

WISDOM UNIVERSITY

PROVERBS 3:13-20

CHRISTIAN HEDONISM (1)

GOD APPROVES THE PURSUIT OF HAPPINESS



FIRST BYRON CHRISTIAN REFORMED CHURCH

DAVID MURRAY
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INTRODUCTION

Problem

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

- People never find lasting happiness
- People hurt themselves and others in the pursuit of happiness
- People get sadder rather than happier
- People give up the pursuit of happiness as hopeless

Does that ring true for you? It certainly does for me. In my teens and early twenties I pursued happiness in all the wrong places and in all the wrong ways. I never found lasting happiness, I hurt myself and others in the process, I got sadder rather than happier, and I almost gave up hope of ever finding happiness.

Solution

Thankfully, God, in his great mercy and love, found me. He saved me from my sinful pursuit of happiness and gave me great happiness in himself. That's remained true through the past 30 years, even in the midst of some painful events and trying times.

I thought about telling you more of my story to illustrate, but let's leave that for another time. Instead, let God tell you his story in Proverbs 3:13-20. His narrative of the emotional benefits of Wisdom (Christ), is far more persuasive than mine. Let's discover God's way to true and lasting happiness.

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:

- The **moral** benefits of Wisdom (2:5-21)
- The **material** benefits of Wisdom (3:1-12)
- The **emotional** benefits of Wisdom (3:13-20)
- The **social** benefits of Wisdom (3:21-35)

We've looked at the moral and material benefits, and we now want to look at the emotional benefits, specifically happiness. This is a subject that can cause a lot of misunderstanding and tends to extremes on both sides.

That's why I decided that one sermon was not enough to address this subject and answer the many questions it prompts. At the moment, I have three sermons planned:

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

Let's turn, then, to the first of these, **God approves the pursuit of happiness**. Before we do so, remember one of the three qualifications from last week. **Wisdom will usually (i.e. as a general rule, with exceptions) make your life better in the long-term.**



Who gave us the desire for happiness and is it a good thing?



1. GOD GAVE THE DESIRE FOR HAPPINESS

(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.

Some Christians question whether the desire to be happy is sinful or godly. Is it a good desire to be cultivated, or a bad desire to be repented of? I want to answer that question by answering two more questions: (1) Should we focus on being blessed or being happy? (2) Is the desire for happiness from God or the devil?

Blessed or happy?

Some Bible translations of verses 13&18 replace 'happy' with 'blessed.' The Hebrew word can be translated both ways. **'Blessed'** is more objective and factual. It's God's stamp of approval on a person. It's something believed by faith rather than experienced in the emotions. **'Happy'** is more subjective and emotional. Happiness is something we feel.

So what is the meaning here? Blessed or happy? As is the case with so many Bible words, the context helps us decide. When we look at where these verses appear, we can see that the emphasis of the passage is more subjective than objective. Look at how verse 12 ends with God's loving delight in his children, and the next word, the first word of verse 13 is therefore more likely to be a subjective word like 'happy.' Now look at verse 17, the one immediately preceding verse 18. It speaks of Wisdom University students experiencing pleasantness and peace. Again, it's more to do with feelings than facts.

As the context is more about the subjective experience of happiness, the right translation, therefore, is 'happy.' But, because it is happiness in the right things and in the right ways, the happiness is also a blessing. So, Wisdom University students are both objectively blessed and subjectively happy.

God or the Devil?

Everyone agrees that almost every human being wants to be happy. Whatever country you go to, whatever century you visit, you will find that the number one pursuit for the vast majority of human beings is the pursuit of happiness. In fact, Pascal said, everyone always and only seeks happiness. Very, very few people set out each day saying, "How can I make myself miserable today?" Any who do are viewed as abnormal.

So, the question is, "Who gave this desire for happiness?" Did God give it, or did the Devil give it? Is it a godly desire or a sinful desire? Was it there before the fall, or was it a result of the fall? Is this a desire to be doused with repentance, or a desire to be fanned into flame? Is it to be crushed or cultivated?

I heard of a pastor recently who listed the sins for which God had sent the coronavirus. And the first reason he gave was the number of Reformed Christian books on happiness. Well, as the author of *The Happy Christian*, that got me rather worried. Am I the cause of the coronavirus?

I don't think so. God made humanity with the capacity for pleasure and happiness, and he gave the desire to be happy. It's central to being human. Indeed, it's part of being made in the image of God. It was basic to the pre-fall human condition and it remains in the post-fall human experience, although, as we'll see, it has been warped in a number of ways.



APPLICATION

♥ Adore the blessed and happy God (1 Tim. 1:11). He is the God who delights in himself and in his children (Jer. 32:41), even when he is correcting them (Proverbs. 3:12). If you want to study more about the happiness of God, read John Piper's book, *The Pleasures of God*.

♥ Adore God for the way he created us. He made us to be happy and blessed. He gave us the capacity for happiness, the ability to be happy, and the desire to be happy. What does that say about God? What does that say about his purpose for us?

♥ Hate the devil because he hates you and desires your misery. He has you seeking happiness in all the wrong places that will only make you more unhappy. He has convinced you that only he is interested in your happiness, and that God is out to spoil your life.

♥ Love Jesus for joining God in this joy mission (John 15:11). He gave up his joy to give us joy. He is the source of all happiness and blessedness.

THE PURSUIT OF HAPPINESS
IS NOT A FUNDAMENTAL RIGHT,
BUT A FUNDAMENTAL GIFT OF GOD.



Does God give us the desire for happiness and then leave us hanging?
No, God addresses and connects with the desire for happiness.



2. GOD ADDRESSES THE DESIRE FOR HAPPINESS

God put this desire in the human heart and connects with it. He doesn't walk away from it, but towards it. He doesn't stifle it, but supports it. He doesn't condemn it, but commends it. He doesn't try to stop it, but stimulates it. He does this in various ways:

He recognizes it

He admits the desire for happiness exists. He doesn't deny it, downplay it, or denigrate it. He talks about it and prioritizes it. It's one of the first things on his agenda. He sees it is huge in the human condition and experience, and therefore says, "OK, you want to talk about happiness, let's talk about happiness."

He ruins it

Although God gave this desire and approves of it, he does not approve of the sinful way that the vast majority of people pursue it. That's why one of the big emphases in the Bible is the unhappiness of sin. It's to disconnect us from false, failing, and fading happiness. It's to show us that sin is the enemy of happiness and the source of all misery.

We see the misery of sin in the fall of Adam and Eve, in the history of Israel, in the biographies of the saints in both the Old and New Testaments, in the world Jesus ministered to, in the mess some of the New Testament churches were in. We see it throughout Proverbs as the happy ways of Wisdom are repeatedly contrasted with the unhappy ways of folly. Even in this passage, we see how Solomon disconnects happiness from money (13-16).

If you read Matthew Henry's commentary, he has a happiness apologetic running from start to finish, as he contrasts the sweetness of Christianity with the bitter experience of those who reject it. Over and over he describes the disadvantages and losses of an irreligious life. He taught that sin was not only evil in itself with no good in it whatsoever, but is also fatal to happiness as it has a direct tendency to make us miserable.

He rewards it

God doesn't just tell us what we should be and do; he also motivates us. He doesn't just tell us what to do, but why. (See Kevin DeYoung's article on the number of the motivations God uses to encourage us to seek him and seek holiness). One of the emotional motivations God uses, and he uses a number of them, is the happiness of being a Christian and of living the Christian life.

Matthew Henry preached for two years on the reasons to be a Christian. His last six sermons in this series were on Proverbs 3:17. He turned these six sermons into a book, the last one he sent to his publisher before he died, and called it, *The Pleasantness of a Religious Life*. He said that God designed the Christian religion to produce the maximum personal profit and pleasure, and, through Solomon, argued for it on these grounds. He summarized Proverbs 3:17 as proving, "That true piety hath true pleasure in it. Or thus; the ways of religion are pleasant and peaceful ways." This he said, was **the** reason to be a Christian. "Nothing draws more forcibly than pleasure," he wrote, and therefore "the pleasures of the divine life are unspeakably better" than any non-Christian life. He believed if he could persuade people of this, many more would become Christians.

Henry pointed out that while Ecclesiastes is all about the misery of sin, it prepares the way for the next book, the Song of Solomon. By this song, "we shall be quickened to seek for happiness in the love of Christ, and that true transcendent pleasure which is to be found only in communion with God through him." He says that in no other book of the Bible is the mutual pleasure enjoyed by Christ and the believer revealed so clearly and constantly.



He re-directs it

We will look at the next few points in more detail in subsequent sermons. In summary, though, the Bible re-directs our pursuit of happiness away from self and sin and toward God and holiness. God does not say, "Stop wanting happiness!" but rather, "Get it in me: my Wisdom, my Word, my worship, my work, and my ways."

He re-defines it

We must not let the culture define happiness. But neither should we make up our own definition of happiness. Instead we must use the rule and standard God has provided, which is his Word. The Bible gives us an objective rule for our subjective life. It helps us seek happiness safely and successfully, so that it sanctifies us. We will work towards a biblical definition of happiness in coming weeks. We need a definition that is consistent with biblical holiness, consistent with repentance, and consistent with suffering and discipline. I don't believe Matthew Henry or John Piper adequately dealt with the problem of suffering in their works on Christian happiness. I'll address some problems with Christian hedonism in a future sermon.

He requires it

Can we just say, "Well I'm just not a happy person"? Can we excuse ourselves and say, "Well, that's just not who I am. My temperament is more Eeyore than Tigger." Or can we say, "I don't really want or need happiness"? Is it optional? No, this is not something God leaves to our choice. He actually commands our joy (Phil. 4:4; Ps. 37:3).

APPLICATION

♥ If you're an unbeliever, I challenge you to compare your happiness with mine (Ps. 4:7) Indeed, I am called to ruin your happiness in everything that is sinful and ungodly. That doesn't make me a spoil-sport. It makes me a spoil-sin. Indeed it makes me a happy-sport.

♥ The desire for happiness is not to be suppressed, but gluttoned by God. Happiness is not the greatest good; God is. And pursuing God will ultimately result in the greatest happiness. Therefore pursue God with all your might. It's a desire to be excited

♥ Why does God require our joy? (1) It makes us strong (Neh. 8:10). (2) Cheerful Christians are great evangelists and apologists. (3) As Piper says, "God is most glorified in us when we are most satisfied in him."

♥ Does this not change your view of God. He is concerned for your happiness and wants to share his with you. Does that not make God more attractive and desirable? Does that not make the Christian life and Christian service more attractive and desirable.

♥ Don't be ashamed of rewards, but use them, Berkouwer said, "We have reason to be thankful that our confessions do not hesitate to speak freely about the promised rewards." He noted how many times the Heidelberg Catechism asks about the profit of numerous truths, and said that the Catechism is "warmly concerned" about the profit and benefits of faith. He insisted that "the idea of reward is confirmed in the Bible as an integral element in the preaching of the gospel." Piper points out that the whole Catechism is placed under the human longing for comfort and argues that "the entire catechism is an answer to the concern for how to live and die happily."

GOD DOESN'T CONDEMN AND SQUASH
THE DESIRE FOR HAPPINESS,
BUT COMMENDS AND SATISFIES IT.

CONCLUSION



FURTHER STUDY

Online Articles

- [Christian Hedonism](#) by John Piper
- [R C Sproul's Childhood Struggle with Happiness and Pleasure](#)
- [40 Motivations to Obedience](#) by Kevin DeYoung
- [What is Christian Happiness?](#)
- [What made Jonathan Edwards A Christian Hedonist?](#) by John Piper

Books

- [Desiring God](#) by John Piper
- [The Pleasures of God](#) by John Piper
- [The Pleasantness of a Religious Life](#) by Matthew Henry
- [The Happy Christian](#) by David Murray
- [Happiness](#) by Randy Alcorn

Discussion Questions

1. What ways have you tried to find happiness and what were the results? How did God "ruin" your happiness?
2. How has God made you happy with the Gospel?
3. What are the pros and cons of these words: happiness, joy, blessed?
4. How did this sermon change your view of God?
5. How will you use Proverbs 3:17 in evangelism and apologetics?
6. What are the sources of Christian happiness?
7. Define Christian happiness.
8. How can the Christian be happy in the midst of sufferings?
9. What place does the motive of reward have in your Christian life?

First Byron Christian Reformed Church
8541 Byron Center Ave SW, Byron Center, MI 49315
Phone: (616) 878-9768
www.firstbyroncrc.org

Dr. David Murray
www.HeadHeartHand.org
www.prts.edu



People pursue happiness in wrong places and wrong ways

- No lasting happiness
- Hurt self and others
- Get sadder not happier
- Give up on happiness

Biblical answer?



God gave the desire for happiness

- "Blessed" or "Happy"?
- God or the Devil?

THE PURSUIT OF HAPPINESS IS NOT A FUNDAMENTAL HUMAN RIGHT BUT A FUNDAMENTAL GIFT OF GOD

He gave it. Does he meet it?

CHRISTIAN HEDONISM (1) GOD APPROVES THE PURSUIT OF HAPPINESS

PERSONS NEED NOT AND OUGHT NOT TO SET ANY BOUNDS TO THEIR SPIRITUAL AND GRACIOUS APPETITES. . . . [RATHER THEY OUGHT TO] BE ENDEAVORING BY ALL POSSIBLE WAYS TO INFLAME THEIR DESIRES AND TO OBTAIN MORE SPIRITUAL PLEASURES. . . . ENDEAVOR TO PROMOTE SPIRITUAL APPETITES BY LAYING YOURSELF IN THE WAY OF ALLUREMENT.

JONATHAN EDWARDS



GOD IS MOST GLORIFIED IN US WHEN WE ARE MOST SATISFIED IN HIM
JOHN PIPER.



Bring your desire for happiness to God who will satisfy it in ways we cannot imagine.

THE SECRET OF HAPPINESS IS THAT IT'S NECESSARY FOR US TO GO OUTSIDE OF OURSELVES TO FIND HAPPINESS.
JOHN CALVIN



God addresses the desire for happiness

- He recognizes it
- He ruins it
- He rewards it
- He re-directs it
- He re-defines it
- He requires it

GOD DOESN'T CONDEMN AND SQUASH THE DESIRE FOR HAPPINESS, BUT COMMENDS AND SATISFIES IT.

Action?