

### The 3<sup>rd</sup>, self-love and the goal of pleasure

Should the emphasis be: we glorify God by enjoying Him?  
Or, should it be we enjoy God by glorifying Him?

The first Q above represents an emphasis by John Piper in his book on Christian hedonism. He builds on the fact that we all love ourselves and our own pleasure.

Although there is a place for proper self-love, we must still try to do justice to the fact that we are being pointed away from self-seeking acts of self-love in some significant way since the text says: love is *not* self-seeking and there is no qualification cited (1 Cor. 13.5b).

On the other hand, our text does not teach that pleasure and happiness are maximized.

This fact should be self-evident because the text directs us away from self-seeking acts of self-love; that is precisely what love is not. However, it is not obvious to those who call themselves "Christian hedonists." There are many good things stressed by Christian hedonists but I detect a major oversight in their doctrine of maximal pleasure in the Lord.

The oversight is right here in our text. Namely, our personal pleasures are not the point; they are not accented. Some obvious limits are imposed on acts of self-love when Paul says, love is not self-seeking. As a matter of fact, if we pursue Christian unselfishness instead of self-seeking selfishness, we will forego or part with some happiness. Hedonism in principle accents the pursuit of pleasure to the maximum and Christian hedonism seeks that maximal pleasure in God (that it is in God is a good point and important to remember). "Are there limits to the pleasures of heaven?" they may ask. But the text tells us not to seek our own pleasure and happiness; it tells us that Christian love is somehow distinct from self-love.

An important parallel passage is Romans 15:1-2, which likewise speaks of "not pleasing ourselves." Accordingly, if we seek to please others by promoting their best interests (their good, 15:2) we will at times be misunderstood and may even suffer for the sake of righteousness. What the gospel tells us promotes the good of a human being is very different from what we, as sinners, think is best for us. So to serve other people in the way of the gospel often costs a lot in emotional energy depletion. We risk some troubled waters if we rock the boat promoting the good of others. We may do what pleases our neighbor objectively (that is, what is for their ultimate benefit) while they are not pleased subjectively (that is, they do not see the benefit and they may dislike our efforts on their behalf). We may then wonder if we didn't forgo some of our own pleasures needlessly. But then we must remember that seeking our pleasure to the maximum is not the goal. Our pleasure, what pleases ourselves, is not what we focus on (Rom. 15:1-2). Sometimes serving others brings tension and sleepless nights. So be it. We are not our own and we seek not our own things.

To broaden out a little more for fuller perspective, I want to make a couple of more comments in critique of Christian Hedonism as represented in the writings of John Piper, especially in his book, *Desiring God: Meditations of a Christian Hedonist* (1st ed., 1986, 2nd ed., 1996). My comments hub around this complaint: Christian hedonism with all the good it represents is a misplaced emphasis.

1) First, pleasure is something good in itself and it is something we naturally seek. We need no commandment to seek it. Yet, Christian hedonism makes pleasure (albeit in God) a standard or law by which to govern our lives. Instead, what we need is guidance on how to seek pleasure. Therefore, we are directed in passages like Romans 15:1-2 to look away from our pleasures to limit them and not maximize them.

2) Second, Christian hedonism makes pleasure the key to everything including worship. However, not all aspects of worship are pleasurable. For example, preaching on eternal punishment is not pleasurable and the saints may go away from such preaching sobered rather

than glutted on joy (glutting oneself on the feast of worship is an emphasis in Christian hedonism).

3) It is surely a misplaced emphasis to speak of glutting oneself whether on food or pleasure. Surely, moderation applies to us both physically and emotionally?

4) Although many other things could be said, I limit my comments here to this final point. Regarding pastoral joy, Piper says that if a pastor does not seek after his highest joy in serving his flock then he does not care for the flock properly ("a pastor who does not seek to do his work with joy does not care for his flock. Not to pursue our joy in ministry is not to pursue the profit of our people," p. 225). He uses Hebrews 13:17 as support.

However, if you read the text carefully, you will notice that nowhere is the pastor directed to pursue his joy in serving (let alone a maximal/hedonistic joy). As a matter of fact, the joy of the pastor is left in the hands of the flock. That may be risky but the pastor serves the flock not for the joy he can get but for the benefit he can give. The risk is that the flock may be ornery and bring the pastor much grief. He serves nonetheless. His pleasure is not the standard of his service. He is not told to seek his joy in serving in this text. That he leaves in the hands of the flock and by faith in the hands of God. In the bigger picture, it seems to me that instead of serving *for* the joy of it, this text directs us in the opposite direction. Serving is encouraged in pastoral labors *by* the joy the flock gives to the pastor. When churches encourage their pastors by making their work joyful, that brings advantage to all.

## Conclusion

Do we then glorify God by enjoying Him as Christian Hedonism teaches? Surely, there is truth in this point because our delight in God reflects His delight in Himself. But it seems to do better justice to the 3<sup>rd</sup> commandment (honoring God's name) to find our joy by seeking His glory at the chief and ultimate goal in all that we think, say, and do.

## Discussion on the meaning of joy in the Christian life

There are pleasures in sin

We are to count it all joy when you fall into various trials

If we have joy in severe trials, then joy is not equal to the common notion of being happy. It is more like contentment. We do weep with those who weep. Thus, the duty to "rejoice always" is not rejoice maximally; there are choices to be made for less joy. Now that may be our "pleasure"; we can say that of anything: it is my pleasure to suffer for the Lord, but this is hardly seeking the greatest amount of pleasure as hedonism suggests. Our joy is more like the caboose of a train of obedience for the glory of God, we will have greater and lesser pleasure day in and out as God chooses to give it to us for our good and His glory. The conscience needs to be rightly informed as to what pleasure is and pleasure needs to be kept in balance against the great goal of glorifying God; what God gives is more the by-product of our ultimate goal rather than a goal we seek to possess in order to rightly (in all cases with pleasure as a standard) glorify God.