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Bridgeway Church
John 13-17 / #14
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Sermon Summary #14

The Pursuit of Happiness

John 15:11

Psalm 1

Blaise Pascal, a 17th century French philosopher and mathematician, once said, and I quote:

“All men seek happiness. This is without exception. Whatever different means they may employ, happiness is their end. The reason why some go to war and others avoid it, is the desire for happiness. . . . This (happiness) is the motive of every action of every man, even of those who hang themselves” (*Pensees*, no. 425).

As far as Pascal was concerned, and he was a Christian, seeking one’s own happiness is not a sin. John Piper put it this way:

“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” (*Desiring God*, 15).

Larry Crabb agrees. The Scriptures, says Crabb,

“acknowledge that we all long deeply for satisfaction without ever hinting at a rebuke for our feeling those desires. We must say it clearly: ***It is not wrong to desire deep joy in our souls.*** A longing for happiness does not make us selfish. To deny self does not require that we stop caring whether we’re happy or not, or that we somehow must nobly rise above an interest in our own well-being” (*Understanding People*, 108; emphasis mine).

When I served as pastor of Christ Community Church in Ardmore I spent considerable time counseling a young lady who struggled with an intense and often debilitating conviction of guilt. What is the “sin” for which she felt guilty? Her answer: “I want to be happy.” She felt selfish and sub-Christian for merely giving thought to her own desire for joy. So I asked her what she thought about the words of Jesus in John 15:11. I said: “If you are in sin because you have a deep and unrelenting desire for joy and happiness, is Jesus equally guilty for making it his goal in all that he said and did to bring you fullness of joy? If your desire to be happy and full of joy is evil, what in the world is Jesus doing when he says in John 15:11, ‘These things I have spoken to you, that my joy may be in you, and that your joy may be full?’”

She didn't have a good answer for that, and it is good that she didn't. And none of you have a good answer either. The fact is, everyone in this auditorium today, whether you are a Christian or an atheist, every one of you seeks happiness. It is a universal desire. Christians, Muslims, Buddhists, agnostics, Democrats, Republicans, and Libertarians, all seek happiness. No one is an exception to this rule. You may not now be happy, but you wish you were. Your very presence here today is an expression of your pursuit of happiness. You came because you were convinced that being present would bring you more joy than staying home or engaging in some other activity.

Why do people thirst for power? Why do people sacrifice their health and families to earn more money? Why does Mark marry Susan instead of Sally? Why does Jan purchase the red car instead of the blue one? Why does Andy choose those friends rather than these? The answer to every such question is that they are all convinced, whether rightly or wrongly, that it will bring more happiness than they presently have.

Why do others give up and fall into depression? Is it not because their pursuit of happiness has failed? That which they were convinced would bring them happiness is beyond their grasp, so they lose hope. Why do some who lose hope fall into such despair that they eventually take their own lives? It is because, as strange as it may sound, they are persuaded that they will be happier dead than alive. Or it is because they believe that death will deliver them from the miseries of life or whatever it is that is depriving them of happiness. In either case, they kill themselves because they no longer want to be miserable and depressed. Believing that living can no longer bring them the happiness they so desperately desire, they take their own lives.

What are we to make of this? Is the hunger for happiness a sinful and selfish desire that Satan has stirred up in our hearts? Is the longing to be happy a result of mankind's fall into sin and moral depravity? Is the desire to be happy one of the many works of the flesh that one day the Holy Spirit will weed out of our souls? Many Christians says yes. Many Christians today have been led to believe that this persistent and inescapable yearning in their heart for happiness is sinful and must be suppressed and ruthlessly denied.

As you can probably guess by now, I altogether and entirely disagree. ***Our sin is not that we long to be happy but that we are stupidly and blindly determined to find it in something or someone other than God and all that he is for us in Jesus. The longing to be happy is both universal and good, and the deepest and most enduring happiness or joy is found in God and in God alone.***

What I'm articulating for you is known as **Christian Hedonism**. As much as that may sound like a contradiction in terms, I assure you it is not. Consider again what Jesus says in John 15:11. Why does he make the joy of his people the goal of his instruction? Why didn't he say something like: "These things I have spoken to you so that you may fulfill your duty and be more obedient and compliant and faithful in doing what I've commanded"? Why did he make our "joy" the aim or goal of his instruction?

I think the answer is found in the first question of the catechism of the Westminster Confession of Faith. It asks: "What is the chief end of man?" It answers: "The chief end of man is to glorify God and to enjoy him forever." As you probably know, John Piper has suggested that we should make one small change in the wording of that answer, a change that has monumentally massive implications for Christianity. He says we should answer by saying: ***"The chief end of man is to glorify God BY enjoying him forever."***

Don't be misled by what others may say in response to this. I'm not saying that God is a means to our happiness. I'm not saying that God is a tool or instrument by which we gain joy or happiness or pleasure. I'm saying that the pleasure or joy or happiness that we as Christians are to seek is the pleasure or joy or happiness in God himself. God is not a shovel, as it were, by which we dig for buried treasure. God is himself the treasure for which we dig. He is the end of our search for happiness. The pursuit of happiness is consummated and complete when we get God.

The apostle Peter had this in mind when he spoke of both the nature and goal of the death of Jesus Christ. In 1 Peter 3:18 we read this: “For Christ also suffered once for sins, the righteous for the unrighteous, that he might bring us to God.” ***The joy and happiness and pleasure for which the human heart was created is the joy and happiness and pleasure that come from finding God, getting God, knowing God, seeing God, and treasuring God above all else.***

So Jesus says it clearly here in John 15:11. The aim of his instruction, the underlying motivation in saying what he says, is that the joy that he himself experiences as God would be reproduced in and imparted to us. It is not the “joy” that the world offers that Jesus wants us to experience. It is his joy! His delight! His pleasure! His words are designed to awaken in us a deeper hunger for joy and then to direct us to himself that we might find in God and all he is for us in Jesus the deepest and most satisfying joy imaginable. That is why Piper so often reminds us that ***God is most glorified in us when we are most satisfied in him. Or we might rephrase that and say that God’s greatest glory in us is our deepest delight in him.***

I assume all of you have seen the film, *It’s a Wonderful Life*, starring Jimmy Stewart. I’ll probably watch it a half dozen times again during the Christmas season. Do you remember the scene where the local pharmacist, Mr. Gower, is intoxicated, overcome with grief at the death of his son? He sends young George Bailey (played by Jimmy Stewart) with a prescription for a family suffering with diphtheria. George knows that Mr. Gower has mistakenly put poison in the pills, and refuses to carry through on the delivery.

My point is simply this. Philosophers, politicians, teachers, the media, as well as well-meaning family members and friends, and even a few misguided pastors, are like drunken druggists who in their desire to cure you of your unhappiness have put poison in the pills! Don’t swallow it! Jesus has a better prescription for what ails you, and so too does the author of Psalm 1. So, in preparation for next week when we will dive more deeply into the truth of John 15:11 and what I’m calling Christian Hedonism, today we turn our attention to Psalm 1.

Only Two Types of People in the World

The psalmist is very clear that as far as he is concerned there are only two types of people in the world. Of course, there are undoubtedly variations and degrees within each type, but there are still only two groups into which the totality of humanity may be divided. There is, on the one hand, the righteous person, whom the psalmist describes in vv. 1-3, and there is, on the other hand, the wicked person, whom he describes in vv. 4-6.

Before we look at the “righteous” person, we need to understand how he/she came to be righteous. After all, in Romans 3:10b-12, Paul says,

“None is righteous, no, not one; no one understands; no one seeks for God. All have turned aside; together they have become worthless; no one does good, not even one” (Rom. 3:10b-12).

The simple and straightforward answer is that it is only because of God’s sovereign, saving, merciful grace in Jesus Christ that people who are otherwise wicked become righteous. We become righteous when God imputes or reckons the righteousness of Jesus Christ to us when we put our faith and trust in him. We become experientially righteous, to varying degrees, when God the Holy Spirit works in our hearts to gradually transform and remake us into the moral image of Jesus himself. So, with that question answered, let’s turn our attention to what the psalmist says about the righteous man or woman.

Blessed! Happy! Joyful!

“Blessed is the man [or woman!] who walks not in the counsel of the wicked” (Ps. 1:1a). The word **“blessed”** occurs 26x in the psalter (see, for example, Psalms 2:12; 32:1-2; 33:12; 34:8; 41:1; etc.). It is a word that describes spiritual joy, tranquility of heart, inner satisfaction of soul, or what we might call **“holy happiness”** (as over against the sort of so-called happiness found in the world).

To be “blessed” or happy or joyful does not necessarily mean the absence of physical pain or external adversity. To be “blessed” or to live in the “joy” that Jesus describes in John 15, is to experience a deep, durable delight in Jesus himself. It is to experience inner satisfaction, an unshakable sense of well-being that flows from the assurance that I am secure in his arms and that nothing in this life can ever separate me from the love of God in Christ. This experience of being “blessed” and full of “joy” can be ours even when God’s providence does not seem to favor us, even when we are sick and financially strapped and at the end of our resources in life.

Let’s also be clear about one thing right from the start. Happiness is not an option. Joy is not a choice that you can either embrace or spurn. ***We are commanded to be happy!*** Moses warned the people of Israel that it is “because you did not serve the Lord your God with joyfulness and gladness of heart, because of the abundance of all things, therefore you shall serve your enemies whom the Lord will send against you” (Deut. 28:47-48a). We are told in Psalm 16:11 that it is only in God’s presence that we find “fullness of joy” and only at his right hand that we experience “pleasures forevermore.” David closes Psalm 32 by saying, “Be glad in the Lord, and rejoice, O righteous, and shout for joy, all you upright in heart!” (Ps. 32:11). And we are commanded in Psalm 37:4, “Delight yourself in the Lord, and he will give you the desires of your heart.”

So how do we gain this blessedness, this joy, this holy happiness? The psalmist answers our question in two ways: one positive and one negative.

Blessedness in Saying “No”

Believe it or not, happiness and joy and blessedness can be found in something negative. **There is joy in saying “No”!** People mistakenly think that when Christians says “No” to some experience that it robs them of real life and real joy. The psalmist disagrees. But to what or to whom does he recommend that we say No?

In v. 1 he explains how blessedness can be ours. It comes by not walking in the counsel of the wicked and not standing in the way of sinners and by not sitting in the seat of scoffers.

His point is simply that we need to be extremely careful about the company we keep or the counsel we believe. Be discerning as to the advice you follow. Be cautious about the habits you develop and from whom you learn them.

When he speaks of “counsel” he has in view what we **believe**. The word “way” points to how we **behave**. And the word “seat” refers to where we **belong**. Our believing, behaving, and belonging must be carefully guarded.

Notice that he says “counsel”, not error or falsehood or heresy or deceit. If we could always see such advice and instruction as wicked we wouldn’t find it so difficult to resist. But the ungodly and irreverent and immoral “counsel” of the wicked of this world often comes to us disguised as good advice. It is often part of a total package, a worldview, a system of values that to the naked eye appears good and sound and sane. But it is actually designed to destroy you. Be discerning!

The “way of sinners” is not always evident as evil. It is not always the openly blasphemous or heretical or immoral path that we can easily recognize and just as easily reject. It may come to us in the form of something that sounds appealing and looks rewarding and seems to work. Take abortion for example. It offers a young woman freedom from having to provide financially for another person. It promises the opportunity to go on vacation whenever you please and to not be burdened by the presence of another who demands so much of your time and energy. It tries to convince you that you are the master of your life and that this is simply an expression of your God-given right to exercise your free will. But it is the counsel and the way of wickedness.

The “seat of scoffers” has in view the individual who is more overtly scornful of what is good and right and true. This is the person who ridicules holiness of life and laughs at the promise of forgiveness and tries to make a mockery of the reality of heaven and hell and tells you that it is stupid for anyone to believe that God actually came to earth in the person of Jesus Christ to make a way for us to enjoy his presence forever.

So the psalmist’s point is simply this: Don’t buy into the world’s system of values. Don’t accept its advice. Don’t be a party to its parties. Don’t linger long among those whose only use of God’s name is in profanity. You cannot experience blessedness of heart and soul if you mingle among and live like the lost. This doesn’t mean you shouldn’t have non-Christian friends or that you should avoid their company. How else are they going to hear the gospel if you do? It does mean that there is a very real and oh-so-subtle danger in cultivating too close a companionship with them. If you spend time in their presence, use it to remind them, as the psalmist does in v. 6, that “the way of the wicked will perish.”

But blessedness or joy or happiness is not simply found in saying No. One must also say Yes.

Blessedness in Saying “Yes”

While in England in February of 2007, I had the privilege of speaking yet again at the Life in the Spirit conference. During one of his messages, fellow-speaker Dave Smith made passing reference to my book, *Pleasures Evermore*, and articulated in a most refreshing and poignant way its principal theme. “When it comes to living a successful Christian life,” said Dave, “and resisting the power of temptation, simply saying ‘No! No! No!’ won’t suffice. We must learn to say ‘Oh! Oh! Oh!’”

I like that! His point was that, by itself, fear has limited capacity to deter our hearts from sin. To it must be added fascination. Resisting is empowered by rejoicing! By all means detest the ugly and revolting and destructive elements in life. But by what means? Delight! Make no mistake: we need to be warned. But we must first be wooed. Fear drives us, but fascination draws. The psalmist’s strategy for blessedness is not mere avoidance but allurements. Look with me at v. 2 of Psalm 1.

“But his delight is in the law of the Lord, and on his law he meditates day and night” (Ps. 1:2)

It is of more than a little significance that the psalmist describes the righteous person as taking “delight” in the law of the Lord. If your approach to the Bible is driven merely by a sense of duty, it will always be a drudgery. The Christian life is not an issue of resolutions and will power and gut-wrenching effort. If that is the way you approach your relationship with Christ, guilt and fear and anxiety will control your heart. But our approach is to be one of unimaginable and unrestrained delight! ***This is no irksome, burdensome, heavy-handed obligation, but a journey that is motivated by the delight and joy that comes from encountering God in and through his Word.***

If you ask me, ***“Sam, how do I obtain this delight?”*** here is my answer. First, start reading and meditating and reflecting on God’s Word. But second, don’t stop with that. As you read and reflect, cry out every moment that God would grant you *eyes* to see the beauty of his revealed truth. Pray every moment that he would give you *new spiritual taste buds* that you might savor the sweetness of all in his Word. Cry out that he would open your *ears* to the majestic sounds of his grace and love and power and majesty.

I hardly need to remind you of how I so often pray before I preach. I employ the words of Psalm 119:18 and cry out to God: “Oh, Lord, open our eyes that we might behold beautiful and wonderful things in your Word.”

Thus we see that it isn’t enough just to avoid the ungodly counsel of the wicked. We must also acquire and feast on the blessedness of truth that God has revealed in his Word. Why is “delight” the only appropriate approach to God’s Word? There are countless reasons, but let me give you only a handful.

“Take to heart all the words by which I am warning you today, that you may command them to your children, that they may be careful to do all the words of this law. For it is no empty word for you, but your very life, and by this word you shall live long in the land that you are going over the Jordan to possess” (Deut. 32:46-47).

“The precepts of the Lord are right, rejoicing the heart” (Psalm 19:8).

“Your testimonies are my delight; they are my counselors” (Psalm 119:24).

“For I find my delight in your commandments, which I love” (Psalm 119:47).

“The law of your mouth is better to me than thousands of gold and silver pieces” (Psalm 119:72).

“How sweet are your words to my taste, sweeter than honey to my mouth!” (Psalm 119:103).

“Your testimonies are my heritage forever, for they are the joy of my heart” (Psalm 119:111).

“Your words were found, and I ate them, and your words became to me a joy and the delight of my heart” (Jer. 15:16).

But note well that this experience of the joy and delight that is found in God’s word does not come to the human heart unless we “meditate” on it “day and night” (Psalm 1:2). What is “meditation”? He isn’t talking about eastern

mysticism in which the individual empties the mind of all thought and seeks detachment from all surroundings. ***To “meditate” is to fill one’s mind with God’s revealed truth and to reflect on it, muse on it, mull it over again and again, memorize it, brood over it. Like a cow chewing its cud, the believer ruminates on God’s word over and over and over.***

May I suggest that you take one verse of Scripture and memorize it. Then ponder it for a week or two. Turn it into prayer and praise. Repetitive reflection is what the psalmist has in mind.

And what will be the result? He tells us in v. 3. The person who turns from the counsel of the wicked and immerses his/her mind and heart in the truth of God’s word “is like a tree planted by streams of water that yields its fruit in its season, and its leaf does not wither.” Whether or not a tree lives and flourishes and blossoms and bears its fruit depends on where it is planted and how it is nourished. If your mind and heart are planted in TV or Facebook and Twitter and you nourish your heart with the banal and blasphemous trash that they produce, you will wither and die. But like a tree that never lacks for life-giving and sustaining waters and bears its fruit, so is the person who never lacks for God’s Word.

It doesn’t take long for you to recognize such people. There are some people that make you feel weary and depressed and discouraged. But then there are those whose lives are like a tree planted by streams of water and you find yourself feasting on their presence and refreshed by the fruit they produce. You leave them feeling renewed and restored and encouraged and fully fed. Your hunger for God and his word is increased and being around such people is like feasting at a table filled with every imaginable delicacy.

The Demise and Death of the Wicked

And what happens to those who reject God’s Word, who seek their joy and happiness in what the world offers?

According to v. 4, they “are like chaff that the wind drives away.” The picture here is of winnowing in which the threshed corn is tossed up in the air so that the husks and fragments of straw might blow away in the wind, leaving behind the grain. The wicked who mock God’s Word are lightweights; they are people without real substance. Contrary to how they may think of themselves and present themselves to you, they are mere chaff. They are rootless, weightless, and of no value.

Furthermore, when the day of final judgment comes, they have no hope to withstand the scrutiny to which God will subject their lives. They will find themselves excluded from the congregation of God’s people. And we know this with certainty because God knows *them* with certainty. He knows their motivation, their behavior, and the ultimate demise to which they are heading.

Conclusion

Let me briefly return to John 15:11. I find it fascinating that ***Jesus connects his words to the capacity of his people to experience genuine joy.*** Note again: “these things I have spoken to you.” The “things” that Jesus has said and taught them through his earthly ministry, and especially the “things” he has spoken to them in the upper room on the eve of his betrayal are the key to unlocking the treasure chest of joy. If you do not hear and heed and immerse yourself in the words of Jesus, or as the psalmist has said, if you do not “meditate” on his words, your joy will forever remain weak and fitful and subject to the ups and downs of daily existence.

Later on in the last words of Jesus, in John 17, Jesus will say this in his prayer to the Father:

“But now I am coming to you, and these things I speak in the world, that they may have my joy fulfilled in themselves” (John 17:13).

So let me conclude with four brief but crucial observations. **First**, we’re not talking about the joy that the world promises, or the casual joys that mere human beings can conjure up or create. We’re talking about the very joy of Jesus himself. The experience in his heart of intimacy and delight in the Father is being offered to us. **Second**, Jesus promises *fullness* of joy, not partial or incomplete or joy that comes only here a little and there a little. When he speaks of us having our joy “fulfilled” he is echoing the words of David in Psalm 16:11 where he speaks of “fullness of joy” in God’s presence and “pleasures forevermore” at God’s right hand. **Third**, as we’ve seen in John 15:11, this joy comes only as we hear and meditate upon and trust the “things” that Jesus has spoken. His words are life indeed. **Finally**, this isn’t a joy or happiness that insulates a person from trial, adversity, pain, and persecution. It is a joy or happiness that enables one to persevere and not lose heart while smack dab in the middle of the worst that life can bring your way. Never forget that Jesus first spoke these words regarding fullness of joy to the very people whom he said would be hated and persecuted by all on account of him.

That is the message and the promise of Christian Hedonism. God’s greatest glory comes from your deepest delight in him. He is most glorified in you when you are most satisfied in him. Your commitment to God’s glory and your commitment to your own gladness are not mutually exclusive. It is precisely in your gladness in his greatness and beauty and grace that he is most glorified in you.