

On Being a Christian Hedonist
New City Church of Los Angeles
June 8, 2008
By Kevin Haah

I. Introduction

In college, one of my best friends used to say to me all the time, “The most important thing in life is to be happy.” In many ways, that was her motto for life. But every time she said it, I had this uneasy feeling. Something about it sounded unchristian (as I understood it at the time). “Isn’t life about denying yourself and taking up your cross and following Jesus?” I thought.

On the one hand, I believed in self-denial and taking up the cross. I would see someone like Mother Teresa and say to myself: now, there is a model of self denial and sacrifice that I should emulate. I also knew in my heart that I could never do it.

On the other hand, however, I was a hedonist in pursuit of pleasure and happiness like everybody else. I wanted to be happy very badly. I pursued things--like career advancement, family, and money--that I believed would help bring me happiness.

I felt a tension in my heart between thinking that I should sacrifice everything and be like Mother Teresa and pursuing happiness. There was a tension between believing in self-denial and wanting pleasure. I would say to myself, maybe someday, I would become a super-Christian and have the courage to sacrifice my life and give up everything for God.

Since then, God’s taken me on a journey, a journey in which the entire paradigm of the way I approached my life has changed. In this journey, I became a Christian

Hedonist—a pleasure seeker in God. Today, I would like to share a little bit about Christian Hedonism and how that impacted my life.

Today's text comes from Psalm 37:4. If you have a Bible, please open it to Psalm 37:4:

“Delight yourself in the LORD, and He will give you the desires of your heart.”

I'd like for us to examine this passage carefully. I'd like to look at four things:

- One, what it means to delight yourself.
- Two, what it means to delight yourself in the Lord.
- Three, how you delight yourself in the Lord.
- And four, what it means that He will give you the desires of your heart.

II. Body

A. **So, first, what it means to delight yourself.**

The passage starts out by saying “delight yourself.” It does not say delight God and sacrifice yourself, as if God is pleased with joyless sacrifices. It says to delight yourself.

The American Heritage Dictionary defines delight as: “to have great pleasure or joy.” That same Dictionary defines hedonism as: “pursuit of or devotion to pleasure.” According to a thesaurus, some synonyms of the word “pleasure” are happiness, joy, and delight.

The command to delight yourself is a truism because we are all in pursuit of pleasure and happiness.

Blaise Pascal, the 17th century Christian philosopher and mathematician, said:

“All men seek happiness. This is without exception. Whatever different means they employ, they all tend to this end. . . This is the motive of every action of every man, even of those who hang themselves.”

Maybe the objects of your pleasure are your relationships—with your spouse or girlfriend or boyfriend, your children, or your friends. Maybe it is your career. Maybe it’s your looks. Maybe it is respect and acknowledgement. Maybe it is sex or drugs. Maybe it is entertainment. The bottom line is that whatever the object is, you and I are in pursuit of pleasure and happiness. We are all hedonists.

John Piper, whom I owe for helping me understand Christian Hedonism, said the following in his book entitled *Desiring God*:

“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.”

The pursuit of pleasure in and of itself is a good thing, like eating when you are hungry is a good thing. The Bible does not tell us to empty ourselves of all motives for pleasure and serve God. The Bible does not command us to kill joy.

B. In fact, it calls us to be Christian Hedonists—pleasure seekers in God. It says to “delight yourself in the Lord.” So, let’s go on to the second point. What does this mean?

It means that God is the object of our delight, not a way to get to something else that we believe will give us pleasure. Don’t we often try to use God like that? We pray: God, give me this or give me that because we are thinking consciously or subconsciously that those things will bring us greater happiness. I am not necessarily saying that these prayers are bad. But, I am saying that the passage today calls us to go beyond them. We

are commanded to pursue great pleasure IN God—in our worship of God and in our walk with God.

John Piper says:

“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 in 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)”

Our deepest experience of ultimate pleasure comes from pursuing pleasure in God. The deepest and most enduring happiness is found only in God.

The Bible is replete with statements of how much joy and pleasure there is in God, and commands us to seek such joy.

Psalm 36:8 says men “feast on the abundance of your house; you give them drink from your river of delights.”

Psalm 34:8 says: “Taste and see that the Lord is good.”

Psalm 43:4 says: “I will go to the altar of God, to God, my joy and my delight.”

Psalm 16:11 says: “you will fill me with joy in your presence, with eternal pleasures at your right hand.”

C.S. Lewis, a great Christian Hedonist, in a sermon entitled “*The Weight of the Glory*,” said:

“[I]t would seem that Our Lord finds our desires [for pleasure] 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.”

So, the problem, is NOT that we seek too much pleasure, the problem is that we are so easily satisfied by the measly things of this world. The problem is that we do not

seek enough pleasure. We have settled at best for a home, a family, a few friends, and a job, and at worst, for short-term pleasures we find in drugs and porn. We have accustomed ourselves to such meager short-lived pleasures that our capacity for joy has shriveled.

God wants us to experience the delight of heaven here on earth. That's why Jesus taught us to pray: "Thy Kingdom come and thy will be done on earth as it is in heaven." What is the kingdom of God? It is heaven. And what is heaven? It is a place where God's presence is unhindered; so, it is a place of absolute joy and happiness. And Jesus taught us to pray that this Kingdom, which is full of absolute joy, would come here now to earth. Heaven, the presence of God, is not just a place we go to when we die, it is a place that we can begin to experience now. When we do experience the Kingdom and the presence of God, it is awesome. It will blow you away. It is the ultimate pleasure and happiness, and God calls us to pursue it full throttle.

You might say, Kevin, didn't Jesus tell us to deny ourselves? As I shared in the beginning, I lived a life of tension between the thought that I should sacrifice everything and deny myself and the reality that I was in hot pursuit of happiness.

But Christian Hedonism has completely transformed my thought on this. Christianity is not about joylessly making sacrifices for God and others. It is about experiencing great pleasure in God *even in* the sacrifices.

C.S. Lewis said this:

"The New Testament has lots to say about self-denial, but not 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."

In other words, Jesus is essentially saying: “Deny yourselves lesser joys so that you don’t lose the big ones.” This is another way of saying: pursue REAL PLEASURE. Don’t settle for anything less than the greatest joy and pleasure there is. So, the call to take up the cross is consistent with Christian Hedonism.

C. Let’s go on to third point: *How* do we actually delight in the Lord?

How do we live the life of a Christian Hedonist?

There are many ways in which we can do so. But I’d like to talk about the most important way to delight in the Lord: **worship**.

We can worship God in vain. In Matthew 15:8, Jesus quotes Isaiah and says: “this people honors me with their lips, but their heart is far from me.” An act of worship is vain if it does not come from the heart! One pastor said:

“Worship is more than an act of mere willpower. All the outward acts of worship are performed by acts of will. But that does not make them authentic. The will can be present (for all kinds of reasons) while the heart is not truly engaged (or, as Jesus says, is “far away”). The engagement of the heart in worship is the coming alive of the feelings and emotions and affections of the heart. Where feelings for God are dead, worship is dead.”

I grew up going to church and before I became a Christian Hedonist, I thought of worship largely as a duty, an obligation to fulfill as a Christian. It was something we did, not for pleasure, but to give God glory. I could not have been more wrong!

When worship is reduced to duty and obligation, it ceases to be worship. To worship is to delight ourselves in the Lord. The original Hebrew word (*anog*) that is translated as “delight” can also mean to be soft and sensual or sensitive to the touch. It is an intimate word. It is an emotive word. It connotes intimate pleasure. We should worship hedonistically! For the joy and pleasure of being in God.

Grace and I have been married for 14 years this month. Now, let's say I got her a beautiful bracelet as an anniversary present. I give it to her and she gives me a big hug and says, "Thank you, it's beautiful." If I say without any emotion, "Don't mention it--it is my duty," I am going to end up in the doghouse that night. This acting purely out of duty strips the gift of any and all honor to Grace and any real meaning for the gift. Grace wants to know that it gives me pleasure to buy her the gift—that it is done out of pleasure. In the same way, God wants us to engage Him for pleasure, not just duty.

If you think about it, this idea of worshiping God disinterestedly—meaning just out of duty and without any motive for self pleasure—is evil. C.S. Lewis puts it well:

"It would be a bold and silly creature that came before its Creator with a boast, 'I'm no beggar. I love you disinterestedly.'"

John Piper put it this way:

"If you come to God dutifully offering Him the reward of your fellowship instead of thirsting after the reward of His fellowship, then you exalt yourself above God as His benefactor and belittle Him as a needy beneficiary— and that is evil."

In other words, if you worship God out of duty only, without opening yourself up for the delight of His pleasure, you are essentially saying to God, You need my worship, which I will grant to you. But I don't really need *You*, the pleasure of fellowship with You. You are putting yourself *above* God and reducing Him to someone who needs your worship—and this is evil.

Folks, the only way to glorify God in worship is to come to Him because in His presence there is everlasting joy.

Earlier in my walk with God, one question I had about praise was this: Why does the Word of God command us to praise God? How can the sovereign God need our praise? In some ways, I felt like it makes God look like someone who craves our worship

and praise like a vain person who needs compliments. If you think of praise and worship only in terms of giving God compliments, declaring approval of God, or the giving of honor to God, in other words, *as a duty*, I do think it is strange for the Bible to demand so much worship and praise. However, praise is more than that. If you think about it, when we enjoy and value someone or something, we can't help but to praise that person or thing. *Every enjoyment overflows into praise!* People do it all the time. People praise their lovers, their children, their school, their favorite team, even their favorite stores—Costco. Why do they praise? Because every enjoyment overflows into praise! That's why God commands us to praise Him. It is a command to delight ourselves in Him. When we delight ourselves in Him, we can't help but to overflow in praise. This is what being a Christian Hedonist is all about.

C.S. Lewis says:

“I think we delight to praise what we enjoy because the praise not merely expresses but completes the enjoyment; it is its appointed consummation.”

Let me illustrate. I just officiated a wedding yesterday. The couple is completely in love. They can look at each other for hours just expressing their love for each other. They adore and enjoy each other so much that they can't help expressing their delight. I believe their delight of each other not only expresses their enjoyment of each other but also completes their enjoyment. If someone told them they can't praise each other and express their love for each other, it would impede their enjoyment of each other. In the same way, our praise and worship of God is not only an expression of our joy but a consummation of our joy.

You might ask, what if I don't feel like worshipping? Are you saying I shouldn't worship God if I don't get any pleasure out of it? If this is you, confess your sin of

joylessness. Confess that your heart has become cold. Don't say it does not matter how you feel. It does matter.

Then, search your heart to determine what has become the delight of your heart. If God is not the delight of your heart, if God does not give you pleasure, something else has become the delight of your heart. You have taken up an idol. Since we are all hedonists in pursuit of pleasure, if God doesn't give you pleasure, something else does. And that something else is your idol. It has a hold on you. It controls you. And if something happens to that thing, you are going to respond with frustration and anger, if not destructive behavior.

Sometimes, the delight of our heart really is approval from other people. It's hard for us to hear God's approval—that God approves of us because of what Jesus has done. When we hear other people say good things about us, we are delighted. If we hear other people saying bad things about us, we are crushed, depressed. And we don't find any joy in our relationship with God. We have to let go of the delight that we are seeking, and demote it compared to the delight we seek in God.

And then, confess your sin of idolatry to God, and ask Him to restore your joy.

God will restore your joy! Continue to preach the gospel to yourself. I'll be talking about what this means in the series we will be starting in two weeks.

D. Now, let's go on to the second part of the verse.

There is a promise component in this verse--as you delight in God, God will give you the desires of your heart. What are the desires of your heart? When you delight yourself in God, God will give you the desires of your heart.

I think when we delight ourselves in God (make God the ultimate delight), God transforms our desires. Some desires we have will go away. He will put our noble desires in noble places and He will put our ignoble desires in ignoble places. Our desires for the things of God intensify. Our desire to love others intensifies. Our desire to feast in even more pleasure in our relationship with God intensifies. Some of our desires may stay the same. Whatever your desires are, God will put them into the right perspective, and He will give you the desires of your heart.

I was in high school when I first sensed a call to enter into full-time ministry. When my youth pastor challenged me to consider it, the last thing I wanted to do was to be a pastor. There was no desire in my heart to be a pastor. I was very much a realist about the life of a pastor. I felt like it would take too much sacrifice. Maybe if God totally zapped me, I guessed I would have to do it. I saw no pleasure in being a pastor. Think of all the expectations people have of a pastor, particularly the moral expectations. I was not sure I wanted to live in such a fish bowl. I was not sure if I was and would be good enough. I was looking for a profession where, among other things, there were no such moral expectations. So, I thought of becoming a lawyer. People don't expect much morality from lawyers, and if I was halfway decent, I would be able to honor God with my profession. The desire of my heart was to become a high-powered lawyer.

During law school, I remember not being able to sleep at nights because my adrenaline was pumping so hard. I was in pursuit of happiness – my desire was to end up in one of those prestigious law firms. I desired so much to be one of the guys who broke the glass ceiling. Somehow, I did end up in one of those firms, and found out that I really liked to practice law. Making it in the mainstream (where my parents could not) was my

definition of success, and it was my idol. It was the source of my delight, my self-worth and identity. And, somehow after about 9 years of practicing law, a pretty good firm admitted me into the ranks of partnership. It was something that I worked very hard at. But, it was so anti-climactic. I worked so hard but it didn't really do anything for me. It was now about getting more senior as a partner. The idol was vain.

At the same time, as I was growing as a Christian Hedonist, God began to change the desires of my heart. There brewed in me a tremendous desire and passion to be a pastor. Leaving the practice of law did not seem like a sacrifice at all. Not to leave the practice of law was self-denial. Yes, I would have to make adjustments in my lifestyle and learn to live on a pastor's salary; but, my desire to enter into full-time ministry and God's call were so compelling that I came to a place where I could not imagine doing anything else that would give me more pleasure. I believe that the work of the church is the most important work on earth. It is about the eternal destiny of people, and it is the only real hope for this bleak world. Almost every time I see people coming to the Lord in repentance, it brings tears of joy to my eyes. I have never found a better buzz than the buzz I get as I delight in the Lord and as I see people coming to delight in the Lord.

When I started to experience a little bit of the pleasures in God, God used my glimpses of it to transform the desires of my heart and to give me the desires of my heart.

Let's pray.