

THE POWER OF LIVING FOR A GREATER PLEASURE

Introduction: Help From History

In a May 1734 sermon titled “Youth And The Pleasures Of Piety” the New England pastor and author Jonathan Edwards made the following assertion as part of his closing application (language is updated):

By this teaching one of the greatest objections that youth have against true faith in God is demolished. One of the main things that prevents youth from embracing true faith in God is their pursuit of pleasure. Their goal is to spend their youth years in pleasure and they believe that this will be lost if they trust in God and follow his way. They look upon the biblical way of life as dull, boring, and depressing. So, if they follow Christ, they must give up on pleasure. Yet, what I have just taught shows just how false these notions are and that the reality is this: True faith in God, rather than removing pleasure, will be the most direct way to find it! In fact, it is the only way to find true pleasure. The pleasure found in any other way of living cannot be compared to the pleasure found in God.¹

The main point Edwards had in this sermon was to show that true pleasure can be found only in God and his way. This godly pleasure is so much greater than that which can be found apart from God Edwards words the comparison of the two in the following provocative manner. In following God, pleasures may be found that are “vastly sweeter... more exquisitely delighting, and are of a more satisfying nature...that exceed the pleasures of the vain, sensual youth, as much as gold and pearls do dirt and dung...” In other words, the pleasures God offers are so much more, so much greater than what is found in youthful sin and lust that it is like comparing gold and pearls to dirt and manure!

It was this same way of thinking about God’s greater pleasure and our affection for this pleasure that led the late 18th to early 19th century pastor Thomas Chalmers to put forth the following about fighting sin (language updated):

There are two ways in which anyone interested in being moral at all can attempt to rid their heart of a love for the world (or that which is immoral). First, they can try to focus upon the empty and/or destructive nature of such immorality with the purpose that the heart will be moved away from desiring such objects or actions. The other option is to look at another greater object, such as God, and to realize that the second object with its way of life, is far

*better. In other words, in this second approach a person replaces an old affection with a newer and better affection. My purpose in this sermon is to show that in light of how God has made us, the first approach will not work. Only the second approach is sufficient for turning the heart's affection away from that which wrong and which dominates it.*²

Both Edwards and Chalmers argued that it is not only true that in God we find greater pleasure than what we do apart from him, but that in order to pursue the godly life, we must focus our hearts and minds upon that greater pleasure so that we can overcome the world and the things in the world that oppose God (1 John 2:15). This is not only true for helping others, including youth, to pursue God, but also for fighting the fight of faith (1 Tim. 6:12; 2 Tim. 4:7) in our own heart and life.

Yet, are Edwards and Chalmers in line with biblical teaching? The answer is a resounding “Yes!” Let’s consider some texts which demonstrate this.

Getting To The Heart Of The Matter: Help From Scripture

In the book of Proverbs we find a collection of wisdom teaching and sayings, mostly by Solomon, that is designed primarily for training the young person for skill in godliness. Much of the collection focuses upon the superiority of the way of wisdom as opposed to the way of foolishness. As such, we could survey the entire book and prove our point. Yet, an approach that takes less time and space and that goes more to the heart of the matter is to compare two passages.

The first passage is the text that Edwards based his sermon on, Proverbs 24:13-14. That text reads: “My son, eat honey, for it is good, and the drippings of the honeycomb are sweet to your taste. Know that wisdom is such to your soul; if you find it, there will be a future, and your hope will not be cut off.”³ To the disciple, the child, or the student, the wise teacher or parent teaches that God’s way of living that is in line with godly skill and that comes from his Word should be desired and enjoyed as much as someone enjoys

honey—finding it sweet. When we come to see that the way of godliness is so pleasurable and, as a result, we follow it, in this way there is a good future and our hope for success and pleasure in life will not be disappointed. This is precisely the point Edwards makes and it proves also the point that Chalmers makes—namely that the best way to move self or another person toward godliness is by focusing upon God’s superior pleasure.

The second passage that gets to the heart of the matter is Proverbs 9:13-18. There we read:

The woman Folly is loud; she is seductive and knows nothing. She sits at the door of her house; she takes a seat on the highest places of the town, calling to those who pass by, who are going straight on their way, ‘Whoever is simple, let him turn in here!’ And to him who lacks sense she says, ‘Stolen water is sweet, and bread eaten in secret is pleasant.’ But he does not know that the dead are there, that her guests are in the depths of [the grave].

The “woman Folly” is a picture of an adulteress who is luring unsuspecting men into her place as a trap. Such a picture is used not only because such traps do include sexual sin (See Proverbs 5), but also because “woman Folly” is the foolish ungodly-way-of-life presented as if it were a person. Such a way of life and the pleasures it offers has a way of attracting the uninformed and the unsuspecting into its ways—promising a wonderful banquet or party, but the end result is that all the guests invited end up in the grave. The grave stands for the realm of sin and death that is characterized by destruction and enslavement.

More specific examples of what is being taught here would include such situations as these: A young Christian woman fears being alone and rather than trusting God to bring along someone who loves God, she becomes involved with an unbeliever who promises pleasure and happiness, only to find herself years later lonely and grieving because her children have rejected Christ and her husband wants nothing to do with her faith; a

college student, wanting to fit in with his fraternity begins to engage in the party life because it offers fun and acceptance, only to find himself two years later enslaved to alcohol and narcotics; or a teen male discovers the wonder of easily-accessible on-line pornography that brings such intense short-term pleasure, only to find himself fifteen years later divorced from his wife and estranged from his children because his enslavement ended up in multiple affairs.

These two passages out of Proverbs illustrate how we personally are to fight sin and how we are to help others fight it: We not only focus upon the pain, devastation, enslavement, and destruction of sin, but we move beyond this to focus upon the greater pleasure we find in our Savior.

Such was the approach Moses took when it came to deciding whether or not he would lead Israel out of Egypt. Hebrews 11:24-26 reads: “By faith Moses, when he was grown up, refused to be called the son of Pharaoh's daughter, choosing rather to be mistreated with the people of God than to enjoy the fleeting pleasures of sin. He considered the reproach of Christ greater wealth than the treasures of Egypt, for he was looking to the reward.” Notice that Moses did not conclude the ungodly way was not pleasurable. It is pleasurable in a temporary manner, often with destructive results. Yet, there is a greater and more lasting pleasure he desired!

Yet, if God provides greater pleasure, if the way of wisdom truly is sweeter and more pleasurable than the way of sin, how is that so? Here is a sampling of the ways that is true.

The Greater Pleasure God Offers

This is designed merely to help us think along these lines and also to look for the greater pleasures God offers as we read the Bible. There far more that could be said.

- God’s way of wisdom, as we saw above, is sweet and delightful as honey to the taste and the opposite way ends up in the realm of sin, death, and destruction. Prov. 9:13-18; 24:13-14
- The solemn bond and agreement (the covenant) God makes with us, his people, to save us and to be our God, along with the resultant commands he gives to us to keep are for our own good. Dt. 4:40; 5:29, 33; 6:3, 18, 24; 10:12-13; 11:21
- God promises us blessing when we honor and follow our parents and mentors who show us the way of wisdom. Ex. 20:12; Eph. 6:1-3
- Part of God’s covenant he makes with his people is that he will not turn away from doing good to us. In fact, he will show us “the immeasurable riches of his grace in kindness toward us in Christ Jesus” and this in age after age to come—i.e. for eternity. Jer. 32:40; Eph. 2:7
- The plans that God has for us, his people, are for our wholeness and not for evil, to give us a future and hope. Jer. 29:11
- God has promised to make a new covenant with us, his people, a covenant by which we come into an intimate knowledge of him—we are his bride—and so he will transform us from the inside out by his Spirit so we can carry out his blessed Word. This is all fulfilled in those who are in Christ. Jer. 31:31-34; Ezek. 36:25-27; Hos. 2:14-20; Heb. 8:8-12
- God has promised to be with, to surround, and to protect his people always in the ultimate way—meaning he will do all that is needed for us, his people, to know him, persevere in him, be protected from the destruction of the enemy, and eventually to come home to him for eternity. Josh. 1:9; Pss. 27:1-5; 91; 125:1-2; 118:5-8; Prov. 18:10; John 10:27-30; Rom. 8:31-39; Heb. 13:5-6; Rev. 21:5-7
- God is so committed to us it is as if he has us engraved on his hand. Is. 49:16
- This is so much the case that God has sent his Son to die for the sheep and, as a result, our great and glorious shepherd provides for us, nourishes us, sustains us, goes with us, leads us in the blessed paths of his righteousness for the glory of his name, prepares a glorious rich banqueting table before us in the most difficult of circumstances, and lavishes upon us his goodness and blesses. Ps. 23; John 10:15, 29-30

- God blesses us, his people (those who fear him, keep his covenant, and remember to do his commands), with many benefits: forgiveness of sins, ultimate healing of our bodies/diseases, crowning us with his eternal magnificent steadfast love and mercy, satisfying us with good, his righteousness and justice, and also making known his ways and acts to us to build our faith and worship and joy. Ps. 103
- Someday Jesus, the Son of God, Second Person Of the Trinity, will come again to take us to be where he is and this can happen because he has redeemed us through his life, death, and resurrection. In addition to the glorious blessing of seeing him and being with our Lord and Savior, he will also bless us by removing sin, death, pain, and mourning. John 14:3; Titus 2:13; 1 John 3:1-2; Rev. 21:3-7
- God has promised that no good thing will he withhold from those who walk uprightly, that is those who are in Jesus Christ. Ps. 84:10; Eph. 1:4
- God has promised that he orchestrates all things together for good for those who love him and are called according to his purpose. What is more, he even loves us enough to bring hard things into our lives to grow us, correct us, make us stronger, and for the purpose of leading to greater glory for Christ and greater glory and joy for us in the age to come. This all brings joy in the present that cannot be put into words! What an amazing pleasure to know that God works for our joy through our hard times! This is true for all who through faith are united to Jesus Christ. Prov. 3:11-12; Rom. 8:18, 28; 2 Cor. 4:16-17; 1 Peter 1:6-8
- It should be no surprise that in God's presence is fullness of joy and at his right hand are pleasures forevermore for all of us, those who are his people! Ps. 16:11
- God loves us in Jesus Christ in such a way that he is truly for us, no one can be against us in any ultimate way, no one can bring a charge against us, he will give us all we need, and no one can separate us from this love. Rom. 8:31-39
- All these promises of God are fulfilled in Jesus Christ, his perfectly obedient Son who has satisfied divine judgment in our place. This means that even when we fall short (which we do), he is our perfect advocate, his blood continually cleanses us from our sin, and we have all God's glorious blessings in the beloved Son, the Second Adam who perfectly passed the test in our place, and so there is now no more condemnation for those of us in Christ Jesus! Mt. 3:17-4:11; Rom. 8:1; Rom. 5:18-19; 2 Cor. 1:20; 1 John 1:7
- What an amazing pleasure that God has given to us in Jesus Christ this eternal life that shapes even our reality now and this is all a free gift. Rom. 6:23; Eph. 2:8-9
- All these promises belong to us because God caused us to be born again to a living hope, which includes an imperishable, undefiled, unfading inheritance—an inheritance that consists of being with God for eternity in a perfected soul and

body, in a perfected New Heaven and New earth, where there are forever, growing, and full joys and pleasures. Ps. 16:11; 1 Pt. 1:3-4

- Out of his goodness toward us, God has promised blessing and grace to those who follow his way, his pattern for marriage and family. Apart from him, truly our labor in these areas is in vain. Gen. 2:18-24; Ps. 127:1-3; Eph. 5:22-33
- Jesus commands our faithful, abiding, fruit-bearing discipleship, our following of him for our joy. John 15:1-16
- God promises to hear our prayers that our joy may be full and he will be glorified. John 14:13; 16:24
- Though the wrath of God is eternally revealed from heaven against the unrighteous, the unsaved, those who refuse Jesus Christ and who refuse to worship the true God (Rom. 1:18f.; 2 Thes. 1:7-9), nevertheless, for those of us who are in Jesus Christ, God saves us from his wrath. John 3:36; 5:24
- What a glorious life to live in Jesus Christ as God's workmanship, since the fruit of his Spirit in us is love, joy, peace, patience, kindness, goodness, faithfulness, gentleness, and self-control—as opposed to the works that typify those without the Spirit of Christ: sexual immorality, impurity, sensuality, idolatry, sorcery, enmity, strife, jealousy, fits of anger, rivalries, dissensions, divisions, envy, drunkenness, orgies, and things like these. Gal. 5:19-23; Eph. 2:10
- Is it any wonder in light of who God is (eternal God, Creator, Sustainer, Lord, Savior, and so much more) and what he has mercifully done to save us that we are called to delight ourselves in him (Ps. 37:4), to taste and see he is good (Ps. 34:8), to trust in him with all our heart (Prov. 3:5), and to love him (Mt. 22:37)?

How To Find God's Greater Pleasure

1. It begins with trusting Jesus Christ as our Savior. John 3:16; 2 Cor. 1:20
2. It continues with living in such a way we continually trust in Jesus Christ that we might bear fruit for his glory as his disciples. This means we must obey him out of love for him and fueled by our faith in him. This is the way of joy. John 14:15; 15:1-16; Rom. 1:5; Gal. 5:6
3. Though we rest in Jesus Christ with the reality there is now no more condemnation for those of us in Jesus Christ (we will not face God's eternal judgment for sin), nevertheless, we still understand there can be consequences for our sinful choices, consequences that will diminish our level of fellowship with God, as well as our enjoyment of it. To think otherwise is to mock God, to act as if what he says is not true. Gal. 6:7; 1 John 1:8-9

4. We should remember that from the beginning of time at the core of Satan's schemes toward us has been his plan to get us to doubt God, his goodness, and his superior ways, and instead to choose substitutes for God, idols and gods that promise to satisfy and bring pleasure, but do nothing but destroy and enslave. So, where we seek to find our pleasure and satisfaction (God or elsewhere) is no small thing. Gen. 3:1-19; Hosea; 1 Cor. 10:7; Gal. 5:20; Col. 3:5; 1 John 5:21
5. We must remember that true and eternal life consists in knowing God the Father and the Son whom he sent (John 17:3). As such, we must value growing in the experience of the grace and also in the intimate knowledge of our Savior, realizing this is how we find our greatest, best, and most lasting pleasure in him. Ps. 27:4; Jer. 9:23-24; 2 Peter 3:18
6. We must remember the ultimate pleasure God offers to us is not found in circumstances, material wealth, or relationships (though God can and does give us pleasure in all these). The greatest and most lasting pleasure is found in God. Mt. 6:19-21, 33; 16:26
7. Finally, we must set our love and affections ultimately upon God, not the world system that opposes him—desires of the flesh, desires of the eyes, and pride in possessions. 1 John 2:15-17; 5:1-5, 21

¹ Taken from the Works Of Jonathan Edwards Online: edwards.yale.edu.

² This is the introduction to a sermon by Chalmers titled "The Expulsive Power Of A New Affection," based on 1 John 2:15.

³ All Scripture quotations are taken from The English Standard Version.