

Sam Storms
Bridgeway Church
John 13-17 / #15
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Sermon Summary #15

Was Jesus a Christian Hedonist? John 15:11; 16:24; 17:13

There was a time when I thought the verb “enjoy” and the noun “God” should never be used in the same sentence. I could understand “fearing” God and “obeying” God, even “loving” God. But “enjoying” God struck me as inconsistent with the biblical mandate both to glorify God, on the one hand, and deny myself, on the other. How could I be committed above all else to seeking God’s glory if I were concerned about my own joy? My gladness and God’s glory seemed to cancel each other out. I had to choose between one or the other, but embracing them both struck me as out of the question. Worse still, enjoying God sounded a bit too lighthearted, almost casual, perhaps even flippant, and I knew that Christianity was serious business.

Then I read Jonathan Edwards (1703–1758). Something he said hit me like a bolt of lightning. I’m not a Christian Hedonist because of Jonathan Edwards. I’m a Christian Hedonist because I believe Psalm 16:11 (among countless other texts such as those we’re looking at today): “You make known to me the path of life; in your presence there is fullness of joy; at your right hand are pleasures forevermore.” This text is more than a declaration of truth: it is an incentive to pursue God.

My point is simply that Scripture always has been and will remain the final authority in my life. But Edwards helped me to see that *God’s glory and my gladness were not antithetical*. He helped me see that at the core of Scripture is the truth that *my heart’s passion for pleasure (which is God-given and not the result of sin) and God’s passion for praise converge in a way that alone makes sense of human existence*. Here is what he said:

“Now what is glorifying God, but a rejoicing at that glory he has displayed? An understanding of the perfections of God, merely, cannot be the end of the creation; for he had as good [i.e., might as well] not understand it, as see it and not be at all moved with joy at the sight. Neither can the highest end of creation be the declaring God’s glory to others; for the declaring God’s glory is good for nothing otherwise than to raise joy in ourselves and others at what is declared” (*The Miscellanies, Entry Nos. a–z, aa–zz, 1-500, The Works of Jonathan Edwards*, vol. 13, ed. Thomas A. Schafer [New Haven: Yale University Press, 1994], no. 3, p. 200).

Edwards’ point is that *passionate and joyful admiration of God, and not merely intellectual apprehension, is the aim of our existence*. If God is to be supremely glorified in us, it is critically essential that we be supremely glad in him and in what he has done for us in Jesus. This is Christian Hedonism. Enjoying God is not a secondary, tangential endeavor. It is central to everything we do. We do not do other things hoping that joy in God will emerge as a by-product. Our reason for the pursuit of God and obedience to him is precisely the joy that is found in him alone. To come to God or to worship him or to yield to his moral will for any reason other than the joy that is found in who he is, is sinful.

Seven Theses on Christian Hedonism

1. All People Desire Happiness

We don’t need to spend much time on this first point because it was the focus of my message last week. So I’ll be brief. Many have rejected Christian Hedonism due to their misguided belief that to the degree they seek their own well-being they diminish the virtue or moral value of a choice or deed. Doing something because we enjoy it threatens to empty the deed of its moral worth, or so they think. Christian Hedonism contends that nothing could be further from the truth.

People struggle with this because it strikes them as experientially misguided. “How can you say I want happiness and joy and satisfaction when I’m always making decisions that I know are painful and sacrificial?” The answer is that we always choose what we think will *ultimately* maximize personal happiness and minimize personal misery. If

you make a decision that is immediately painful and uncomfortable or unsettling, I assure you it is because you believe that such a choice *in the long term* will generate more pleasure than not. In other words, you gladly forego present pleasures if you believe the long-term benefits outweigh whatever short-term discomfort you might experience or sacrifice you might make. Likewise, you will ignore long-term consequences if you believe the immediate pleasures of a decision are worth the risk.

2. God Places No Restraints on the Depths of Delight in Himself that He Commands Us to Pursue

When it comes to satisfying our spiritual appetites, there is no such thing as excess. There are no limitations placed on us by God. There are no rules of temperance or laws requiring moderation or boundaries beyond which we cannot go in seeking to enjoy him. We need never pause to inquire whether we've crossed a line or become overindulgent. You need never fear feeling too good about God.

That's not to say our *sensual* appetites should be left unchecked. The Bible is full of prohibitions and restrictions on how and to what extent we indulge our fleshly and bodily desires. But no such rules exist for our *spiritual* appetites. *Christianity forbids us no pleasures, except for those that lead to temporal misery and eternal woe.* You cannot desire pleasure too much. You *can* desire the *wrong kind* of pleasure. You can rely on the wrong things to satisfy your soul, things that God has forbidden. But the intensity of the soul's search for joy cannot be too great or too deep or too sharp or too powerful. The divine invitation is that we would satisfy our voracious appetite for spiritual delight by indulging our souls in every delicacy that God has to offer. He bids us to imbibe the waters of spiritual refreshment from a well that never runs dry. He points us to the river of his delights (Ps. 36:8) and says: "Drink!" We are urged to immerse and soak and saturate ourselves in the spiritual pleasures and blessings that he lavishly and abundantly and happily pours forth through Jesus and the power of the Holy Spirit.

3. Even Self-Denial Is a Hedonistic Choice

I say this in response to those who argue that the words of Jesus in Mark 8:34-37 contradict Christian Hedonism:

And calling the crowd to him with his disciples, he said to them, "If anyone would come after me, let him deny himself and take up his cross and follow me. For whoever would save his life will lose it, but whoever loses his life for my sake and the gospel's will save it. For what does it profit a man to gain the whole world and forfeit his soul? For what can a man give in return for his soul?"

Our Lord's appeal that we deny ourselves and take up our cross is actually grounded upon the concern that each person inescapably has for his or her own soul. The only way you can respond appropriately to his call for "self" denial is if you are wholeheartedly committed to the happiness and eternal welfare of your "self." If you lacked concern for the eternal welfare of your soul you would lose all incentive for obeying Christ's command. His exhortation is persuasive because of the intensely passionate concern you have for what might happen if you don't obey. Jesus calls on us to deny ourselves because otherwise we'll die! We must "lose" our lives if we hope to "save" them. And it is the legitimacy of that personal hope on which Jesus bases his appeal. Clearly, Jesus grounds his exhortation in the inescapable reality of human desire for one's own welfare and happiness and well-being (let us never forget that self-interest is not the same as selfishness).

Jesus is aware that we desire what is best for our selves. He neither rebukes us for it nor calls for repentance as if it were sinful. In fact, he intentionally targets that universal desire and entreats us based upon its undeniable presence in our souls. His somewhat paradoxical advice is that ***the best thing you can do for your "self" is to deny "self"!*** Eternal life is the best and most advantageous thing you can obtain for your "self," but it may cost you temporal life and the passing pleasures of sinful self-indulgence.

Jesus is simply asking that you sacrifice the lesser blessings of temporal and earthly comforts in order to gain the greater blessings of eternal and unending pleasure. To refuse to follow Jesus is to deny your "self" the greatest imaginable joy. His call is for us to renounce our vain attempt to satisfy our souls through illicit sex and ambition and earthly fortune. Instead, do yourself a favor. Follow Jesus and gain true life, true joy, true pleasure. Jesus, if I may say this reverently, is not a Buddhist! He is not telling us to ignore our needs or to repress our longings but to fulfill them . . . in him!

4. God Is Most Glorified in Us When We Are Most Satisfied in Him

Or again, as Piper has said: “Pleasure is the measure of our treasure” (“There Is No Greater Satisfaction”, Oct. 1, 1990, www.desiringGod.org). The best gauge or standard by which to judge the value of any treasure is the intensity and depth of the pleasure it evokes. Thus the greatness and glory and majesty of God is most clearly seen in the extent to which our souls find satisfaction in him and all that he is for us in Jesus. Or, to put in other terms, *God’s preeminent glory is in our passionate gladness in him.*

Piper himself provides a helpful illustration in making this point. Consider the difference between a *microscope* and a *telescope* and how it relates to our knowledge and enjoyment of God, and what it means to *glorify* him (*The Dangerous Duty of Delight*, 17). Both a microscope and a telescope are designed to *magnify* objects. So, too, are we. The Bible repeatedly calls on us, especially in the Psalms, to magnify the Lord: “O *magnify* the LORD with me, and let us exalt his name together” (Ps. 34:3; cf. 35:27). “I will praise the name of God with a song; I will *magnify* him with thanksgiving” (Ps. 69:30). “My soul *magnifies* the Lord, and my spirit rejoices in God my Savior” (Luke 1:46-47).

But there are two entirely different ways of magnifying God, one of which exalts him and the other demeans him. First, you can magnify God the way a microscope does by focusing on something quite small, most often invisible to the naked eye, and causing it to look much, much bigger than it really is. This is magnification by distortion! This is *not* how we are to magnify God! Tragically, though, that’s how many Christians think of God and how they are to worship him. They think that in their lives and in their prayers and in their praise they are causing God to look bigger and greater and more glorious than he really is, in and of himself. Worship is not like blowing up a balloon. ***God is not honored by human inflation, as if the breath of our praise enhances and expands his visibility and worth.*** To think that apart from our praise God remains shrunken and shriveled is to dishonor him who “gives to all mankind life and breath and everything” (Acts 17:25).

But you can also magnify God the way a telescope would. A telescope helps people who are small and distant to see something indescribably huge and massive by making it to appear as it really and truly is. A telescope peers into the distant realms of our universe and displays before our eyes the massive, unfathomable, indescribable dimensions of what is there. Only in this latter sense are we called to *magnify* the Lord. Of course, the analogy breaks down, as all analogies eventually do, because God is infinitely greater than anything you can see through a telescope. Indeed, he created and fashioned everything you can see through a telescope. But I trust you get my point.

Let’s change words for a moment and put in place of “magnify” and “glorify” the word “exalt.” What is the most biblical and effective way to *exalt* God? How might we engage in the *exaltation* of the Creator? The answer is found in another word, the spelling of which differs in only one letter from our first word: *exultation*. This is *not* semantic nitpicking. The Christian life hangs suspended on it.

To exult is to rejoice and to celebrate. We exult when we find deep satisfaction in an individual or experience. Whether we say it, shout it, or merely sigh with a profound sense of delight, there is fascination and joy and gladness of heart. There is an emotionally explosive dimension to exultation. To exult in something or someone is to find in them happiness, gladness, joy, complete and utter satisfaction; it is to savor them.

Christian Hedonism contends that exulting in God is the most biblical and effective means for exalting him! Or to put it in other terms: God is praised when he is prized! Understanding God is but a means to enjoying God. We tell others of this glory so that we might elevate and intensify joy in both their hearts and our own.

How do you measure the value of something you hold dear? How do you assess the worth of a prize? Is it not by the depth of delight it induces in your heart? Is it not by the intensity and quality of your joy in what it is? Is it not by how excited and enthralled and thrilled you are in the manifold display of its attributes, characteristics, and properties? Is it not by the extent of the sacrifice you are willing to make to gain it, to guard it, and to keep it? In other words, your satisfaction in what the treasure is and does for you is the standard or gauge by which its glory (worth and value) is revealed. The treasure, which is God, is most glorified in and by you when your pleasure in him is maximal and optimal.

That is why if you want to *elevate* God, *celebrate* God! Treasure him. Prize him. Delight in him. Enjoy him. In doing so you *magnify* him, you show him to be the most wonderful and sweet and all-sufficient being in the universe. Enjoying God is not a momentary diversion from more important responsibilities you have as a Christian. Enjoying God is not a means to a higher end. This *is* the end. Enjoying is not a pathway to the pinnacle. It is the

pinnacle, the purpose for which you and I live. As such, it is the solution to our struggle with sin. The antidote to apathy is the enjoyment of God. It is the divine catalyst for human change.

5. Christian Hedonism Insists that We Be Deadly Serious about Joy

Why must we be deadly serious about our joy? Because Jesus was. Look again at our three texts from the Last Words of Jesus in John 13-17. Why is joy so central to Christian Hedonism? What is it about joy or delight in God that makes it so important? Or again, *what is it about joy in God rather than simple obedience or fear or service that uniquely honors and exalts him?* Several things are worthy of note.

Joy, unlike any other human experience, requires the engagement and expression of the whole soul. There are things that I *understand* but in which I find no joy. There are things that I *choose*, such as eating squash, which bring me no immediate delight whatsoever. But when I genuinely *enjoy* something there is both an intellectual and volitional, as well as emotional, satisfaction. Simply put, joy is more wholistic than any other human experience. We must also remember that there is no such thing as hypocritical or insincere joy. You can pretend to have joy when you really don't (as when I'll pretend to enjoy the squash you serve me at your home). You can fake having joy, but you can't have fake joy. There's something pure and sincere and authentic and genuine about joy that isn't the case with any other human affection.

Most importantly, joy—more clearly and thoroughly than any other response—reveals the worth and value and splendor of whatever has captivated your heart. When you experience and express joy in God, perhaps in the midst of suffering or loss, others may take note and ask: “What must this God be like that he is deemed worthy not simply of acknowledgement but delight, not simply recognition but rejoicing?” Or, as Piper has put it, “Joy is the clearest witness to the worth of what we enjoy. It is the deepest reverberation in the heart of man of the value of God's glory” (“Joy and the Supremacy of Christ in a Postmodern World,” in *The Supremacy of Christ in a Postmodern World*, ed. John Piper and Justin Taylor [Wheaton, IL: Crossway Books, 2007], 78).

We must also be clear about the meaning of this joy that is so central to Christian Hedonism. We are talking here about a *deep* (not superficial or merely surface), *durable* (it sustains you in the worst of times, no less than in the best of times) *delight* (not merely duty or following God out of a sense of moral obligation) *in the splendor of God* (not in the stuff or goodies or achievements that occupy so many today) *that utterly ruins you for anything else*. This is the kind of joy that, rather than being dependent on material and physical comfort, actually frees you from bondage to it and liberates you from sinful reliance on worldly conveniences and gadgets and gold.

The problem is not that we have deep, passionate, and powerful desires for joy and pleasure. *The problem is that we are far, far, far too easily satisfied. We have settled for pathetic little pleasures like illicit sex and drunkenness and earthly wealth when God offers us fullness of joy and pleasures that never lose their capacity to satisfy and enthrall.* The counsel of Christian Hedonism is that we pursue God's presence where “fullness of joy” may be found (Ps. 16:11) and that we “taste and see that the LORD is good” (Ps. 34:8) and that we “delight” ourselves “in the LORD” (Ps. 37:4) and that we “drink from the river” of God's “delights” (Ps. 36:8).

6. The Foundation of Our Delight in God Is God's Delight in Himself

To come straight to the point, our glad-hearted passion for God is exceeded only by *God's* glad-hearted passion for God. *If the chief end of man is to glorify God by enjoying him forever, the chief end of God is to glorify God and to enjoy himself forever!* What is the pre-eminent passion in God's heart? What is *God's* greatest pleasure? In what does *God* take supreme delight? Christian Hedonism wants 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 proof for this bold proposition is the multitude of biblical texts that explicitly affirm (see my book, *Pleasures Evermore*, 81-101). What is of immediate concern, however, is the objection this assertion provokes, to wit, that if God is so utterly consumed with his own glory he cannot possibly be committed to our good. Or again, *if God is so completely in love with himself, how can he be in love with us?* This important question leads directly into our seventh and concluding thesis concerning Christian Hedonism.

7. God's Passion for His Glory and His Demand that We Praise Him is the Consummate Expression of Love for His People

Some argue that God's preeminent passion for his glory and his constant command that we praise him is a sure sign of egomania and makes God unworthy of our love and devotion. Far from it. **Let me respond to this objection with two statements and a conclusion.**

First, I think you would agree that the greatest and most authentic love desires to satisfy the beloved with the deepest and most durable happiness possible. I think you would agree that true love is willing to suffer and sacrifice to enthrall and bless the beloved with the greatest and most lasting joy.

Second, surely God himself is the most beautiful being in the universe. Surely there is none more enthralling or more glorious or more satisfying than he.

Third, is it not then the case that for God to love us and bless us supremely he must give himself to us in and through the person of Jesus Christ? Is it not the case that there is no more satisfying experience than to know and admire and love God? Is it not the case that there is no experience that brings more happiness or joy or fulfillment than seeing and savoring and enjoying God as he is revealed to us in Jesus?

It would seem then that the most loving thing God could do for us is to give us himself and show us himself and satisfy us with himself and elicit from our hearts the incomparable joy that comes with praising him for his beauty and majesty and grace and glory.

That is why when God tells us to enjoy him and to treasure him and to be satisfied solely in him, above all others, he is loving us. I love how John Piper sums it up. He writes:

“God is the one being in the universe for whom self-exaltation is not the act of a needy ego, but an act of infinite giving. The reason God seeks our supreme praise, or that Jesus seeks our supreme love, is not because he's needy and won't be fully God until he *gets* it, but because we are needy and won't be fully happy until we *give* it. This is not arrogance. This is grace. This is not egomania. This is love. And the very heart of the Christian gospel is that this is what Christ died to achieve — our full and everlasting enjoyment of the greatness of God.”

We could never say this about anyone else because no one else is God! For anyone but God to demand praise and to pursue his own glory would be an act of colossal arrogance and egomania. If I asked you to come on Sundays to praise me, to magnify me, to enjoy me, you would rightly be offended. Why? Because I'm not God. I'm not praiseworthy and I'm far from being magnificent. But the good news is that God is. ***That is why he loves us supremely when he shows his glory and greatness and calls for our adoration and admiration and enjoyment of himself.***

If God is to love you to the greatest degree possible, he must bestow or impart the best gift he has, the greatest prize, the most precious treasure, the most exalted and worthy thing within his power to give. That gift, of course, is himself. Nothing in the universe is as beautiful and captivating and satisfying as God! ***So, if God loves you he will give himself to you and then work in your soul to awaken you to his beauty and all-sufficiency. In other words, he will strive by all manner and means to intensify and expand and enlarge your joy in him.***

How could it be otherwise? If God is as excellent and gloriously ineffable and unfathomably majestic as Scripture contends, he wouldn't love us unless he did whatever was necessary to bring us into the knowledge and experience and enjoyment of himself. All other, lesser gifts would not be the ultimate expression of divine love. God is the gospel. Having God is the good news! All other, necessarily lesser, gifts are good only to the extent that they facilitate the higher, indeed highest, goal of getting God! Making himself known to us in Jesus and working through his Spirit to bring us into white-hot admiration and enjoyment of who he is (that's worship, by the way) is the ultimate and unparalleled act of love.

Therefore, God comes to you and says: “Here I am in all my glory: incomparable, infinite, immeasurable, and unsurpassed. See me! Be satisfied with me! Enjoy me! Celebrate who I am! Experience the height and depth and width and breadth of savoring and relishing me!” Does that sound like God pursuing his own glory? Yes. But it also

sounds like God loving you perfectly and passionately. ***The only way it is not real love is if there is something for you better than God: something more beautiful than God that he can show you, something more pleasing and satisfying than God with which he can fill your heart, something more glorious and majestic than God with which you can occupy yourself for eternity. But there is no such thing! Anywhere! Ever!***

In summary, your greatest good is in the enjoyment of God. God's greatest glory is in being enjoyed. So, for God to seek his glory in your worship of him is the most loving thing he can do for you. Only by seeking his glory pre-eminently can God seek your good passionately. For God to work for your enjoyment of him (that's his love for you) and for his glory in being enjoyed (that's his love for himself) are not properly distinct.

And that is Christian Hedonism!