

## **A Cheerful Heart**

Proverbs 17:22; 1 Timothy 6:17

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Greg L. Price

People spend billions of dollars each year on medicines, drugs, and supplements in order to maximize the quality of their physical life. I can certainly testify through my recent bout with kidney stones, how I literally went (in a matter of a few minutes) from a physical state of agony to that of bliss after they gave me a couple doses of strong pain medication. How much we have for which to be thankful to the Lord. Medicines, drugs, and supplements do not heal us (in themselves), but are the means ordained by God through which He brings about healing in our frail, weak bodies. Thus, we ought never to despise whatever lawful means the Lord uses to sustain and promote our physical life.

However, let us never forget that we are not only body but that we are also soul. The Lord has so mysteriously and wondrously united body and soul together that what happens in the body can and does affect the soul, and what happens in the soul can and does affect the body. Thus, the disposition of the soul ought not to be left out of the picture when considering the health of the body. For example, it is well recognized that uncontrolled stress within our mind has serious effects upon the body ranging from headaches to more serious diseases. This truth is not new, but was clearly taught by God through King Solomon in Proverbs 17:22: "A merry heart doeth good like a medicine: but a broken spirit drieth the bones." Since Christians should be desirous of being the most effective servants of the Lord possible (in both body and soul), let us consider from our text (1) A Divine Prescription for Good Health (Proverbs 17:22a); (2) A Divine Warning for Poor Health (Proverbs 17:22b).

### **I. A Divine Prescription for Good Health (Proverbs 17:22a).**

A. God in effect says, "If you would enjoy good health, you must not only use medicine and supplements as needed, but you must also use a merry heart."

B. Let us look more closely at what a merry heart is by considering what it is not and then what it is.

#### **1. What a Merry Heart Is Not.**

a. A merry heart as used here by Solomon is not mere laughter. Laughter does not necessarily equal a merry heart.

(1) For laughter on the outside may conceal great sorrow and pain of heart on the inside (Proverbs 14:13). You may laugh out of embarrassment if you have fallen in front of a crowd of people. You may laugh if you are very nervous with others. This does not mean you have a merry heart.

(2) Laughter may also be used in excess or at inappropriate times (James 4:9). If you laugh when you ought to mourn, or if you laugh when you ought to worship in reverence, or if you laugh when you are corrected, you are not manifesting the merry heart of which God here speaks.

(3) Laughter may be directed at or the result of immoral behavior. Laughter may be the result of not taking the promise of God seriously (Genesis 18:13); or it may be directed at mocking the righteous or that which is righteous (Psalm 22:7); or directed at one who is drunk (Proverbs 29:9). Dear ones, how much of the humor of the world (whether jokes on TV or at the workplace) either has the audience laughing at that which is righteous or laughing at that which is wicked. Laughter is a gift from God, but it must never be used to imply your approval of that which is immoral. Yes, it is true that God laughs at the wicked (according to Psalm 2:4), but it is clear that it is not with any approval of their sin, but rather with complete disapproval of their vain attempts to overthrow his Anointed One whom He has seated upon His throne.

Pharaoh imagined that by drowning the Israelite males, he had found a way to root their name from the earth; but when at the same time, his own daughter, in his own court, gave princely education to Moses, Israel's deliverer, did not God laugh?... Oh, what are his frowns, if his smiles be so terrible" (Thomas Adams cited in *The Treasury of David*, 1:15)!

Certainly, in the same sense we may laugh at the vain attempts of man to overthrow the kingdom of Christ.

b. Furthermore, a merry heart as used here by Solomon is not mere feasting—it is not merely throwing a party where there is plenty of food and booze (Daniel 5:1ff).

c. Moreover, a biblical merry heart is not immersing oneself in worldly pleasure (Ecclesiastes 2:1-11). There is a thin outward veneer of merriment, but an ocean of emptiness within. Lawful recreations must be used in a lawful way if they are to bring joy. Here are some guidelines we should follow if we would have true joy from our recreations.

(1) Our recreations must not be contrary to the Word of God. They must not violate any of the commandments of God.

(2) Our recreations must be done to the glory and honor of God. Do our recreations help us to be more effective in serving the Lord and our neighbor or do they have a mere entertainment value?

(3) Our recreations must not give an implicit or explicit approval of sin. I would submit, dear ones, that we should not invite into our home actors or actresses (in the form of movies) that perform lewd acts, blaspheme the name of the Lord, or break other commandments of God if we would not invite our neighbors into our homes to do the same thing (the same may be said of the music to which we listen).

(4) Our recreations are to be mere diversions for a brief time (and not to consume our lives). They are to help us to be more effective in our lawful callings and to give us a rest in order that we might be ready to apply ourselves to our jobs.

d. Finally, a merry heart according to our text is not a happiness that fluctuates with every trial and affliction like the thermometer which changes due to the constant fluctuating temperatures that each day may bring. A merry heart is more like a thermostat which regulates the temperatures in our lives when trials or blessings come our way.

## 2. What a Merry Heart Is.

a. A merry heart is a holy heart. One cannot be truly merry, joyous, and cheerful without having a pure heart and a clean conscience before God. True joy of heart can only be experienced when one knows and receives the love of God who rescued such vile sinners as we are by meting out His infinite justice and wrath against our Mediator, His only begotten Son. A merry heart is only manifested in one who daily sorrows over the sin committed against God and one's neighbor, daily lives in the forgiveness of Christ, daily endeavors to crucify the flesh and its evil desires, daily worships and communes with Jesus Christ in worship, and daily grows in the grace and the knowledge of Christ.

b. A merry heart is a thankful heart. One cannot be truly merry who is filled with murmuring and complaining against the trial and afflictions God has brought into his/her life. To rejoice in the Lord and to complain against the Lord (and His providence) cannot peacefully coexist within the same heart at the same time. You rob yourself of a merry heart whenever you choose to complain rather than to be thankful. When you are tempted to complain against God's providence, rather list 5 things for which you are thankful to the Lord. When this becomes a habit in your life, you will experience a continual feast of joy in your heart.

c. A merry heart is a contented heart. Only those who (like Paul in Philippians 4:11) are learning and growing in their contentment in all circumstances can enjoy the blessing of a merry heart.

What would it take in your life to be truly content? If it is anything other than Christ, you have deceived yourself. For everything in this world is changeable and perishable except Christ.

d. A merry heart is a humble heart. Pride and selfishness lead only to pain and misery for it is truly an empty and sorrowful existence to be wrapped up in yourself. Where there is no self-sacrificial service to Christ and one's neighbor, there can be no true joy. For in such a case, everything around you exists for your happiness and since nothing around you can completely satisfy you, you will never know what it is to be cheerful simply because God is pleased or honored in what you do. You will never know how you can be merry in the gifts and graces of others. You will rather simply bemoan the fact that you don't have the same gifts or graces as others and rather find yourself in a perpetual competition with others. You will not know God's divine pleasure in using your talent for His glory to extend His kingdom upon earth.

e. A merry heart is a believing heart. Only those can be merry in heart that cling to Christ and His promises. For they do not have to put their fingers into the wounds of his hands to know that He is the almighty risen Savior who is able to do infinitely more than they even can imagine. They do not have to see the fulfillment of the promise before they believe Christ is trustworthy and will unfailingly keep His word, for He would cease to exist if He lied. They look to the tokens He has left us in His oath, His past faithfulness, and His sacraments.

f. A merry heart is a hopeful heart. When everything all around you seems to fall apart, if you would be cheerful and have a continual feast of joy in your soul, you must look in hope to the amazing glory that awaits you in heaven where you will be given even a higher place of honor than the angels. Samuel Rutherford has truly written in his Letters:

I wonder many times that ever a child of God should have a sad heart, considering what his Lord is preparing for him.

C. Such a merry heart is like a medicine to the health of the body (and not simply to the health of the soul).

1. Dear ones, you may become so wrapped up in the mere duty of your work that you lose the joy of your work. You are not to be like the Pharisees who conceived of much to be done, but little or nothing to be enjoyed in what you do. You are not to be a gloomy people whose seriousness about life allows little or no rays of cheerfulness, appropriate laughter, and smiling countenances into your everyday existence. Yes, you may be busy. Yes, you may have a very stressful job to perform. If such is the case, how much more you need to work on having a merry heart, lest the care and stress of your work actually works you into an early grave and sends you away from Christ rather than to Christ.

2. One last comment before moving on to our final point. How do we reconcile what Solomon says here with what he says in Ecclesiastes 7:3?

a. First, the merry heart of the godly is not opposed to the sorrowful heart of the godly. There is no contradiction here at all. For there can be no true joy in the heart of the godly if they do not first know what it is to mourn over their own sin and the sin of others. Jesus said, "Blessed are they that mourn: for they shall be comforted" (Matthew 5:4). It is through our sincere grief of sin that we are brought to see with a believing joy that the only hope in overcoming sin is Jesus Christ.

b. The contrast in Ecclesiastes 7:3 is not between a godly sorrow and a godly joy, but between a godly sorrow and an ungodly laughter and mirth. For you see the proper contrast in verses 4-6.

c. Thus, the true Christian religion is not filled with gloom and doom. It is a religion to be taken seriously because life and death, heaven and hell will stand or fall upon one's faith or unbelief in Jesus Christ. But Jesus came to bring life, peace, and joy to man and to bring it more abundantly. He came to make your joy full. He came that you might enjoy all that He has created to a much more full capacity than any unbeliever is able to do (1 Timothy 6:17). God is not a kill-joy. Satan is the ultimate kill-joy who brings on

momentary laughter so that people laugh themselves all the way to the lake of fire. Jesus Christ is the ultimate joy of man's desiring. To enjoy Christ is the only way to find true joy now and for all eternity. Follow not your sinful heart to find joy, but know your Savior, commune with Him through His Word and prayer, and cherish and practice His Word in your life, and you will have a merry heart.

## II. A Divine Warning for Poor Health (Proverbs 17:22b).

A. The second part of this verse provides a fitting contrast to the first part. Here we find what will inevitably lead one to poor health in his life: "a broken spirit" (literally, stricken or scourged spirit). This is a spirit that has been wounded and beat up.

1. We ought immediately to wonder how such a broken spirit is used here in a negative sense (since it is an undesired contrast to a desirable merry heart).

a. We read elsewhere in Scripture concerning a broken spirit that it is a necessary grace in the life of every child of God (Psalm 34:18; Psalm 51:17).

b. As a grace, a broken spirit refers to the wounding of our sinful pride. It is a lowly-mindedness in which we see the Lord as holy and ourselves as vile—the Lord as mighty and ourselves as weak—the Lord as deserving of all glory and honor and ourselves as deserving of all wrath and condemnation. Genuine repentance ought always to be accompanied with a broken spirit before God. If you would be a humble people, you must pray to increase in this grace.

2. However, as a vice to be shunned, a broken spirit refers to the wounding of the conscience. It is an attack upon the conscience of one wherein he becomes so beat up over his sin that he does not fall upon the mercy of God in Christ Jesus, but falls into an ugly, dark pit of endless sorrow and condemnation. He gives way not to the promises of Christ, but to the despair of one accusation after another. This brokenness of spirit leads to a paralyzing apathy ("who cares") and to depression so heavy that it weighs down upon the shoulders of a person so that he is bent over under the burden of his sorrow. This is not a genuine godly sorrow which leads to life, but a legal sorrow that turns the day at noon into the darkness of midnight. This word is used in only two other places (in this form as an adjective) in the Old Testament Scriptures where it has the same negative meaning (Proverbs 15:13; Proverbs 18:14).

B. What is ultimately the cause of such a broken spirit in man? The cause is unabated condemnation of sin that seems to yell louder than the voice of mercy, grace, and love in Christ Jesus. In such a case, the answer to a poor sinner's despair and depression is the gospel of Jesus Christ. It is not further weight from the law of God that is needed for such a person. But what is needed is to see and understand that Christ has once and for all borne this unbearable burden of guilt upon the cross for all those who will come to Him in faith alone and cast themselves upon the promises of God. It is not the law that binds up the broken-hearted (although it is necessary to break the proud-hearted). It is the gospel that gives hope and brings a merry heart (Proverbs 12:25). Dear ones, the Lord breaks us not to leave us in a broken state of heart and conscience, but that we might flee to Christ who binds up the broken-hearted and sends them on their way with a joy that the world can never know. There is no virtue in the doom and gloom of a broken spirit for its own sake. Such is the hopelessness and despair of false religion. It is a false gospel (this is the penance of the Church of Rome wherein one punishes himself for his own sin). The gospel of Jesus Christ sets the prisoner free, and issues in a merry heart; for Jesus was punished once and for all for all of the sins of those who trust in Him alone for their eternal salvation.

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