

PROVERBS 3:13-20

CHRISTIAN HEDONISM (2)

GOD RE-DIRECTS THE PURSUIT OF HAPPINESS



FIRST BYRON CHRISTIAN REFORMED CHURCH

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INTRODUCTION

Problem

People pursue happiness in all the wrong places and in all the wrong ways. The results are:

- They cannot find happiness in their way of life
- They cannot imagine happiness in the Christian way of life.

Solution

If this is true of you, I want to help you see that you are heading in the wrong direction, and I want to help you turn in the right direction.

If you are a Christian and heading in the right direction, but you've slowed down, broken down, or you're thinking of turning back, I want to confirm you in the right way and help you move forward with new momentum.

CONTEXT

Remember the background to this passage. God is calling us to enroll in Wisdom University by highlighting the benefits of being a student in his school:

- Moral benefits of Wisdom (2:5-21)
- Material benefits of Wisdom (3:1-12)
- **Emotional benefits of Wisdom** (3:13-20)
- Social benefits of Wisdom (3:21-35)

Last week we began to look at the emotional benefits of Christianity. There are a number of these—peace, love, joy, hope—but we decided to focus on happiness, as that's the emphasis of this passage, and also the most common emotion that drives and motivates people. We laid out the series as follows:

1. God approves the pursuit of happiness
2. **God re-directs the pursuit of happiness**
3. God satisfies the pursuit of happiness

In the first sermon last week, we saw that God gave the desire for happiness, approves of it, and addresses it in the Gospel. Now, we want to turn to the second sermon, **God re-directs the pursuit of happiness**. He doesn't stop it or condemn it, but rather encourages it in a new way and direction. God does not say, "Stop wanting happiness!" but rather, "Get it in me." We want to study what that re-direction means and looks like.

Proverbs 3:13-20 contrasts two sources of happiness: wealth and Wisdom. It's not saying that wealth is the only alternative to Wisdom. It's focusing on the most common alternative to Wisdom, the most common way people pursue happiness. But it's a sample of the other ways people pursue happiness: pleasure, power, popularity, education, drugs, etc. Let's look at this happiness competition between wealth and Wisdom and see how God uses it to re-direct our pursuit of happiness.

Before we go on, I want to make clear that the Bible does not condemn wealth as sinful, but only the idolizing of it and the misuse of it. The Bible, church history, and personal experience remind us that God gives some of his people wealth because they are able to handle it and because they will use it to serve God and others by employing people, supporting charities, investing in businesses, helping people out, and giving to the Lord's cause.



So what's the wrong direction?



1. THE WAY OF WEALTH IS THE WRONG DIRECTION

(13) Happy is the man who finds wisdom, and the man who gains understanding...(17) Her ways are ways of pleasantness, and all her paths are peace. (18) She is a tree of life to those who take hold of her, And happy are all who retain her.

Solomon starts and finishes by declaring the extraordinary happiness of the way of Wisdom. This is the first of five beatitudes in Proverbs 1-9 (3:13, 18, 33, 8:32, 34). We hear echoes of it in Jesus's beatitudes (Matthew 5:1-12) and in his happiness competition in Matthew 13:44-46.

In between these verses, Solomon engages in a "bigger than...better than" competition. Children, I'm sure you've done this before. You maybe say to your friends, "I'm bigger than you, I'm faster than you." Or perhaps, "My Beyblade goes longer than yours," or "My Easter Egg is bigger than yours." We're competitive aren't we.

Well, that's what Solomon is doing here. He's saying, "Let's have a competition, a happiness competition." On one side is Wisdom and on the other side is wealth. Wisdom represents Jesus Christ, and wealth represents all Christ-less happiness. Let's read verses 14-16 and then watch a slow-motion replay of the competition because it will be over very quickly.

For her proceeds are better than the profits of silver, and her gain than fine gold. She is more precious than rubies, and all the things you may desire cannot compare with her. Length of days is in her right hand, in her left hand riches and honor (14-16).

That was quick wasn't it. We need to slow it down to see all the ways that Wisdom beat wealth.

Wisdom is more profitable

Her proceeds are better than the profits of silver, and her gain than fine gold (14). Here's a huge rate of return, a massive dividend. It's in your interests to receive this interest (Psalm 119:72, 127; 19:10). Isn't Jesus more interesting and interest-giving than the stockmarket?

Wisdom is more valuable

She is more precious than rubies (15a). Some investments pay good dividends, while others are better for increasing in value over the long-term (Job 28:18; Prov. 8:11; 20:15). Doesn't Jesus get more valuable, more precious to you day by day? It's not just what he gives but who he is that gets more and more valuable.

Wisdom is more satisfying

All the things you may desire cannot compare with her (15b). Our hearts are desire-factories. We have a vast capacity of desiring. But how often is that desire satisfied? It's like a factory running its machines 24/7/365, and all these materials are being delivered, but nothing comes out at the end. God doesn't tell us to turn off our desire-factories, but, rather, bring Wisdom in and just see how much satisfaction is produced. Doesn't Jesus satisfy you more than anything else?

Wisdom is more generous

"Length of days is in her right hand, in her left hand riches and honor" (16). Wisdom stretches out both hands with quantity and quality of life. Isn't Jesus so kind? Is there a more generous person in the universe? Wealth couldn't keep up and has now disappeared.



Wisdom is more pleasant

Her ways are ways of pleasantness (17). "Pleasantness" is a combination of profit and pleasure. We're going to look at this pleasure more closely in the second half of the sermon. Let me just mention here that John Piper calls the believer a "Christian hedonist," meaning a "Christian pleasure-seeker." He wasn't the first to use such language. Before him, Matthew Henry used the Greek word for hedonism to describe the Christian's experience in this verse. Henry also described the Christian as a "Holy Epicure." Like Piper he takes a secular term for a worldly philosophy (Epicureanism) and Christianizes it. Both men are trying to explain and illustrate what Solomon is claiming here. Doesn't Jesus give you more pleasure than treasure?

Wisdom is more peaceful

And all her paths are peace (17b). I was listening to a wealthy man speaking recently and he basically said that he had far less worries when he was poor. People think wealth will give them a sense of security, but it just makes you buy more security. Jesus can give us peace, even in the midst of the storm?

Wisdom is more fruitful

"She is a tree of life to those who take hold of her, and happy are all who retain her." The tree of life appears at the beginning and end of the Bible (Gen 2:9; Rev 2:7; 22:2, 14) and is a symbol for Christ. Here, in the middle of the Bible, we are reminded that in Christ we can still access this happy tree and enjoy her fruit.

The Result

So, how did the competition turn out? Wisdom is more profitable, more valuable, more satisfying, more generous, more pleasant, more peaceful, and more fruitful. Wisdom wins in every category. I think we could say "Game over!" Indeed, "Game, set, and match." Or, as they say at the Wimbledon finals, "Game, set, and championship."

APPLICATION

♥ If the game is over, why are you still playing the game? It's like the football field is empty, the stadium is quiet, everyone's gone home, and you're still out on the field trying to score.

Why you still out there? Is it because you've believed the Devil's lies about the happiness of wealth and about the misery of Wisdom? You're on the losing side. Will you not join with the winners? The Devil is saying, "No, look at what you will lose!" Wisdom is saying, "Yes, look at what you will gain!"

♥ Wisdom extends her hands to you but you have to reach out and take her. The Tree of Life offers you fruit but you have to take it. Grab it while you can.

♥ Maybe you are tempted to let go of Wisdom. Maybe you are believing the Devil's lies. Remember "Happy are all who retain her." Give her up and you give up happiness. Cling more tightly than ever before. Get a grip and don't let go. Hold Wisdom tight and close.

OUR SINS THEY ARE MANY,
HIS WISDOM IS MORE.



If Christless happiness is the wrong way,
what's the right way?



2. THE WAY OF WISDOM IS THE RIGHT DIRECTION

What pleasures does the Way of Wisdom offer us. It starts with the person who is Wisdom, Jesus Christ, and he brings many pleasures along with him.

God's Wisdom

God's Wisdom is identified in the Bible as Jesus Christ (1 Cor. 1:24; Col. 2:3; Matt. 11:19). When Proverbs speaks of Wisdom, it is therefore describing the Son of God (we can see that even more clearly in Proverbs 8).

Why is Jesus called the Wisdom of God? It's not primarily because he knows everything. Neither is it because, when he was on earth, he always knew what to say, when to say it, and how to say it. It's because he is THE solution to the greatest problem humanity has ever faced – sin. He is THE answer to the greatest question humanity has ever asked – What must I do to be saved? He is THE key to the hardest puzzle we've ever encountered – How can God be just and justify the ungodly? He is the one who makes the invisible God visible (John 14:9; Heb 1:3).

The more we learn about the Wisdom of God, the more we are stunned, the more we are in awe. He's the happiest subject we could ever study, the happiest person we could ever know, and the person who makes us the happiest people in the world.

God's Word

God's Word has produced more happiness in the world than all other books put together. Its Gospel good news is so beautiful and satisfying. It's an ever-flowing fountain of refreshing wisdom. It rejoices the heart (Psa. 119:111, 162; 19:8; Jer. 15:16; Luke 2:10). We learn so much about God, salvation, the world, ourselves. It's so enjoyable. It's a book we can read again and again, and the more we read it, the more we find joy in it.

God's Worship

Perhaps at first, when we become Christians, worship is not such a source of joy. We find joy in sermons and books and lectures as we learn and grow in knowledge. But as we grow in faith and maturity, we begin to find worship bubbling up inside which has to be released in adoration and praise. To do that privately is a joy, with family a greater joy, with God's family in God's house an even greater joy. That's why it's so painful to be apart on Sundays isn't it? Worshipping God expands, thrills, and excites our hearts like nothing else.

God's Works

God has given us many of his works to find delight in. Each of these is a sermon in itself:

- Work of **Creation**: The more we see Christ's beauty, the more we see beauty in his creation.
- Work of **Providence**: The more we see Christ's wisdom, the more we see wisdom in his providence.
- Work of **Redemption**: The more we see Christ's grace, the more we see grace in God's salvation.



God's Ways

Proverbs 3:17 specifically mentions the peace, pleasure, and profit of God's ways, all of God's ways. What are God's ways? Again, each of these is a sermon in itself, but for this sermon, we can only give a bird's eye view.

The ways of obedience: There are ten of these, summarized in the ten commandments. Those who spend their day meditating on God's law and doing it are truly happy (Psalm 1:1-2). Read Psalm 119 and see how many times obeying God's law is linked to happiness.

The way of service: We find great joy in serving God, not just doing explicitly Christian work, but doing our own work for the Lord's glory and by the Lord's power.

The way of sacrifice: The Lord loves a cheerful giver and we love it when we can give cheerfully too. Even giving up our comfort for Christ's sake can be a means of joy (Matt. 5:10-12; Acts 5:41).

APPLICATION

♥ Do you have any solution for your greatest problem—sin? Do you have any answer to the greatest question in the world—What must I do to be saved? Do you have the key to the hardest puzzle you've ever encountered—How can God be just and merciful at the same time? Why not ask Wisdom to be your solution, your answer, your key?

♥ Read Psalm 119 and count all the times the Psalmist rejoices in God's Word. Pray for joy as you read God's Word, especially if it's become a dead book to you. God's Word can give you joy even when everything else is falling apart.

♥ Confess that you have taken public worship for granted and that you have not used it as you should have. Plead with God that he would restore the joy of this again (Ps. 122:1). In the meantime, find joy in listening to Worship songs. It will keep your joy-fuel topped up.

♥ Take time to pause and enjoy the beauty of God's works of creation. Ask him to help you see wisdom in his providence. See the beauty of God's grace in regeneration, justification, adoption, sanctification, and glorification. View with pleasure, God in his three persons and God in his attributes.

♥ Compare the pleasure of obedience with the misery of disobedience; the pleasure of service with the joy of being served; the pleasure of giving to the pleasure of receiving.

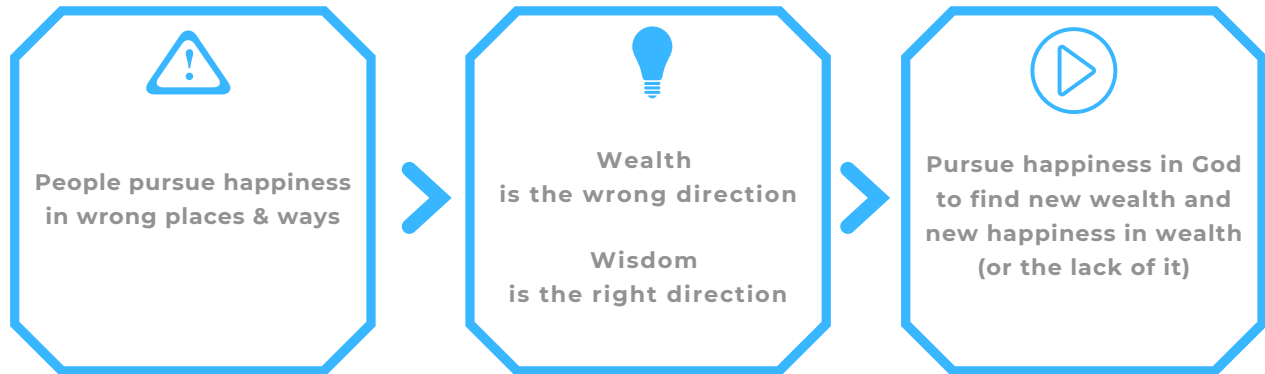
♥ If God has given you wealth and it's making you miserable, God shows you here how you can find joy by putting it second to Wisdom and putting it in the service of Wisdom.

♥ If God has given you poverty and it's making you miserable, God shows you here how to find joy in something far better than Wisdom, that unemployment and stockmarket crashes cannot take away.

SECULAR HAPPINESS IS GODLESS,
BUT CHRISTIAN HAPPINESS IS GOD-FULL



CONCLUSION



FURTHER STUDY

Online Articles

- [Our Happy Book: Finding Joy in God's Word](#) by David Murray
- [Are you Chasing Happiness or Holiness?](#) by Tony Reinke
- [The Simple Reason why so many Christians are Miserable](#) by Kevin Halloran
- [Designed for Smiling](#) by Mark Loughridge

Books

- [Happiness](#) by Randy Alcorn. See my review [here](#).
- [Choosing Gratitude: Your Journey to Joy](#) by Nancy Demoss Wolgemuth.
- [The Pleasures of God](#) by John Piper
- [The Pleasantness of a Religious Life](#) by Matthew Henry
- [The Happy Christian](#) by David Murray

Discussion Questions

1. What competes with Wisdom in your life? How can you help Wisdom to win?
2. How did you seek happiness apart from Wisdom and how did it work for you?
3. What other ways would you show the superiority of Wisdom to someone?
4. What do you think of the description "Christian Hedonist" (John Piper) or "Holy Epicure" (Matthew Henry)?
5. What is the greatest pleasure in Christianity for you?
6. Describe the ways you have experienced pleasure in: God's Wisdom, God's Word, God's Worship, God's Works, and God's Ways.

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GOD RE-DIRECTS THE PURSUIT OF HAPPINESS



People seek happiness in all the wrong places and ways

- Cannot find happiness in their way of life
- Cannot imagine happiness in Christian way of life

Biblical answer?



The way of wealth is the wrong direction

- Wisdom more profitable
- Wisdom more valuable
- Wisdom more satisfying
- Wisdom more generous
- Wisdom more pleasant
- Wisdom more peaceful
- Wisdom more fruitful

**OUR SINS THEY ARE MANY,
HIS WISDOM IS MORE.**

Where do I turn?



Pursue happiness in God to find new wealth, and also new happiness in wealth (or the lack of it)



The way of Wisdom is the right direction

- God's Wisdom
- God's Word
- God's Worship
- God's Works
- God's Ways

**SECULAR HAPPINESS IS GODLESS
BUT CHRISTIAN HAPPINESS IS GOD-FULL**

Action?

THE SLIGHTEST FRAGMENT OF TRUTH IS MORE VALUABLE THAN A DIAMOND... YOU ARE SO MUCH THE RICHER FOR EVERY TRUTH YOU KNOW; YOU WILL BE SO MUCH THE POORER FOR EVERY TRUTH YOU FORGET.
CHARLES SPURGEON



CHRIST HAD TROUBLE, THAT WE MIGHT HAVE PEACE; PAIN, THAT WE MIGHT HAVE PLEASURE; SORROW, THAT WE MIGHT HAVE JOY.
MATTHEW HENRY