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Appendix: Piper's central message in Desiring God

John Piper's book *Desiring God*¹ is an assertion, defense, and explanation of Christian hedonism. Piper defines Christian hedonism as a philosophy of life built around five core convictions.² This essay will provide a brief articulation of Piper's thesis in *Desiring God*, describe the flavor of the concern expressed by Rev. Peter Masters, and then respond.

1. The longing to be happy is a universal human experience, and it is good, not sinful.

Many people, Christians among them, seem to live as if wanting to be happy is inherently selfish and therefore sinful. True virtue, it is thought, requires selfless sacrifice. If one finds satisfaction through acts of Christian service, that service is thereby defective. In the words of Immanuel Kant, as quoted by novelist Ayn Rand³, "An action is moral only if one has no desire to perform it, but performs it out of a sense of duty and derives no benefit from it of any sort, neither material nor spiritual. A benefit destroys the moral value of an action."

The trouble is that such thinking does not cohere with reality. Firstly, all people instinctively pursue that which they deem to be in their best interest (in other words, that which will most make them happy). This is neither good nor evil; it is merely a God-endowed bias that (generally) tends to self-preservation and the enhancing of life (improving one's marketable skills, gaining employment, paying the rent, buying a

¹ John Piper, *Desiring God: Meditations of a Christian Hedonist*, published by Multnomah publishers, © 1986, 1996 and 2003 by Desiring God Foundation.

² *Ibid.*, p. 28.

³ Ayn Rand, *For the Intellectual* (New York: Signet, 1961), p. 32.

house, providing for one's children).⁴ Secondly, we recognize that to perform a good deed *and desire to do so* is often morally preferable to performing the good deed *without the desire*. If my dad was dying in a hospital, I should go see him. But I should also *want to go see him*. An absence of desire to visit him would represent a moral defect on my part.

How about the worship of God? Is God pleased when people go through all the right motions, but lack an internal disposition of satisfaction and delight in God? There are far too many biblical commands *to feel* (not just think, decide, or act) to answer in the affirmative (Ps. 42:5, 100:2; Micah 6:8; Luke 12:5; Rom. 11:20; 12:8; 12:11; 12:15; Heb. 13:17; Jas. 4:9).

2. *We should never try to deny or resist our longing to be happy, as though it were a bad impulse. Instead, we should seek to intensify this longing and nourish it with whatever will provide the deepest and most enduring satisfaction.*

Self-denial is never an end in itself. It is always the denial of a lesser good for the sake of attaining or intensifying a greater good. Sin entices by means of offering an immediate good, either for the mind and/or body to enjoy. God tells us to kill sin (Rom. 6:12-14; 13:14), in those moments by denying ourselves the genuine pleasure that would accompany the sin (Luke 8:14; Gal. 5:17; Tit. 3:3). But to what end? So that we can experience the far greater happiness experienced by those who walk closely with Him (Ps. 63:5-8; 73:25,28).⁵ The longing for happiness is not the problem; the problem is

⁴ And even people who commit suicide do so because they perceive that they will thereby lessen their pain and suffering. It is noteworthy that God even built this into our nervous system: we touch a hot stove, and immediately recoil at the pain. The pain warns us that our bodies are in danger of being damaged, and we automatically react to flee the pain and thereby preserve our physical constitution.

⁵ Words such as pleasure, joy, and happiness have a wide range of semantic meaning. The Bible seems to use them interchangeably (e.g., Ps. 16:11 uses the terms "pleasures" and "joy"). It is unhelpful to draw

that (being sinners) we often seek to satisfy this longing by drinking from polluted waters that end up harming us (Jer. 2:13).

3. The deepest and most enduring happiness is found only in God. Not from God, but in God.

We were made for God, and our hearts can only find true and lasting happiness in Him. God’s promise to all who trust in Him is, “Call upon me in the day of trouble; I will deliver you, and you shall glorify me” (Ps. 50:15).⁶ There is no other God like Him, who works for those who wait for Him (Isa. 64:4). No good thing does He withhold from those who walk uprightly (Ps. 84:4). We have no good apart from Him (Ps. 16:2). Christ suffered that he might bring us to God (I Peter 3:18; II Cor. 5:18-20; Eph. 2:16), whom to know is eternal life (John 17:3).

But what about God’s gifts: Can *they* give us enduring happiness? Every good and perfect gift is from above (Jas. 1:17), yet if we love His gifts more than we love Him, they become toxic idols, ultimately robbing our joy both of the gifts and the Giver. As Augustine said, “He loves Thee too little, who loves anything together with Thee, which he loves not for Thy sake.”⁷ God will have no competitor—our enduring happiness is found *in God* Himself (Habakkuk 3:17; Ps. 43:4), not in the (blessed, wonderful) things that proceed *from God*.

4. The happiness we find in God reaches its consummation when it is shared with others in the manifold ways of love.

sharp dichotomies between “happiness” and “joy”, as if the former only meant something ephemeral and the latter something deep-seated. Space limitations preclude further discussion on this particular theme.

⁶ All Scripture references, unless otherwise noted, are from the English Standard Version.

⁷ St. Augustine, Confessions.

Praise is the most natural disposition of those who are delighted. Happiness is intrinsically effusive or expressive. We are prone to speak of that in which we find delight. But our happiness in God expresses itself to others not in words and feelings only, but in holy deeds. The churches in Macedonia overflowed with joy, leading to generosity in spite of poverty (II. Cor. 8:1-2). The Apostle John tells us that he has no greater joy than that his children are walking in the truth (III John 4). This does not imply that John is an idolater (loving people more than God). Rather, John longs to extend his delight in God by bringing others into it. Seeing the evidence of God's grace in others enhances John's enjoyment of God. What is really being enjoyed is God's work in them, and hence, ultimately, God. So it will be for us: the inevitable result of our happiness of God is a longing to see others brought into that joy. That longing, in turn, leads to manifold expressions of love.

This has important implications for how we should conceive of love. Love is not making much of others, but rather helping them to make much of God.⁸ As Jonathan Edwards said, "And so far as a virtuous mind exercises true virtue in benevolence to created beings, it chiefly seeks the good of the creature; consisting in its knowledge or view of God's glory and beauty, its union with God, conformity and love to Him, and joy in Him."⁹

5. To the extent that we try to abandon the pursuit of our own pleasure, we fail to honor God and love people. Or, to put it positively: The pursuit of pleasure is a necessary part of all worship and virtue. That is: The chief end of man is to glorify God by enjoying Him forever.

⁸ See John Piper, God is the Gospel, Crossway, 2005.

⁹ Jonathan Edwards, A Dissertation Concerning the Nature of True Virtue, chapter 2.

That the Christian is to glorify God is manifestly clear (Josh. 7:19; I Cor. 10:31, Rom. 15:7; II. Cor. 4:15). The question is, by what manner are we to glorify God? He will not share his glory with us (Isa. 48:11). And He saves us apart from our deeds (Rom. 4:4-8; Eph. 2:5). In Jer. 2:13 God likens Himself to a “fountain of living waters,” and He chastises His people for forsaking Him. One glorifies a fountain by drinking and being refreshed (Christian worship), by refusing lesser fountains (the first commandment), and by going forth in the strength the fountain supplies (Christian service, I Pet. 4:11). “The kingdom of heaven is like treasure hidden in a field, which a man found and covered up. Then in his joy he goes and sells all that he has and buys that field” (Matt. 13:44). God is most glorified when we see Him not just as our Savior and Lord, but also as our all-consuming treasure.