism, I looked up the word hedonism in my high school dictionary, basic dictionary. And the first definition was a life devoted to pleasure. And I thought, that's exactly what I mean.

A life devoted to the pursuit of pleasure. That's what I was talking about this morning. But of course the world means pleasure in money, pleasure in success, pleasure in power.

And when I put the word Christian on the front of it, I mean pleasure in God according to Psalm 16:11. In your presence is fullness of joy, at your right hand are pleasures forevermore. That's what I mean by it.

So I am an advocate for what I call Christian hedonism. And the reason I am emphasizing it here, in this conference, is because the theme of the conference, I was told in a word, would be holiness or Philippians chapter 2, verses 15, where we are to shine like lights in the world, be blameless children of God in a crooked and perverse generation. And I thought, the only way I know to kill sin in my life is to kill it with the power of a superior pleasure.

That's my understanding of sanctification. It won't do any good just to say to people, stop sinning, that won't work. The reason I sin, the reason you sin, is because it feels good to sin.

Nobody sins out of duty. Nobody gets up in the morning and says, it is my obligation to sin today. Nobody does that.

The reason we sin is because it's pleasurable, it feels good, my life will be happier if I sin. How are you going to conquer that? Tell people happiness doesn't matter? Of course it matters, it's all over the Bible. So the reason I'm talking about it is because this conference is about holiness, it's about being bright and distinct and radical Christian people in a pagan culture like yours and mine.

And I believe the key is to be so miraculously transformed by God into the kind of people who find more pleasure in God than we do in sin, that we get victory over the sin in our lives. Let's go back 73 years. I was born into a family, Bill and Ruth Piper, my parents.

My father was an evangelist, my mother was a homemaker, I have one older sister. It was a sweet, happy, godly, Christian home. I had nothing to do with that.

Isn't that amazing? That was total grace. I think my father was the happiest man I've ever known, which is an amazing statement. And my mother was joyfully supportive as he traveled all over the United States preaching the gospel, leading people out of darkness into light.

And I admired my father my whole life. He's in heaven today. And I never once resented my father's travels.

He was at home maybe one third of my growing up life. And the rest of the time he was on the road, preaching. And I never resented that.

And I think probably the reason I didn't resent it is because my mother didn't resent it. If my mother had been angry, I probably would have been angry. My mother loved my father.

She loved his ministry. She supported it with all her heart. And so I cannot deny that one of the huge reasons I'm talking about joy 70 years later is because my father was the most joyful man I've ever known.

And he loved God with all of his heart. There was a second impulse in the home. So this joy was pervasive, right? I mean, can you imagine having parents and you're a child sitting in the back seat of the car and you're going on a vacation and your parents are in the front seat of the car singing to Jesus.

Singing in the car. What a privilege. So the other emphasis was both my father and my mother would write letters to me while I was in college, seminary, graduate school over in Germany.

And the end of their letters, they would write very often. Johnny, never forget, whether you eat or whether you drink, do all to the glory of God. First Corinthians 10 31.

Well, when I left home at age 18 to go to university and study literature, these two forces, I want to be happy. My parents are happy. I want to be happy.

And I want to glorify God because the Bible says I should. And I could not at that time put the two together. I didn't know how they fit.

I wasn't sure whether it was completely right to want to be happy. I mean, happiness was okay if it kind of snuck up on you. But should you pursue it? Should you want it? And I wasn't sure.

I knew I should want this one, the glory of God. I knew I couldn't stop wanting this one. You can't stop wanting to be happy.

You can't. God has wired you in this room, and it isn't sinful wiring. God has wired you to want to be happy.

That's a good thing. So I went off to college, and at the end of the university four years, I still hadn't figured it out. But I knew I wanted to.

I wanted to know this book, teach or preach this book. So at age 22, I go off to seminary. California, in Pasadena, California.

And in those three years, between age 22 and 25, 1968 to 1971, my whole world changed. My vision of God, my understanding of his sovereignty, my understanding of joy, my understanding of his glory. I remember saying to my wife, because I got married in 1968, I remember saying to Noelle, as our lives were being turned upside down by these things I'm going to talk about in a minute, I said, Noelle, you know how you can tell that your world and your understanding of God is being revolutionized by the way you pray? I wanted to pray with my wife.

I've always prayed with my wife. I think that's why we're still married. Every night we're praying together.

Every morning we're praying together. But oh, how differently I was praying in those days. I mean, hallowed be thy name was not a wasted phrase anymore.

The number one request of every prayer. Make your name great. Make your name great in this world.

Hallowed be your name. So three influences came into my life. Daniel Fuller, C.S. Lewis, Jonathan Edwards.

Daniel Fuller, you don't know him. He was a professor of mine. C.S. Lewis, you may know, the British writer, Christian writer.

He died on the very same day that John F. Kennedy died. And Jonathan Edwards was an 18th century preacher in America. And those influences were gigantic.

And let me just try to explain how they were. I was standing in a bookstore on Colorado Avenue in Pasadena, California, in the fall of 1968, Vroman's Bookstore, at a used book table. And I picked up a little blue book, about that big, about 60 pages, called The Weight of Glory by C.S. Lewis.

And I've said often, books don't change people. Paragraphs change people. And this one changed me.

So I opened up the first page and read this. The New Testament has lots to say about self-denial. But not about self-denial as an end in itself.

We are told to deny ourselves and take up our crosses in order that we may follow Christ. And nearly every description that we find gives us appeals to our desire. That's what I tried to explain this morning when I was talking about self-denial.

And then he adds this. If there lurks in most modern minds the notion that to desire our own good and earnestly hope for it is a bad thing. And that was me.

I feared that wanting my good, my happiness, my pleasure, I feared that's a bad thing. I shouldn't feel this. And he's saying, if there lurks that thought in my mind, I submit this notion has crept in from Immanuel Kant and the Stoics and is no part of the Christian faith.

Well, he had my attention. Because he was saying the desire to be happy is not a bad desire. And those who say it's a bad desire are being influenced by the Stoics, not by the Bible.

And then he kept going like this. Indeed, if we consider the unblessing promises of reward and the staggering nature of the rewards promised in the Gospels, it would seem that our Lord finds our desires not too strong, but too weak. I had never heard anybody say that.

John Piper, your problem in the Christian life, your problem is not that your desires are too strong, but your desires are too weak. I couldn't believe anybody was saying that. Because I had felt for years my problem is I want to be happy so bad it must be a bad desire.

And he's saying, no, that's not your problem. Your problem is you are settling for way too little. And he finishes it with this amazing sentence that I've never forgotten.

We are half-hearted creatures fooling around with drink and sex and ambition when infinite joy is offered us. Like an ignorant child who wants to go on making mud pies in the slum because he cannot imagine what is meant by an offer of the holiday at the sea. We are far too easily pleased.

So here's the C.S. Lewis diagnosis of Holland. He's dead now, but if he were here, right here, and I say, give me your diagnosis of the problem of the world in Holland. He would say, they're all too easily pleased.

And that's true. Like children fooling around with mud pies in the slum. Just sitting in the gutter playing in dirty water.

And a man is offering them, I want to give you a holiday at the sea, at the ocean for two weeks. And the kids say, no thank you, we're having a good time. They don't know what he's talking about.

That's the problem in the world. We heard it this morning from Jeremiah. You turn away from the fountain of living waters, dig out cisterns in the slums.

Well I've never heard anybody say that. And my professor, Daniel Fuller, built an entire part of his course around the sentence, we are far too easily pleased. Well, two more steps.

What about the glory of God? What about praising God? Here's what Lewis said that blew me away. This is in his book, Reflection on the Psalms. The most obvious fact about praise, whether of God or anything, strangely escaped me.

I thought of it in terms of compliment or approval or giving of honor. I had never noticed that all enjoyment spontaneously overflows in praise. The world rings with praise.

Lovers praising their mistresses. Readers praising their favorite poet. Walkers praising the countryside.

Players praising their favorite game. Praise of weather, wines, dishes, actors, motors, horses. I had not noticed that just as men spontaneously praise what they value, so they spontaneously urge others to join them in praising it.

Isn't she lovely? Wasn't it glorious? Don't you think that magnificent? The psalmists, in telling everyone else to praise God, are doing what all men do when they speak of what they value, what they care about. I think we delight what we enjoy because the praise not merely expresses, but completes the enjoyment. It is its appointed consummation.

So here's what that did to me. God is not an egomaniac when he commands you to praise him. If I commanded you to praise me, I would be sick, evil.

When God commands you to praise him, he's being loving. And Lewis gave me the answer to how that can be because he said, if God is supremely enjoyable and you are enjoying his beauty, his excellence, his worth, his power, his wisdom, his grace, if you're enjoying him and he commands you to give expression to that enjoyment, that praise is bringing the joy to completion, to consummation. And therefore, he's loving you.

He's wanting you to complete your joy, complete your joy, because he's the only place where it can be found. That was revolutionary for me to think of praise that way. The consummation of your joy in God.

But that wasn't the essence of the matter. The essence, which is what I ended with this morning, is that God is most glorified, most praised in you when you are most satisfied in him. So, praising is the consummation of joy.

It's the completion of joy. But, joy is the essence of praising. The way I like to say it in English, because it sounds so good, is praising is the essence of praising.

You prize something, you value it, you are satisfied with it, and that is the heart and the essence of praising. Otherwise, praising is hypocritical. This people honors me with their lips, but their heart is far from me.

They don't prize me, they're just singing songs on Sunday morning, because that's what you're supposed to do. So, that was another huge part, and Jonathan Edwards is the one who gave me the key to that, because he said, God glorifies himself not only by communicating himself to our minds, but by communicating himself to our hearts, and being glorified by our rejoicing in him. And I thought, I've never heard anybody say that.

So, all this has happened. In these three years, these thoughts, these discoveries were happening, and they've just never been the same since those three years. So, let me end with just one more illustration.

So, the last argument this morning was that God is most glorified in you when you're most satisfied in him. So, the glory of God depends upon your pursuing pleasure in God. It's the essence of it.

The argument just before that was love. You can't love people if you don't pursue your joy in God, because loving people is the overflow of joy in God that meets the needs of others. So, let me end like this.

That was the last piece that I couldn't figure out. I saw that God is glorified when I'm satisfied in him. Like my wife receiving, I want to be with you, Noelle, that honors her.

I want to be with you, God. You make me glad more than anybody. God is honored when I say that and feel that.

I could not for the life of me figure out how that vertical satisfaction made me a loving person horizontally. I knew that there were other religions that had pictures of people sitting with their arms folded and their legs crossed under a tree experiencing a kind of karma and just let the world go to hell. Who cares? I'm happy.

I'm happy in God. I don't care if people are dying or suffering. I knew that couldn't be.

That's not the Bible. That cannot be. But what's the link? So, I gave you one answer this morning.

Here's my last answer and I'll be done. Paul was talking to the elders in Acts 20. To the elders of Ephesus.

And at the end of his talk, he said, remember. This is Acts 20, verse 35. Here it is.

Remember. He didn't say forget. Some people say, you shouldn't have this motive to be blessed.

And I say, if that were true, he'd say forget. Remember. It is more blessed to give than to receive.

More blessed? More happy? More satisfied? More content? More joyful? To give my life away? Die for others? Suffer for others? Sacrifice for others? Yes. Yes. You want more joy? Die for others.

Live for others. That's what it says. It is more blessed.

More happy. More content. If you will give yourself away.

Don't just fold your arms and sit under a tree and say, me and you God. We're happy. I don't care about other people.

You won't be happy. Not long. That's not joy in God.

So, I discovered that joy in God is a peculiar kind of thing. It not only honors God, but it also is a kind of pressure inside of me. It wants to be out.

It wants to draw you in. Because the way it works is that joy in God gets bigger if I can include you in it. So that your joy in God becomes part of my joy in God.

So that's why I came to Holland. I want to be happier. And I look out at you.

I don't know but half a dozen of you. And it would make me very happy. I mean it is making me happy.

I'm very happy right now. Just to talk to you about these things. But if I heard that God took these few words and drew you in to more joy in God.

That caused you to lay down your life for the people in your country who don't know him. If I heard that half a dozen of you out of the 5,000 that have been here. My joy would be greater.

That's what John said, right? My joy is complete when my children walk in the truth. And you're not my children, but kind of. I mean some of you are older than I am, but not many.

So I don't know if I'll ever see you again on earth. But if God preserves me in faith. Which I think we might sing.

We did yesterday. If God preserves me. If he holds me fast.

And he works in you to bring you into a deeper, sweeter enjoyment of himself. For the sake of the world and his glory. I will not have come to Holland in vain.

Let's pray. Father, that's your work now. I've done all I can do.

By your strength. And now it's your spirit. And I pray that understanding would be granted.

And that heart work would be done by the spirit. To cause Christ to look more attractive. More beautiful.

More valuable. More satisfying than anything in this world. I ask this in his great name.

Amen. Thank you.

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