

God-Centered Living

Lesson 1 – Introduction to Christian Hedonism

Insight #1

Blaise Pascal – “All men seek happiness. This is without exception. Whatever different means they employ, they all tend to this end. The cause of some going to war, and others avoiding it, is the same desire in both, attended with different views. The will never takes the least step but to this object. This is the motive of every action of every man, even those who hang themselves.” (Quoted in DG, 19)

1st Conviction of Christian Hedonism: The longing to be _____ is a universal human experience, and it is _____, not sinful.

Insight #2

C.S. Lewis – “If there lurks in most modern minds the notion that to desire our own good and earnestly to hope for the enjoyment of it is a bad thing, I submit that this notion has crept in from Kant and the Stoics and is no part of the Christian faith. Indeed, if we consider the unblushing 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. We are half-hearted creatures, fooling about 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 a slum because he cannot imagine what is meant by the offer of a holiday at the sea. We are far too easily pleased.” (Quoted in DG, 20)

2nd Conviction of Christian Hedonism: We should never try to deny or resist our _____ to be happy, as though it were a bad impulse. Instead we should seek to _____ this longing and nourish it with whatever will provide the deepest and most enduring _____.

Insight #3

Blaise Pascal – “There once was in man a true happiness of which now remain to him only the mark and empty trace, which he in vain tries to fill from all his surroundings, seeking from things absent the help he does not obtain in things present. But these are all inadequate, because the infinite abyss can only be filled by an infinite and immutable object, that is to say, on by God Himself.” (Quoted in DG, 21)

3rd Conviction of Christian Hedonism: The deepest and most enduring _____ is found only in God. Not _____ God, but _____ God.

Insight #4

C.S. Lewis – “But the most obvious fact about praise – whether of God or anything – strangely escaped me. I thought of it in terms of compliment, approval, or the giving of honor. I had never noticed that all enjoyment spontaneously overflows into praise...The world rings with praise – lovers praising their mistresses, readers their favorite poet, walkers praising the countryside, players praising their favorite game...My whole, more general difficulty about the praise of God depended on my absurdly denying to us, as regards the supremely Valuable, what we delight to do, what indeed we can’t help doing, about everything else we value. I think we delight to praise what we enjoy because the praise not merely expresses but completes the enjoyment; it is its appointed consummation.” (Quoted in DG, 21–22)

4th Conviction of Christian Hedonism: The happiness we find in God reaches its _____ when it is shared with others in the manifold ways of love.

Insight #5

Lookup the following Psalms:

- Psalm 37:4
- Psalm 42:1–2
- Psalm 63:1
- Psalm 36:7–8
- Psalm 34:8
- Psalm 119:103
- Psalm 43:4
- Psalm 16:11

5th Conviction of Christian Hedonism: To the extent we try to abandon the pursuit of our own pleasure, we _____ to honor God and love people. Or, to put it positively: the pursuit of pleasure is a _____ part of all worship and virtue. That is: The chief end of man is to glorify God _____ enjoying Him forever.

The Root of the Matter

In *Desiring God*, Piper ends his introduction with this paragraph:

“This book will be predominantly a meditation on Scripture. It will be expository rather than speculative. If I cannot show that Christian Hedonism comes from the Bible, I do not expect anyone to be interested, let alone persuaded. There are a thousand man-made philosophies of life. If this is another, let it pass. There is only one rock: the Word of God. Only one thing ultimately matters: glorifying God the way He has appointed. That is why I am a Christian Hedonist. That is why I wrote this book.” (DG, 28)

Jonathan Edwards – “God glorifies Himself toward the creatures also in two ways: 1. By appearing to...their understanding. 2. In communicating Himself to their hearts, and in their rejoicing and delighting in, and enjoying, the manifestations which He makes of

Himself...God is glorified not only by His glory's being seen, but by its being rejoiced in. When those that see it delight in it, God is more glorified than if they only see it... He that testifies his idea of God's glory (doesn't) glorify God so much as he that testifies also his approbation of it and his delight in it." (Quoted in DG, 22)

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Lesson 2 – The God-Centered God

Introduction

What is God most passionate about? What is the chief end of God?

- John Piper – “The ultimate foundation for our passion to see God glorified is His own passion to be glorified. God is central and supreme in His own affections. There are no rivals for the supremacy of God's glory in His own heart. God is not an idolater. He does not disobey the first and great commandment. With all His heart and soul and strength and mind He delights in the glory of His manifold perfections. The most passionate heart for God in all the universe is God's heart.” (Let the Nations Be Glad, 21)

The Foundation of God's Happiness

1. God is absolutely sovereign over the world
2. God is infinitely happy; He is never hindered from doing what He pleases
3. God delights in His own glory above all else; His glory is uppermost in His affections
4. God's pursuit of the praise of His people is supremely loving
5. Pursuing God's glory and pursuing our joy is the same pursuit

Struggling with God's Sovereignty

John Piper – “The Bible shows (in Deuteronomy 38:63; Proverbs 1:24–26; Revelation 18:20; Ezekiel 5:13; and Isaiah 30:31–32) that even acts of judgment which in one sense do not please God, in another sense do please Him. Our method is not to choose between these texts, or to cancel out one by the other, but to do deep enough into the mysterious mind of God to see (as far as possible) how both are true. How shall we account for this apparent tension?

The answer I propose is that God is grieved in one sense by the death of the wicked, and pleased in another. God's emotional life is infinitely complex beyond our ability to fully comprehend. For example, who can comprehend that the Lord hears in one moment of time the prayers of 10 million Christians around the world, and sympathizes with each one personally and individually as a caring Father (as Hebrews 4:15 says), even though among those 10 million prayers some are brokenhearted and some are bursting with joy? How can God weep with those who weep and rejoice with those who rejoice when they are both coming to Him at the same time – in fact, are always coming to Him with no break at all? Or who can comprehend that God is angry at the sin of the world every day (Psalm 7:11), and yet every day, every moment, He is rejoicing with tremendous joy because somewhere in the world a sinner is repenting (Luke 15:7, 10, 23)? Who can comprehend that God continually burns with hot anger at the rebellion of the wicked and grieves over the unholy speech of His people (Ephesians 4:29–30), yet takes pleasure in them daily (Psalm 149:4), and ceaselessly makes merry over penitent prodigals who come home? Who of us could dare say what complex of emotions is not possible for God? All we have to go on here is what He has chosen to tell us in the Bible. And what He has told us is that there is a sense in which He does not experience pleasure in the judgment of the wicked and there is a sense in which He does." (The Pleasures of God, 72)

God's Happiness is in Himself

Is God for Us or for Himself?

Sam Storms – “What is the pre-eminent passion in God’s heart? What is God’s greatest pleasure? In what does God take supreme delight? I want to suggest that the pre-eminent passion in God’s heart is His own glory. God is at the center of His own affections. The supreme love of God’s life is God. God is pre-eminently committed to the fame of His name. God is Himself the end for which God created the world. Better, still, God’s immediate goal in all He does is His own glory. God relentlessly and unceasingly creates, rules, orders, directs, speaks, judges, saves, destroys, and delivers in order to make known who He is and to secure from the whole of the universe the praise, honor, and glory of which He and He alone is ultimately and infinitely worthy.

The question I most often hear in response to this is that if God loves Himself pre-eminently, how can He love me at all? How can we say that God is for us and that He desires our happiness if He is primarily for Himself and His own glory?”

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Lesson 3 – The God-Centered Gospel

What the World Needs Most

Defining the Gospel

1. The Gospel is an _____
2. He _____ something when He died:
3. The _____ _____ to be received by faith alone, not works
4. The _____ _____ _____ to us
5. God is the Gospel

What Makes the Good News Good

John Piper - "Until the Gospel events of Good Friday and Easter and the Gospel promises of justification and eternal life lead you to behold and embrace God Himself as your highest joy, you have not embraced the Gospel of God." (God is the Gospel, 37-38)

God's Glory in Christ

John Piper – “We must see ‘the glory of God in the face of Christ.’ Why? Because that is what the Gospel is. The Gospel is not just historical events—Christ died and was buried and rose. Gospel is good news. And we do not see the decisive good in the good news if we do not see in the events the glory of Christ who is the image of God. Notice carefully the use of the word Gospel in verse 4: It is the ‘Gospel of the glory of Christ who is the image of God.’ This is the Gospel. The glory of Christ seen and savored in the work of redemption is the good news.

This is the highest and best and final good that makes all the other good things promised in the Gospel good. Justification is good news because it makes us stand accepted by the One whose glory we want to see and savor above all things. Forgiveness is good news because it cancels all the sins that keep me from seeing and enjoying the glory of Christ who is the image of God. Removal of wrath and salvation from hell are good news because now in my escape from eternal misery I find eternal pleasure beholding the glory of God in the face of Christ. Eternal life is good news because this is eternal life, Jesus said, that they know Me and Him who sent Me. And freedom from pain and sickness and conflict are good news because, in my freedom from pain, I am no longer distracted from the fullest enjoyment of the glory of Christ who is the image of God.

In other words, 2 Corinthians 4:4 and 6 tell us what the highest, best, ultimate good of the good news is: the glory of God in the face of Christ, that is, the glory of Christ who is the image of God.” (from the sermon, “What Makes the Good News Good?”)

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Lesson 4 – A God-Centered Conversion

Is Jesus Your Treasure?

Finding Hidden Treasure

John Piper – “In the Old Testament, to be converted from worldliness to godliness was to discover the truth of Psalm 16:11: ‘You make known to me the path of life; in your presence there is fullness of joy; at your right hand are pleasures forevermore.’ In the New Testament, conversion meant discovering

that Jesus was a treasure of such surpassing worth that joy would enable a new disciple to leave everything and follow Him.” (When I Don’t Desire God, 25)

Christ-Exalting Contrition

John Piper – “Peter’s response was remarkable, unlike our modern self-esteeming response to grace. What is remarkable here is that a miracle of grace, not a word of judgment, broke Peter’s heart and brought him to contrite repentance.

...Now why is that? Genuine evangelical contrition—as opposed to legalistic, fearful sadness simply owing to threats—is a sorrow for not having holiness.

...The only true sorrow for not having holiness comes from a love for holiness, not just from a fear of the consequences of not having it. Or a more precise way to say it is this: true remorse over not having holiness is remorse over not enjoying God and living by the impulses of that joy. To cry over the punishment one is about to receive for wrongdoing is no sign of hating wrong but only hating pain. For crying and contrition to be real and evangelical, it must come from the brokenhearted feelings you have for lacking a life of joy in God, not just from the fearful feelings of being threatened with pain.

But now think what this means. ...If crying over something you don’t have is going to show the preciousness of that ‘something’ in itself, then you must really have some delight in it. And the more you delight in it, the more you feel distressed over not having it. This means that true evangelical contrition, true repentance, must be preceded by a falling in love with the all-satisfying God. To weep at not having holiness, you must long for holiness as a precious experience and reflection of God. To weep over not possessing it, it must be attractive to you for what it really is.

So you see how strange this seems at first: God and His way of holiness must become your joy before you can weep over not having them. You must fall in

love before estrangement truly hurts. We must taste the pleasure of knowing God before we will experience the God-honoring pain of remorse for sin.” (Brothers we are not Professionals, 123–124)

John Piper – “The opposite of godly remorse is not always remorselessness. The powers of darkness in the world are much more subtle than that. There is a grief, a regret, a remorse which is ‘of the world’ and not ‘according to God.’ You can feel sorry for something in a worldly way which leads to death. So what we need to do is distinguish godly regret from worldly regret.

I would suggest two ways to distinguish them.

1. Worldly regret is when you feel sorry for something you did because it starts to backfire on you and leads to humiliation or punishment. It’s the reflex of a proud or fearful ego. Pride will always regret making a fool of itself. And fear will always regret acts that jeopardize comfort and safety. So feeling sorry for something we have done is in itself no sign of virtue. But godly regret is the reflex of a conscience that has wounded God’s ego, not its own. Godly regret grieves that God’s name has come into disrepute. The focus of godly regret is God.
2. A second way to distinguish worldly regret from godly regret is that godly regret is owing to God’s Word putting its finger on sin in our lives. Worldly regret is owing not to God’s Word but to the attitudes of men whose praise we don’t want to lose. We can feel extremely sorry for something we have done if we detect that the people around us think it is stupid or silly or reprehensible. The word of man not God becomes the criterion of guilt.

So in summary, godly grief, or godly regret, is the uncomfortable feeling of guilt when the Word of God shows you that what you’ve done is sin and thus has brought reproach on God’s name. (Of course, if other people have been hurt by your sin, godly regret will want to redress the wrong and so remove the reproach upon God’s honor.) Godly regret is the regret of a God-saturated heart, not a world-saturated heart.” (from a sermon titled, “The Good End of Godly Regret”)

Scott Hafemann – “Being sorrowful as God intended is feeling the deep grief that comes from knowing that our attitudes and actions have harmed our relationship with God. ‘Godly sorrow’ feels bad because it is missing out on God...Worldly sorrow is the grief that comes about because one’s actions result in missing out on something the world has to offer. Worldly sorrow feels bad

because it wants more of the world.” (The NIV Application Commentary: 2 Corinthians, 312)

Believing as Embracing

John Piper – “God is pleased by us when two things about him are reflected in our relation to him. One: that He is real; and the other: that He is rewarding.

Behind these two assertions about God are two great facts:

1. God exists absolutely. He did not come into being and will never go out of being. He is not becoming or growing or changing. He said, “I am who I am” (Exodus 3:14). That is his name. He absolutely is. Therefore, he is pleased when this absolute existence is known and embraced. He is pleased when what he is is reflected in our lives.
2. Behind the assertion that God is rewarding is the fact that God is so full and so completely self-sufficient that he overflows. Rather than needing our service, he is like a never-ending Spring of life and energy and joy and beauty and goodness and power. Therefore it pleases God when we come to him in a way that affirms this and delights in it—when we come to him as a Rewarder.

Now the writer of Hebrews simply asserts that this is what faith does: faith comes to God with the confidence that he is, and faith comes with the confidence that God will be a generous Giver. He is not arguing that faith is this way because he finds it defined in the Old Testament stories. He is saying: given the absolute reality of God's being and God's fullness, this is what faith has to be. This is the end of the argument. This is the bottom of the reasoning.

We could say it like this: what pleases God is that our hearts and minds display God's being and God's beauty. That we display God's existence and his excellence. That we display how real he is and how rewarding he is. This is what pleases God, and this is faith.” (from a sermon titled, “Without Faith it is Impossible to Please God”)

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Lesson 5 – God-Centered Faith

Introduction

“I have a picture in my mind of the majesty of Christ like the sun at the center of the solar system of your life. The massive sun, 333,000 times the mass of the earth, holds all the planets in orbit, even little Pluto, 3.6 billion miles away.

So it is with the supremacy of Christ in your life. All the planets of your life—your sexuality and desires, your commitments and beliefs, your aspirations and dreams, your attitudes and convictions, your habits and disciplines, your solitude and relationships, your labor and leisure, your thinking and feeling—all the planets of your life are held in orbit by the greatness and gravity and blazing brightness of the supremacy of Jesus Christ at the center of your life. And if he ceases to be the bright, blazing, satisfying beauty at the center of your life, the planets will fly into confusion, and a hundred things will be out of control, and sooner or later they will crash into destruction. (from a sermon titled, “Sex and the Supremacy of Christ, Part 2”)

Right Thinking, Right Living

Should Gratitude Motivate Obedience?

God-Centered Faith in Action

Scott Hafemann - “The life of faith is a continuous experience of ‘comparison shopping’ in which we are ‘buying’ with our attitudes and actions that which we think will really make us happy. The good news in obeying the commandment ‘Thou shall not covet’ is that in doing so we will not be disappointed, since God is of more value than anything this world has to offer. This is why the fear of God, reflected in faith and manifested in obedience to His commands, is the beginning of wisdom (Genesis 22:12; Psalm 1; 2:1-22; 119; Proverbs 1:7). Given who God is and the magnitude of His promises, Jesus is right: seeking God first and serving Him alone is the only ‘smart’ thing to do (Matthew 6:19-20; Mark 10:17-31; Luke 12:32-34).” (The God of Promise and the Life of Faith, 102)

The Transforming Power of the Gospel

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Lesson 6 – God-Centered Worship

Introduction

The following quote represents an unbeliever's perspective on worship:

Michael Prowse – “Worship is an aspect of religion that I always found difficult to understand. Suppose we postulate an omnipotent being who, for reasons inscrutable to us, decided to create something other than himself. Why should he . . . expect us to worship him? We didn't ask to be created. Our lives are often troubled. We know that human tyrants, puffed up with pride, crave adulation and homage. But a morally perfect God would surely have no character defects. So why are all those people on their knees every Sunday?” (London Financial Times, March 30, 2003)

The How and Whom of Worship

Andreas Köstenberger – “Proper worship in any age is critically predicated upon adequate and accurate knowledge of the God worshipped. No matter how ceremonially

elaborate, emotionally rousing, or sermonically eloquent, worship that is not offered from a proper understanding of who God is falls short...Thus, true worship is not a matter of geographical location (worship in a church building), physical posture (kneeling or standing), or following a particular liturgy or external rituals; it is a matter of the heart and of the Spirit.”

Feelings for God

Enjoying Him Forever

John Piper on the uniqueness of worship:

“I want to try this morning to create a consciousness in our church that worship is an end in itself. I want us to have this conviction: that worship should never be pursued as a means to achieving something other than worship. Worship is never a step on our way up to any other experience. It is not a door through which we pass to get anywhere. It is the end point, the goal.

I remember one night in my room in Saint Hall at Wheaton College my senior year. I was struggling with what should motivate me to try to win people to Christ. I asked myself, “What’s the goal of winning people to faith in Christ?” And I answered, uncomfortably, “So that they can help win others.” But then I translated that purpose into an actual witnessing experience. Suppose a person asks me: “Why do you want me to become a Christian?” And I say, “So you can win others.” Won’t a thoughtful person look at me and say, “Well now, that’s

strange. You mean the goal of your religion is to recruit people to recruit other people to recruit other people, on and on? Where's the substance? Where's the content?" I remember how miserable I felt as I realized how empty and mechanical my life with Christ had become. I could never have suggested such an empty answer to, "Why evangelize?" if my own life or worship had been a real end in itself. Of course the purpose for winning people to Christ is not that they might win others. It's that they might bring honor to God in worship and that they might experience the joy of trusting God's mercy. We do not recruit people to recruit others. We recruit people for God! The content, the substance, the life, the goal, the end is God and the joyful experience of ascribing glory to him. Evangelism is not an end in itself. Worship is an end in itself.

From that point on, all my thinking about the church revolved around the uniqueness of worship. Of all the activities in the church, only one is an end in itself: worship." (from a sermon titled, "Worship Is an End in Itself")

John Piper – "I am keenly aware of the criticism that the direct pursuit of joy by taking one's eyes off The Enjoyed is deadly. I am not commending that you go to the Grand Canyon of God's greatness and sit on the rim with your finger on your pulse and your mind on your inner condition. That would cancel out the Canyon. Give yourself up to the Canyon. See it. Revel in it. Absorb it. Ponder it. That is the kind of pursuit I have in mind. God's all-satisfying glory is not experienced by focusing on the experience, but on the glory." (Let the Nations Be Glad, 227)

The Feast of Christian Hedonism

John Piper – "When I saw the truth that God is most glorified in us when we are most satisfied in him, I was freed from the unbiblical bondage of fear that it was wrong to pursue joy. What once had seemed like an inevitable but defective quest for the satisfaction of my soul now became not just permitted but required. The glory of God was at stake. This was almost too good to be true—that my quest for joy and my duty to glorify God were not in conflict. Indeed they were one. Pursuing joy in God was a non-negotiable way of honoring God. It was essential. This was a liberating discovery. It released the energies of my mind and heart to go hard after all the soul-happiness that God is for me in Jesus.

But simultaneous with the liberation came the devastation. I was freed to pursue my fullest joy in God without guilt. Indeed, I was commanded to pursue it. Indifference to the pursuit of joy in God would be indifference to the glory of God, and that is sin. Therefore, my quest took on a seriousness, an earnestness, a gravity that I never dreamed would be part of pursuing joy. And then, almost immediately, came the realization that my indwelling sin stands in the way of my full satisfaction in God. It opposes and perverts my pursuit of God. It opposes by

making other things look more desirable than God. And it perverts by making me think I am pursuing joy in God when, in fact, I am in love with his gifts. ...This discovery was devastating to me. It still is. I was made to know and enjoy God. I was freed by the doctrine of Christian Hedonism to pursue that knowledge and that joy with all my heart. And then, to my dismay, I discovered that it is not an easy doctrine. Christian Hedonism is not a lowering of the bar. Out of the blue, as it were, I realized that the bar had been raised. Manageable, duty-defined, decision-oriented, willpower Christianity now seemed easy, and real Christianity had become impossible. The emotions—or affections, as former generations called them—which I was now free to enjoy, proved to be beyond my reach. The Christian life became impossible. That is, it became supernatural.

Now there was only one hope, the sovereign grace of God. God would have to transform my heart to do what a heart cannot make itself do, namely, want what it ought to want. Only God can make the depraved heart desire God. ...Pursuing what we want is possible. It is easy. It is a pleasant kind of freedom. But the only freedom that lasts is pursuing what we want when we want what we ought. And it is devastating to discover we don't, and we can't.

This is why the most common and desperate question I have received over the last three decades is: What can I do? How can I become the kind of person the Bible is calling me to be? The question comes from an aching in the heart that rises from the hope of great joy. People listen to the biblical arguments for Christian Hedonism, or they read *Desiring God: Meditations of a Christian Hedonist*. Many are persuaded. They see that the truth and beauty and worth of God shine best from the lives of saints who are so satisfied in God they can suffer in the cause of love without murmuring. But then they say, 'That's not who I am. I don't have that kind of liberating, love-producing, risk-taking satisfaction in God. I desire comfort and security more than God.' Many say it with tears and trembling.

Some are honest enough to say, 'I don't know if I have ever tasted this kind of desire. Christianity was never presented to me like this. I never knew that the desire for God and delight in God were crucial. I was always told that feelings didn't matter. Now I am finding evidence all over the Bible that the pursuit of joy in God, and the awakening of all kinds of spiritual affections, are part of the essence of the newborn Christian heart. This discovery excites me and frightens me. I want this. But I fear I don't have it. In fact, as far as I can see, it is outside my power to obtain.'" (When I Don't Desire God, 13-15)

John Piper - "The difference between desire for God and delight in God is important mainly to make clear that finite creatures like us, who have a spiritual taste for the glory of God, will always want more of God than we presently experience—even in eternity. There will always be more of God to enjoy. Which means there will always be holy desire—forever.

In this age that is frustrating. We kick ourselves that our cravings for lesser things compete with God as the satisfaction of our souls. Rightly so. This is godly grief. We do well to be convicted and penitent. We know that we have tasted pleasures at his right hand, and that our desires for them are pitifully small compared to their true worth. It is helpful at this point to be reminded that our desires—no matter how small—have been awakened by the spiritual taste we once had of the presence of God. They are an evidence that we have tasted. It is also helpful at this point to be reminded that our desires are only a tiny part of what is to come. The strength of our desire is not the measure of the strength of the final pleasure. That truth can rescue us from despair and keep us fighting in this fallen world for all the joy possible in God.” (When I Don’t Desire God, 27–28)

God-Centered Living

Lesson 7 – God-Centered Love

Introduction

Here are some attempts to talk about love:

- “Attention is the most basic form of love; through it we bless and are blessed.”—John Tarrant
- “To be in love is merely to be in a state of perceptual anesthesia.” —H. L. Mencken
- “Love is the master key that opens the gates of happiness.” —Oliver Wendell Holmes
- “Love stretches your heart and makes you big inside.” —Margaret Walker
- “Love has no awareness of merit or demerit; it has no scale... Love loves; this is its nature.” —Howard Thurman
- “Love is the irresistible desire to be irresistibly desired.” —Robert Frost
- “Love is more than three words mumbled before bedtime. Love is sustained by action, a pattern of devotion in the things we do for each other every day.” —Nicholas Sparks
- “Love is an act of endless forgiveness, a tender look which becomes a habit.”—Peter Ustinov
- “Love is the only sane and satisfactory answer to the problem of human existence.” —Erich Fromm
- “In the final analysis, love is the only reflection of man’s worth.” —Bill Wundram, Iowa Quad Cities Times

Disinterested Love?

Love is the Overflow of Joy

John Piper - “The giving of these poor, afflicted new believers was not just free, it was passionate. Giving for them was so much a part of their joy in God’s grace that they begged to give. ‘Please let us give.’ This probably means that Paul was trying to stop them from giving since he knew they were poor. And they were saying, ‘No, Paul, our joy will not be complete until it overflows to meet the needs of others. Let us give.’” (from a sermon titled, “Begging for the Favor of Blessing Others”)

Love Rejoices in the Joy of the Beloved

Love's Deed and Reward

Jonathan Edwards – “There are different degrees of happiness and glory in heaven...It will be no damp to the happiness of those who have lower degrees of happiness and glory, that there are others advanced in glory above them: for all shall be perfectly happy, every one shall be perfectly satisfied. Every vessel that is cast into this ocean of happiness is full, though there are some vessels far larger than others; and there shall be no such thing as envy in heaven, but perfect love shall reign through the whole society. Those who are not so high in glory as others, will not envy those that are higher, but they will have so great, and strong, and pure love to them, that they will rejoice in their superior happiness; their love to them will be such that they will rejoice that they are happier than themselves; so that instead of having a damp to their own happiness, it will add to it.” (as quoted by John Piper in Let the Nations Be Glad, 89)

John 11:6:

- **ESV** – So, when he heard that Lazarus was ill, he stayed two days longer in the place where he was.
- **NASB** – So when He heard that he was sick, He then stayed two days longer in the place where He was.
- **NIV** – Yet when he heard that Lazarus was sick, he stayed where he was two more days.

God-Centered Living

Lesson 8 – Being God-Centered in Reading Scripture

Introduction

Consider an experience John Piper had one morning:

“Let me tell you about a most wonderful experience I had early Monday morning, March 19, 2007, a little after six o’clock. God actually spoke to me. There is no doubt that it was God. I heard the words in my head just as clearly as when a memory of a conversation passes across your consciousness. The words were in English, but they had about them an absolutely self-authenticating ring of truth. I know beyond the shadow of a doubt that God still speaks today.

I couldn’t sleep for some reason. I was at Shalom House in northern Minnesota on a staff couples’ retreat. It was about five thirty in the morning. I lay there wondering if I should get up or wait till I got sleepy again. In his mercy, God moved me out of bed. It was mostly dark, but I managed to find my clothing, got dressed, grabbed my briefcase, and slipped out of the room without waking up Noël. In the main room below, it was totally quiet. No one else seemed to be up. So I sat down on a couch in the corner to pray.

As I prayed and mused, suddenly it happened. God said, “Come and see what I have done.” There was not the slightest doubt in my mind that these were the very words of God. In this very moment. At this very place in the twenty-first century, 2007, God was speaking to me with absolute authority and self-evidencing reality. I paused to let this sink in. There was a sweetness about it. Time seemed to matter little. God was near. He had me in his sights. He had something to say to me. When God draws near, hurry ceases. Time slows down.

I wondered what he meant by “come and see.” Would he take me somewhere, like he did Paul into heaven to see what can’t be spoken? Did “see” mean that I would have a vision of some great deed of God that no one has seen? I am not sure how much time elapsed between God’s initial word, “Come and see what I have done,” and his next words. It doesn’t matter. I was being enveloped in the love of his personal communication. The God of the universe was speaking to me.

Then he said, as clearly as any words have ever come into my mind, “I am awesome in my deeds toward the children of man.” My heart leaped up, “Yes, Lord! You are awesome in your deeds. Yes, to all men whether they see it or not. Yes! Now what will you show me?”

The words came again. Just as clear as before, but increasingly specific: “I turned the sea into dry land; they passed through the river on foot. There they rejoiced

in me—who rules by my might forever.” Suddenly I realized God was taking me back several thousand years to the time when he dried up the Red Sea and the Jordan River. I was being transported by his word back into history to those great deeds. This is what he meant by “come and see.” He was transporting me back by his words to those two glorious deeds before the children of men. These were the “awesome deeds” he referred to. God himself was narrating the mighty works of God. He was doing it for me. He was doing it with words that were resounding in my own mind.

There settled over me a wonderful reverence. A palpable peace came down. This was a holy moment and a holy corner of the world in northern Minnesota. God Almighty had come down and was giving me the stillness and the openness and the willingness to hear his very voice. As I marveled at his power to dry the sea and the river, he spoke again. “I keep watch over the nations—let not the rebellious exalt themselves.”

This was breathtaking. It was very serious. It was almost a rebuke. At least a warning. He may as well have taken me by the collar of my shirt, lifted me off the ground with one hand, and said, with an incomparable mixture of fierceness and love, “Never, never, never exalt yourself. Never rebel against me.”

I sat staring at nothing. My mind was full of the global glory of God. “I keep watch over the nations.” He had said this to me. It was not just that he had said it. Yes, that is glorious. But he had said this to me. The very words of God were in my head. They were there in my head just as much as the words that I am writing at this moment are in my head. They were heard as clearly as if at this moment I recalled that my wife said, “Come down for supper whenever you are ready.” I know those are the words of my wife. And I know these are the words of God.

Think of it. Marvel at this. Stand in awe of this. The God who keeps watch over the nations, like some people keep watch over cattle or stock markets or construction sites—this God still speaks in the twenty-first century. I heard his very words. He spoke personally to me.

What effect did this have on me? It filled me with a fresh sense of God’s reality. It assured me more deeply that he acts in history and in our time. It strengthened my faith that he is for me and cares about me and will use his global power to watch over me. Why else would he come and tell me these things?

It has increased my love for the Bible as God’s very word, **because it was through the Bible that I heard these divine words**, and through the Bible I have experiences like this almost every day. The very God of the universe speaks on every page into my mind—and your mind. We hear his very words. God himself has multiplied his wondrous deeds and thoughts toward us; none can

compare with him! I will proclaim and tell of them, yet they are more than can be told (Psalm 40:5).

And best of all, they are available to all. If you would like to hear the very same words I heard on the couch in northern Minnesota, read Psalm 66:5–7. **That is where I heard them.** O how precious is the Bible. It is the very word of God. In it God speaks in the twenty-first century. This is the very voice of God. By this voice, he speaks with absolute truth and personal force. By this voice, he reveals his all-surpassing beauty. By this voice, he reveals the deepest secrets of our hearts. No voice anywhere anytime can reach as deep or lift as high or carry as far as the voice of God that we hear in the Bible.

It is a great wonder that God still speaks today through the Bible with greater force and greater glory and greater assurance and greater sweetness and greater hope and greater guidance and greater transforming power and greater Christ-exalting truth than can be heard through any voice in any human soul on the planet from outside the Bible.” (from an online article, “The Morning I Heard the Voice of God”)

The Benefits of Scripture

John Piper – “When this Psalm ponders the value of being wicked or of delighting in the Word of God, it measures the value finally by what happens at the judgment. There may be some prosperity in this life for the wicked, but in the end they will be swept away like chaff, but those who have delighted in the Word of God will go on flourishing because God sets his eye and favor on them. He ‘knows’ their way.

So the blessing, the happiness, referred to in verse 1 is a life that is nourishing and fruitful for others, a life that is deeply durable in the face of drought and a life whose ‘labor is not in vain’ (1 Corinthians 15:58), but succeeds in God's good purposes into eternity. That’s the blessing of delighting in the Word of God and meditating on it day and night.” (from a sermon titled, “Meditate of the Word of the Lord Day and Night”)

John Piper – “One of the ways we can fight against the inclinations that lure us from the Word of God to computers or television or any other substitute pleasure is to remind ourselves often of the immeasurable and superior benefits of the Word of God in our lives. We must put the evidence before us that reading, pondering, memorizing, and studying the Bible will yield more joy in this life and the next than all the things that lure us from it.

There are many different reasons why the Bible has this joy-producing effect. I don't want to minimize this diversity or belittle the range of benefits that the Bible has in our lives—more than any of us realizes. But I want to stress that ultimately, in and through all its benefits, the Bible leads us to superior and lasting joy because it leads us to Christ, especially to see his glory and enjoy his fellowship. All the varied benefits are beneficial finally because they show us and bring us more of Christ to enjoy.” (When I Don't Desire God, 97)

Delight Yourself in God's Word

Here are John Piper's comments on 1 Peter 1:22–2:3:

“Verses 2–3 say,

Like newborn babes [who were born by the Word of God], long [the way babies do] for the pure milk of the word, that by it you may grow in respect to salvation, 3 if [that is, since!] you have tasted the kindness of the Lord.

Do you see the connection between the intense longing or craving for the 'spiritual milk' in verse 2 and the tasting of the kindness of the Lord in verse 3? Put them together: 'Long for the spiritual milk, since you've tasted the kindness of the Lord.' So it seems to me that the milk is the milk of God's kindness. That is what we are commanded to long for. So which is it: the milk of the Word (NASB)? Or the milk of God's kindness?

But there doesn't have to be a contradiction. Where did the readers taste the kindness of the Lord? The answer is: in the Gospel, the Word of God (v. 25). They were born again by that kindness through the Word of God. So the spiritual milk is the kindness of the Lord experienced through the Word of God. Or you could say, the spiritual milk is the Word of God revealing or transmitting the kindness of the Lord.

You were born again by that Word—namely, by the powerful kindness of God in that Word, and now go on longing for that Word and for the day-by-day experience—tasting—of the kindness of the Lord through his Word.” (from a sermon titled, “Long for the Pure Milk of the Word”)

Reading the Old Testament as a Christian Hedonist

Ligon Duncan – “Paul said to Timothy, ‘From childhood you have known the sacred writings [Old Testament Scriptures] which are able to give you the wisdom that leads to salvation through faith which is in Christ Jesus’ (2 Timothy 3:15). It is the Old Testament, the apostle Paul says, that is able to give you the wisdom that leads to salvation through faith. Here in the Old Testament is sola fide. Therefore, we ought not be surprised that when Paul wants to prove the doctrine of justification by grace alone through faith alone in Christ alone, he goes to Genesis 15. If someone had asked the apostle Paul, ‘Paul, are people saved in the old covenant like they are in the new covenant, you know, by grace alone through faith alone in Christ alone?’ the apostle Paul would have said, ‘I don’t understand the question. The only question is, are they still saved the same way in the new covenant as they were in the old covenant? Because when I want to show you that salvation is by grace alone through faith alone in Christ alone, I go to the old covenant Scriptures. I will start with Genesis 15, for example.’

...Very often as people urge us to preach redemptive historically and to preach christologically, they make fun of what they call exemplaristic or moralistic preaching. They say, ‘The Old Testament wasn’t given as a how-to guide for the Christian life. You are not to learn how to be a godly man from the story of Joseph. It is all about christology and redemptive history. You are not to learn moralistic messages and principles from these events, to pound the people of God with these lessons today.’

Now the problem with that assertion is it goes directly contrary to Jesus and Paul. Jesus will say, ‘Remember Lot’s wife’ (Luke 17:32). And the apostle Paul will say, ‘Now these things happened [he has just talked about the Exodus, crossing of the Red Sea] as examples for us, so that we would not crave evil things as they also craved’ (1 Corinthians 10:6). Someone needs to clue Paul in that he has a problem with moralistic teaching of the Old Testament, because Paul, happily, will take an Old Testament passage chock full of redemptive, historical, and christological significance and still see moral exhortation for Christians.” (“Preaching Christ from the Old Testament” in Preaching the Cross, 56, 63–64)

Reading the New Testament as a Christian Hedonist

Theme verse for SOM:

Psalm 111:2 – Great are the works of the LORD, studied by all who delight in them.

John Piper – “This is how the truth of God’s Word sets us free. It gives us the weapon with which we kill deceitful desires. Just as Jesus spoke of violence in the battle against desire, so does Paul: ‘Put to death therefore what is earthly in you . . . evil desire, and covetousness, which is idolatry’ (Colossians 3:5). And in another place he says, ‘If by the Spirit you put to death the deeds of the body, you will live’ (Romans 8:13)....

Both Romans 8:13 and Colossians 3:5 say, ‘Kill!’ This is mortal combat, and our lives—not to mention our joy—hang on it. Jesus and Paul agree: This is war. Christianity would look very different in many places if Christians pursued the joy of seeing God with this life-and-death seriousness and felt a deadly urgency in fighting the desires that deceive us and blind us to the all-satisfying glory of God.” (When I Don’t Desire God, 104)

John Piper – “First, I would stress the importance of planning. ...Many good things do not happen in our lives for the simple lack of planning. ...Most Christians neglect their Bibles not out of conscious disloyalty to Jesus, but because of failure to plan a time and place and method to read it.” (When I Don’t Desire God, 116)

In view of this exhortation, formulate your own plan for reading the Bible daily. If you already have a plan to do this, use this assignment to reflect on whether your plan has been effective and helpful. Let the following questions guide your written plan and reflections:

- During what part of the day will you have a fixed time to meet with God?
- Where will this be?
 - Is it a place free from distractions?
- How will you read through your Bible?
 - Do you have a specific reading plan to follow?
- What will you do to retain what you are reading and learning?
- How will you meditate of God’s Word throughout the day?
- How will you treasure His Word in your heart?
- How will you read the Bible in a God-centered way?

God-Centered Living

Lesson 9 – Being God-Centered in Prayer

Introduction

Here are two Muslim prayers that are part of Salat:

All our oral, physical and monetary ways of worship are only for Allah. Peace, mercy and blessing of Allah be on you, O Prophet. May peace be upon us and on the devout slaves of Allah. I testify that there is no God but Allah and I testify that Muhammad is His slave and messenger.

O God send your Mercy on Muhammad and his posterity as you sent Your mercy on Abraham and his posterity. You are the Most Praised, The Most Glorious. O God, send your Blessings on Muhammad and his posterity as you have blessed Abraham and his posterity. You are the Most praised, The Most Glorious. (www.islam-usa.com/pray7)

And here is a Buddhist prayer:

Oneness of Life and Light,
Entrusting in your Great Compassion,
May you shed the foolishness in myself,
Transforming me into a conduit of Love.
May I be a medicine for the sick and weary,
Nursing their afflictions until they are cured;
May I become food and drink,
During time of famine,
May I protect the helpless and the poor,
May I be a lamp,
For those who need your Light,
May I be a bed for those who need rest,
And guide all seekers to the Other Shore.
May all find happiness through my actions,
And let no one suffer because of me.
Whether they love or hate me,
Whether they hurt or wrong me,
May they all realize true entrusting,
Through Other Power,
And realize Supreme Nirvana. (buddhistfaith.tripod.com/pureland_sangha/id41)

Here are two Hindu prayers:

We worship the three-eyed One (Lord Siva) Who is fragrant and Who nourishes well all beings; may He liberate us from death for the sake of immortality even as the cucumber is severed from its bondage (to the creeper).

I prostrate myself before the five-faced Lord of Parvati, who is adorned with various ornaments, who shines like the crystal jewel, who is seated peacefully in the lotus pose, with moon-crested crown, with three eyes, wearing trident, thunderbolt, sword and axe on the right side, who holds the serpent, noose, bell, damaru and spear on the left side, and who gives protection from all fear to His devotees. (Hinduism.about.com/prayersmantras/a/5prayers)

Pursuing God's Glory in Prayer

John Piper - “Beware of a mindset that belittles and insults God. God is an absolutely unstoppable, unfailing, constant, volcano of power and fire and joy and help. He never wearies in the slightest and is omnipotently enthusiastic about his gracious purposes in your life. Never let a weak or miserly or tightfisted or weary or boring God enter your mind. He owns all and loves to glorify his power and grace by delivering people who call on him.” (from a sermon titled, “Call Upon Me in the Day of Trouble and I Will Deliver You”)

The Prayer of an Adulteress

Don't Serve God

John Piper - “God aims to exalt Himself by working for those who wait for Him. Prayer is the essential activity of waiting for God—acknowledging our helplessness and His power, calling upon Him for help, seeking His counsel. Since His purpose in the world is to be exalted for His mercy, it is evident why prayer is so often commanded by God. Prayer is the antidote for the disease of self-confidence, which opposes God’s goal of getting glory by working for those who wait for Him.” (Desiring God, 170–171)

Pursuing Our Joy in Prayer

John Piper – “Praying for joy is not the emotional pampering of joyless people. It is preparation for sacrifice. What’s at stake in the fight for joy is the radiance of the worth of Jesus made visible for the world to see in sacrifices of love flowing from the joy of blood-bought, soul-satisfied, Christ-exalting people. When Paul said to the Corinthians, ‘We work with you for your joy’ (2 Corinthians 1:24), he was not saying, ‘We pamper you.’ He was saying, ‘We prepare you for radical, Christ-exalting sacrifices of love.’” (When I Don’t Desire God, 140)

Pages 182–183 of Desiring God end the chapter on prayer with an earnest exhortation to be intentional in planning to pray. Record a brief, but specific, plan for how you will be devoted to prayer.

God-Centered Living

Lesson 10 – Being God-Centered with Money

Introduction

“One more revival—only one more—is needed, the revival of Christian stewardship, the consecration of the money power to God. When that revival comes, the Kingdom of God will come in a day.” —Horace Bushnell

“It is just as much a matter of discipline for a church member practically to deny his stewardship as to deny the divinity of Christ.” —Charles Finney

Don't Aspire to be Rich

John Calvin – “Since it is incomparably the greatest dignity to be introduced into the company of angels, nay, to be made the associates of Christ, he who estimates this favor of God aright, will regard all other things as worthless. Then neither poverty, nor contempt, nor nakedness, nor famine, nor thirst, will make his mind so anxious, but that he will sustain himself with this consolation, ‘Since the Lord has conferred on me the principal thing, it behooves me patiently to bear the loss of other things, which are inferior.’

Behold, how a lowly brother ought to glory in his elevation or exaltation; for if he be accepted of God, he has sufficient consolation in his adoption alone, so as not to grieve unduly for a less prosperous state of life.

...[James] bids [the rich] to glory in their lowness or littleness, in order to repress the haughtiness of those who are usually inflated with prosperity. But he calls it lowness, because the manifested kingdom of God ought to lead us to despise the world, as we know that all the things we previously greatly admired, are either nothing or very little things. For Christ, who is not a teacher except of babes, checks by his doctrine all the haughtiness of the flesh. Lest, then, the vain joy of the world should captivate the rich,

they ought to habituate themselves to glory in the casting down of their carnal excellency.” (Calvin’s Commentaries, Vol. 22, 285–286)

John Piper – “When Paul said in 1 Timothy 6:10, ‘The love of money is the root of all evils,’ what did he mean? He didn’t mean that there’s a connection between every sinful attitude and money—that money is always in your mind when you sin. I think he meant that all the evils in the world come from a certain kind of heart, namely, the kind of heart that loves money.

Now what does it mean to love money? It doesn’t mean to admire the green paper or the brown coins. To know what it means to love money you have to ask, What is money? I would answer that question like this: Money is simply a symbol that stands for human resources. Money stands for what you can get from man (not from God! ‘Ho everyone who thirsts, come to the waters. He who has NO MONEY come buy and eat!’ Isaiah 55:1). Money is the currency of human resources.

So the heart that loves money is a heart that pins its hopes, and pursues its pleasures, and puts its trust in what human resources can offer. So the love of money is virtually the same as faith in money—belief (trust, confidence, assurance) that money will meet your needs and make you happy.” (from a sermon titled, “Battling Unbelief at Bethlehem”)

What Should the Rich Do?

Be Rich in Good Deeds

Killing Covetousness

God-Centered Living

Lesson 11 – Being God-Centered in Suffering

Introduction

Listen to the testimony of John Piper as he introduces a sermon on 1 Peter:

“It might seem strange to you that 1 Peter is one of my favorite Biblical books—since it’s mostly about suffering and how to live in a hostile culture, while I am a card-carrying, full-blooded, unwavering Christian Hedonist. But it isn’t strange for people who have lived long enough to realize what Paul Brand, the missionary surgeon to India wrote in his book: *Pain: The Gift Nobody Wants*.

‘I have come to see that pain and pleasure come to us not as opposites but as Siamese twins, strangely joined and intertwined. Nearly all my memories of acute happiness, in fact, involve some element of pain or struggle.’ (Christianity Today, Jan. 10, 1994, p. 21)

I have never heard anyone say, ‘The deepest and rarest and most satisfying joys of my life have come in times of extended ease and earthly comfort.’ Nobody says that. It isn’t true. What’s true is what Samuel Rutherford said when he was put in the cellars of affliction: ‘The Great King keeps his wine there’—not in the courtyard where the sun shines. What’s true is what Charles Spurgeon said: ‘They who dive in the sea of affliction bring up rare pearls.’

Christian Hedonists will do anything to have the King’s wine and the rare pearls—even go to the cellars of suffering and dive in the sea of affliction.” (from a sermon titled, “Why We Can Rejoice in Suffering”)

Choose Suffering

John Piper – “I say it again: The call of Christ is a call to live a life of sacrifice and loss and suffering – a life that would be foolish to live if there were no resurrection from the dead.” (DG, 262)

Why Suffer?

Completing the Sufferings of Christ

John Piper – “The thing that distresses me most about those who say Christians should always be miraculously healed is that they give the impression that the quality of faith can only be measured by whether a miracle of physical healing takes place, whereas in much of the New Testament you get the impression that the quality of our faith is reflected in the joy and confidence we maintain in God through suffering.” (from a sermon titled, “Christ and Cancer”)

“God intends for the afflictions of _____ to be presented to the _____ through the afflictions of His _____.” (DG, 269)

Is This Christian Hedonism?

John Piper - "We in America need to learn what Christians in most of the world can't help but learn, namely, when Jesus calls us to himself, he calls us to suffer. Romans 8:16-17 says, 'The Spirit himself bears witness that we are the children of God, and if children, then heirs, heirs of God and fellow heirs with Christ, provided we suffer with him in order that we may also be glorified with him.'

Paul said to the new churches he was starting (Acts 14:22), 'Through many tribulations we must enter the kingdom.'

And the reason this is so is not just because tribulations often find us inside the camp, but because being a Christian means going outside the camp where even more tribulations are. It may mean choosing places to live, places to work, places to minister, places to travel, people to help, ministries to do that are not safe from abuse and reproach." (from a sermon titled, "Christ and Cancer")