



JOHN PIPER

DESIRING
GOD

Meditations *of a* Christian Hedonist

Includes Guide for Personal or Group Study



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HOW I BECAME A CHRISTIAN HEDONIST

Vou might turn the world on its head by changing one word in your creed. The old tradition says:

*The chief end of man is to glorify God
and
enjoy Him forever.*

And? Like ham *and* eggs? Sometimes you glorify God *and* sometimes you enjoy Him? Sometimes He gets glory, sometimes you get joy? *And* is a very ambiguous word! Just how do these two things relate to each other?

Evidently, the old theologians didn't think they were talking about two things. They said "chief end," not "chief ends." Glorifying God and enjoying Him were one end in their minds, not two. How can that be?

That's what this book is about.

Not that I care too much about the intention of seventeenth-century theologians. But I care tremendously about the intention of God in Scripture. What does God have to say about the chief end of man? How does God teach us to give Him glory? Does He command us to enjoy Him? If so, how does this quest

for joy in God relate to everything else? Yes, everything! “Whether you eat or drink, or whatever you do, do all to the glory of God” (1 Corinthians 10:31).

The overriding concern of this book is that in all of life God be glorified the way He Himself has appointed. To that end this book aims to persuade you that

The chief end of man is to glorify God

by

enjoying Him forever.

HOW I BECAME A CHRISTIAN HEDONIST

When I was in college, I had a vague, pervasive notion that if I did something good because it would make me happy, I would ruin its goodness.

I figured that the goodness of my moral action was lessened to the degree that I was motivated by a desire for my own pleasure. At the time, buying ice cream in the student center just for pleasure didn't bother me, because the moral consequences of that action seemed so insignificant. But to be motivated by a desire for happiness or pleasure when I volunteered for Christian service or went to church—that seemed selfish, utilitarian, mercenary.

This was a problem for me because I couldn't formulate an alternative motive that worked. I found in myself an overwhelming longing to be happy, a tremendously powerful impulse to seek pleasure, yet at every point of moral decision I said to myself that this impulse should have no influence.

One of the most frustrating areas was that of worship and praise. My vague notion that the higher the activity, the less there must be of self-interest in it caused me to think of worship almost solely in terms of duty. And that cuts the heart out of it.

Then I was converted to Christian Hedonism. In a matter of weeks I came to see that it is unbiblical and arrogant to try to worship God for any other reason than the pleasure to be had in Him. (Don't miss those last two words: *in Him*. Not His gifts, but Him. Not ourselves, but Him.) Let me describe the series of insights that made me a Christian Hedonist. Along the way, I hope it will become clear what I mean by this strange phrase.

1. During my first quarter in seminary, I was introduced to the argument for Christian Hedonism and one of its great exponents, Blaise Pascal. He wrote:

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 of 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 of those who hang themselves.¹

This statement so fit with my own deep longings, and all that I had ever seen in others, that I accepted it and have never found any reason to doubt it. What struck me especially was that Pascal was not making any moral judgment about this fact. As far as he was concerned, seeking one's own happiness is not a sin; it is a simple given in human nature. It is a law of the human heart, as gravity is a law of nature.

This thought made great sense to me and opened the way for the second discovery.

2. I had grown to love the works of C. S. Lewis in college. But not until later did I buy the sermon called "The Weight of Glory." The first page of that sermon is one of the most influential pages of literature I have ever read. It goes like this:

If you asked twenty good men today what they thought the highest of the virtues, nineteen of them would reply, Unselfishness. But if you asked almost any of the great Christians of old he would have replied, Love. You see what has happened? A negative term has been substituted for a positive, and this is of more than philological importance. The negative ideal of Unselfishness carries with it the suggestion not primarily of securing good things for others, but of going without them

1. Blaise Pascal, *Pascal's Pensees*, trans. W. F. Trotter (New York: E. P. Dutton, 1958), 113, thought #425.

ourselves, as if our abstinence and not their happiness was the important point. I do not think this is the Christian virtue of Love. 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 to take up our crosses in order that we may follow Christ; and nearly every description of what we shall ultimately find if we do so contains an appeal to desire.

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.²

There it was in black and white, and to my mind it was totally compelling: It is not a bad thing to desire our own good. In fact, the great problem of human beings is that they are far too easily pleased. They don't seek pleasure with nearly the resolve and passion that they should. And so they settle for mud pies of appetite instead of infinite delight.

I had never in my whole life heard any Christian, let alone a Christian of Lewis's stature, say that all of us not only seek (as Pascal said), but also *ought to seek*, our own happiness. Our mistake lies not in the intensity of our desire for happiness, but in the weakness of it.

3. The third insight was there in Lewis's sermon, but Pascal made it more explicit. He goes on to say:

2. C. S. Lewis, *The Weight of Glory and Other Addresses* (Grand Rapids, Mich.: Eerdmans, 1965), 1–2.

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, only by God Himself.³

As I look back on it now, it seems so patently obvious that I don't know how I could have missed it. All those years I had been trying to suppress my tremendous longing for happiness so I could honestly praise God out of some "higher," less selfish motive. But now it started to dawn on me that this persistent and undeniable yearning for happiness was not to be suppressed, but to be glutted—on God! The growing conviction that praise should be motivated solely by the happiness we find in God seemed less and less strange.

4. The next insight came again from C. S. Lewis, but this time from his *Reflections on the Psalms*. Chapter 9 of Lewis's book bears the modest title "A Word about Praise." In my experience it has been *the* word about praise—the best word on the nature of praise I have ever read.

Lewis says that as he was beginning to believe in God, a great stumbling block was the presence of demands scattered through the Psalms that he should praise God. He did not see the point in all this; besides, it seemed to picture God as craving "for our worship like a vain woman who wants compliments." He goes on to show why he was wrong:

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....

3. Pascal, *Pensees*, 113.

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.⁴

This was the capstone of my emerging Hedonism. Praising God, the highest calling of humanity and our eternal vocation, did not involve the renunciation, but rather the consummation of the joy I so desired. My old effort to achieve worship with no self-interest in it proved to be a contradiction in terms. God is not worshiped where He is not treasured and enjoyed. Praise is not an alternative to joy, but the expression of joy. Not to enjoy God is to dishonor Him. To say to Him that something else satisfies you more is the opposite of worship. It is sacrilege.

I saw this not only in C. S. Lewis, but also in the eighteenth-century pastor Jonathan Edwards. No one had ever taught me that God is glorified by our joy in Him. That joy in God is the very thing that makes praise an honor to God, and not hypocrisy. But Edwards said it so clearly and powerfully:

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.⁵

4. C. S. Lewis, *Reflections on the Psalms* (New York: Harcourt, Brace & World, 1958), 94–5.

5. Jonathan Edwards, "Miscellanies," in *The Works of Jonathan Edwards*, vol. 13, ed. Thomas Schafer (New Haven: Yale University Press, 1994), 495, miscellany #448, emphasis added. See also #87 (pp. 251–2); #332 (p. 410); #679 (not in the New Haven volume).

This was a stunning discovery for me. I *must* pursue joy in God if I am to glorify Him as the surpassingly valuable Reality in the universe. Joy is not a mere option alongside worship. It is an essential component of worship.⁶

We have a name for those who try to praise when they have no pleasure in the object. We call them hypocrites. This fact—that praise means consummate pleasure and that the highest end of man is to drink deeply of this pleasure—was perhaps the most liberating discovery I ever made.

5. Then I turned to the Psalms for myself and found the language of Hedonism everywhere. The quest for pleasure was not even optional, but commanded: “Delight yourself in the LORD, and he will give you the desires of your heart” (Psalm 37:4).

The psalmists sought to do just this: “As a deer pants for flowing streams, so pants my soul for you, O God. My soul thirsts for God, for the living God” (Psalm 42:1–2). “My soul thirsts for you; my flesh faints for you, as in a dry and weary land where there is no water” (Psalm 63:1). The motif of thirsting has its satisfying counterpart when the psalmist says that men “drink their fill of the abundance of Your house; and You give them to drink of the river of Your delights” (Psalm 36:8, NASB).

I found that the goodness of God, the very foundation of worship, is not a thing you pay your respects to out of some kind of disinterested reverence. No, it is something to be enjoyed: “Oh, taste and see that the LORD is good!” (Psalm 34:8). “How sweet are your words to my taste, sweeter than honey to my mouth!” (Psalm 119:103).

As C. S. Lewis says, God in the Psalms is the “all-satisfying Object.” His people adore Him unashamedly for the “exceeding joy” they find in Him (Psalm 43:4). He is the source of complete and unending pleasure: “In your presence there is fullness of joy; at your right hand are pleasures forevermore” (Psalm 16:11).

That is the short story of how I became a Christian Hedonist. I have now been brooding over these things for some forty years, and there has emerged a

6. I will deal in chapter 10 with the place of sadness in the Christian life and how it can be a part of worship, which is never perfect in this age. True evangelical brokenness for sin is a sadness experienced only by those who taste the pleasures of God's goodness and feel the regret that they do not savor it as fully as they ought.

philosophy that touches virtually every area of my life. I believe that it is biblical, that it fulfills the deepest longings of my heart, and that it honors the God and Father of our Lord Jesus Christ. I have written this book to commend these things to all who will listen.

Many objections rise in people's minds when they hear me talk this way. I hope the book will answer the most serious problems. But perhaps I can defuse some of the resistance in advance by making a few brief, clarifying comments.

First, Christian Hedonism as I use the term does not mean God becomes a means to help us get worldly pleasures. The pleasure Christian Hedonism seeks is the pleasure that is in God Himself. He is the end of our search, not the means to some further end. Our exceeding joy is He, the Lord—not the streets of gold or the reunion with relatives or any blessing of heaven. Christian Hedonism does not reduce God to a key that unlocks a treasure chest of gold and silver. Rather, it seeks to transform the heart so that “the Almighty will be your gold and your precious silver” (Job 22:25).

Second, Christian Hedonism does not make a god out of pleasure. It says that one has already made a god out of whatever he finds most pleasure in. The goal of Christian Hedonism is to find most pleasure in the one and only God and thus avoid the sin of covetousness, that is, idolatry (Colossians 3:5).

Third, Christian Hedonism does not put us above God when we seek Him out of self-interest. A patient is not greater than his physician. I will say more about this in chapter 3.

Fourth, Christian Hedonism is not a “general theory of *moral justification*.”⁷ In other words, nowhere do I say: An act is right because it brings pleasure. My aim is not to decide what is right by using joy as a moral criterion. My aim is to own up to the amazing, and largely neglected, fact that some dimension of joy is a moral duty in all true worship and all virtuous acts. I do not say that loving God is good because it brings joy. I say that God commands that we find joy in

7. One of the most extended and serious critiques of Christian Hedonism to appear since *Desiring God* was first published is in Richard Mouw, *The God Who Commands* (Notre Dame: Notre Dame Press, 1990). The quotation is taken from p. 33 (emphasis added).

loving God: “Delight yourself in the LORD” (Psalm 37:4). I do not say that loving people is good because it brings joy. I say that God commands that we find joy in loving people: “[Let] the one who does acts of mercy [do so] with cheerfulness” (Romans 12:8).⁸

I do not come to the Bible with a hedonistic theory of moral justification. On the contrary, I find in the Bible a divine command to be a pleasure-seeker—that is, to forsake the two-bit, low-yield, short-term, never-satisfying, person-destroying, God-belittling pleasures of the world and to sell everything “with joy” (Matthew 13:44) in order to have the kingdom of heaven and thus “enter into the joy of your master” (Matthew 25:21, 23). In short, I am a Christian Hedonist not for any philosophical or theoretical reason, but because God commands it (though He doesn’t command that you use these labels!).

Fifth, I do not say that the relationship between love and happiness is this: “True happiness requires love.” This is an oversimplification that misses the crucial and defining point. The distinguishing feature of Christian Hedonism is not that pleasure seeking demands virtue, but that virtue consists essentially, though not only, in pleasure seeking.

The reason I come to this conclusion is that I am operating here not as a philosophical hedonist, but as a biblical theologian and pastor who must come to terms with divine commands:

- to “*love* mercy,” not just *do* it (Micah 6:8, KJV),
- to do “acts of mercy, *with cheerfulness*” (Romans 12:8),
- to “*joyfully*” suffer loss in the service of prisoners (Hebrews 10:34),
- to be a *cheerful* giver (2 Corinthians 9:7),
- to make *our joy* the joy of others (2 Corinthians 2:3),
- to tend the flock of God willingly and “*eagerly*” (1 Peter 5:2), and
- to keep watch over souls “*with joy*” (Hebrews 13:17).

8. Additional texts revealing the God-given duty of joy in God include Deuteronomy 28:47; 1 Chronicles 16:31, 33; Nehemiah 8:10; Psalm 32:11; 33:1; 35:9; 40:8, 16; 42:1–2; 63:1, 11; 64:10; 95:1; 97:1, 12; 98:4; 104:34; 105:3; Isaiah 41:16; Joel 2:23; Zechariah 2:10; 10:7, Philippians 3:1; 4:4. Additional texts mentioning the divine command of joy in loving others include 2 Corinthians 9:7 (cf. Acts 20:35); Hebrews 10:34; 13:17; 1 Peter 5:2.

When you reflect long and hard on such amazing commands, the moral implications are stunning. Christian Hedonism attempts to take these divine commands with blood-earnestness. The upshot is piercing and radically life changing: The pursuit of true virtue includes the pursuit of the joy because joy is an essential component of true virtue. This is vastly different from saying, “Let’s all be good because it will make us happy.”

Sixth, Christian Hedonism is not a distortion of historic Reformed catechisms of faith. This was one of the criticisms of Richard Mouw in his book, *The God Who Commands*:

Piper might be able to alter the first answer in the Westminster Shorter Catechism—so that glorifying *and* enjoying God becomes glorifying *by* enjoying the deity—to suit his hedonistic purposes, but it is a little more difficult to alter the opening lines of the Heidelberg Catechism: That I, with body and soul, both in life and death, am not my own but belong unto my faithful Savior Jesus Christ.⁹

The remarkable thing about the beginning of the Heidelberg Catechism is not that I can’t change it for hedonistic purposes, but that I don’t have to. It already places the entire catechism under the human longing for “comfort.” Question one: “What is your only *comfort* in life and death?” The pressing question for critics of Christian Hedonism is: Why did the original framers of the four-hundred-year-old catechism structure all 129 questions so that they are an exposition of the question “What is my only comfort?”

Even more remarkable is to see the concern with “happiness” emerge explicitly in the second question of the catechism, which provides the outlines for the rest of the catechism. The second question is: “How many things are necessary for thee to know, that thou in this *comfort* (*Troste*) mayest live and die *happily* (*seliglich*)?” Thus, the entire catechism is an answer to the concern for how to live and die *happily*.

9. Mouw, *The God Who Commands*, 36.

The answer to the second question of the catechism is: “Three things: first, the greatness of my sin and misery; second, how I am redeemed from all my sins and misery; third, how I am to be thankful to God for such redemption.” Then the rest of the catechism is divided into three sections to deal with these three things: “The First Part: Of Man’s Misery” (questions 3–11); “The Second Part: Of Man’s Redemption” (questions 12–85); and “The Third Part: Of Thankfulness” (questions 86–129). What this means is that *the entire Heidelberg Catechism is written to answer the question “What must I know to live happily?”*

I am puzzled that anyone would think that Christian Hedonism needs to “alter the opening lines to the Heidelberg Catechism.” The fact is, the entire catechism is structured the way Christian Hedonism would structure it. Therefore, Christian Hedonism does not distort the historic Reformed catechisms. Both the Westminster Catechism and the Heidelberg Catechism begin with a concern for man’s enjoyment of God, or his quest to “live and die happily.” I have no desire to be doctrinally novel. I am glad that the Heidelberg Catechism was written four hundred years ago.

TOWARD A DEFINITION OF CHRISTIAN HEDONISM

Fresh ways of looking at the world (even when they are centuries old) do not lend themselves to simple definitions. A whole book is needed so people can begin to catch on. Quick and superficial judgments will almost certainly be wrong. Beware of conjecture about what lies in the pages of this book! The surmise that here we have another spin-off from modern man’s enslavement to the centrality of himself will be very wide of the mark. Ah, what surprises lie ahead!

For many, the term *Christian Hedonism* will be new. Therefore, I have included the appendix: “Why Call It Christian Hedonism?” If this is a strange or troubling term, you may want to read those pages before plunging into the main chapters.

I would prefer to reserve a definition of Christian Hedonism until the end of the book, when misunderstandings would have been swept away. A writer often wishes his first sentence could be read in light of his last—and vice versa! But, alas, one must begin somewhere. So I offer the following

advance definition in hope that it will be interpreted sympathetically in light of the rest of the book.

Christian Hedonism is a philosophy of life built on the following five convictions:

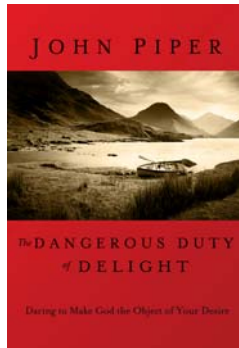
1. The longing to be happy is a universal human experience, and it is good, not sinful.
2. We should never try to deny or resist our longing to be happy, as though it were a bad impulse. Instead, we should seek to intensify this longing and nourish it with whatever will provide the deepest and most enduring satisfaction.
3. The deepest and most enduring happiness is found only in God. Not from God, but in God.
4. The happiness we find in God reaches its consummation when it is shared with others in the manifold ways of love.
5. To the extent that we try to abandon the pursuit of our own pleasure, we fail to honor God and love people. Or, to put it positively: The pursuit of pleasure is a necessary part of all worship and virtue. That is:

*The chief end of man is to glorify God
by
enjoying Him forever.*

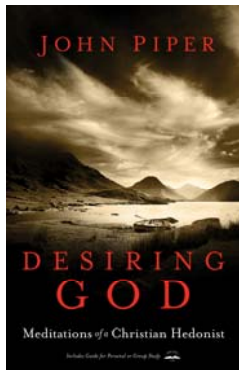
THE ROOT OF THE MATTER

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.

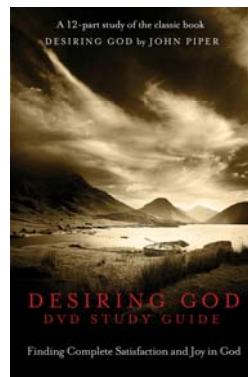
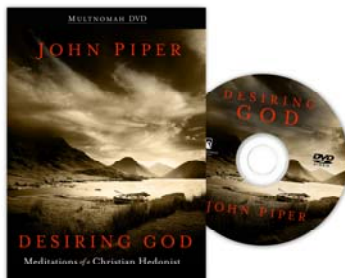
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