

Response to Peter Masters' critique of Desiring God

by Alex Chediak

Executive Summary

Masters claims that Desiring God advocates a "single-track" perspective on sanctification, failing to adequately acknowledge other essential aspects of holy living. Two subsidiary arguments are that Masters sees joy not as a motivation, but as "comfort" for obedience and suffering undertaken for the sake of duty or compassion, and that Piper's vision is unable to robustly account for sorrow and suffering in the Christian pilgrimage. In response, it is shown that joy in God is an essential element of faith, and thus shares faith's centrality in the Christian life. Jesus appealed to joy as a motivating force in conversion (Matt. 13:44), and Heb. 11:6 echoes the notion that faith includes an expectancy of reward. Furthermore, joy in God is foundational to the sustaining of God's children in all manner of difficulty. Pursuit of joy in God is consistent with (and essential to) truly loving God with both heart and head.

Practical Theology

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John Piper's book Desiring God¹ is an assertion, defense, and explanation of "Christian Hedonism," which could be summarized by the phrase "God is most glorified in us when we are most satisfied in Him." Peter Masters² has raised several significant concerns regarding Piper's thesis. My aim is to fairly and succinctly summarize Masters' main concern and provide a brief, persuasive rebuttal.

Concerns with Desiring God expressed by Peter Masters

Masters claims that Desiring God advocates a "single-track" perspective on sanctification, failing to adequately acknowledge other essential aspects to Christian living. Two subsidiary arguments are that Masters sees joy not as a motivation, but as "comfort" for obedience and suffering undertaken for the sake of duty or compassion, and that Piper's vision is unable to robustly account for sorrow and suffering in the Christian life.

Master's primary argument is that John Piper offers an inadequate, overly narrow approach to Christian sanctification in elevating one duty (the obligation to delight oneself in God) above all other Christian responsibilities (as delineated in passages like the Sermon on the Mount, I Tim. 6:11-12, and Gal. 5:22-23). According to Masters, Desiring God constructs a "single-principle formula," not unlike one of several theological factions—such as the holiness movement—which engender spiritual imbalance and immaturity among their adherents by emphasizing one truth disproportionately. Masters alleges that Piper, approaching the Bible already convinced of a bold, paradigm-shattering vision, essentially eisegetes a novel theology

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

² Unless otherwise stated, convictions attributed to Peter Masters are based on his 2002 essay entitled "Christian Hedonism: Is it Right?" The essay appears in the on-line periodical *Sword & Trowel*, 2002, No. 3, and can be read here: <http://www.metropolitantabernacle.org/?page=articles&id=3>.

into numerous texts, thereby (unintentionally) distorting the Scriptural witness. The result is an oversimplified view of spiritual growth. The essence of Masters' essay can be stated this way³:

Delighting in God ought not to be made the organizing principle for every other spiritual experience and duty. Rather, delighting in God is one of many strands in a multiple-track, irreducibly complex approach to sanctification and personal holiness. If delighting in God is unduly elevated, the other aspects to sanctification will necessarily be overly neglected, particularly among less astute readers/learners/parishioners being influenced. The result will be spiritual weakness (as with single-principle movements like the holiness camp) or mystical serenity. The former stems from inattention to doctrine⁴ while the latter is due to a subjective goal (joy) tending towards "a self-conscious nurturing of happiness."⁵

Masters asserts that, for Piper, "although the joy pursued is derived from reflecting on the Lord, the end is still subjective, and this will lead to a self-conscious nurturing of happiness."

The claim seems to be that joy (albeit from God) becomes the ultimate end, rather than God. In his discussion of Heb. 12:2, Masters says that Jesus' joy referred not to "bare emotion" or even to the anticipation of *His own* future experience of joy but rather to the accomplishment of His mission, namely "*our* salvation and deliverance, including our joy." In treating Heb. 10:34, Masters says "the word 'joyfully' is obviously selected to show how willingly the Hebrews accepted persecution...it is not intended to show that they laughed and leapt for joy as they were punished." These observations suggest that Masters conceives of "joy" in the Bible as consisting of a determination of the will *without any necessary stirring of one's affections*. In other words, whether or not affections are intermingled with particular acts of obedience is not relevant.

And so Masters challenges Piper's interpretation of Scripture that joy is a motivation for obedience. Masters believes this is a dangerously self-serving idea and that motivation should stem instead from a desire to please Christ and from compassion for others. Masters does note

³ Mr. Masters was kind enough to read this portion of my essay and affirm that I have expressed his thesis fairly.

⁴ Masters asserts: "When delight is everything, doctrine suffers a setback."

⁵ Masters states: "This [self-conscious nurturing of happiness] will become for many an unhealthy preoccupation, emotions being artificially 'cranked up' (a feature of other single-dominant-issue movements)."

that the believers in Heb. 10:34, upon losing their goods and homes, “comforted themselves with the thought of their heavenly wealth.” Yet this is not tantamount to pursuing self-interest because the comfort did not give rise to the sacrifice but was rather the Hebrews’ *response* to their loss *after* undergoing the sacrifice – *not the motivation that led them to sacrifice*. In fact, Masters claims that Piper erroneously interprets many of Christ’s and Paul’s words as intending to motivate. In these texts, says Masters, Christ and Paul are simply stating facts. Masters applies this to “it is more blessed to give than to receive.” Self-interest is not to motivate, for that would be a shallow and an unsure guide for lifelong sanctification.

In a related argument, Masters argues that because Piper offers an oversimplified theology of sanctification, there is “no adequate and balanced view of trials and heartaches.” Masters contrasts Piper with the Puritans, noting that they had a place in their theology for a child of God walking in the darkness (Isa. 50:10). The Puritans ascribed several possible explanations for such seasons (unrepented sin, God-ordained trail to purify faith, and our alien status on earth). Masters claims that Piper addresses spiritual heaviness only with an urge for repentance for coldness of heart, which Masters deems “shallow.”

A Response to Peter Masters

Masters’ concern with single-principle theologies is commendable. Ours is an affective age—one in which many determine reality based on feelings or experiences. Testimonies that feature heinous pre-conversion sins are often more celebrated than those that highlight a commitment to Christ from one’s childhood, with no recollection of unregenerate years. Churches that encourage emotional encounters with God often bypass the rational faculties and express an anti-intellectual perspective on the life of the mind in general and rigorous Bible study in particular. And where this happens, Christian growth is stunted and imbalanced.

But Desiring God does not encourage a “single-track” or oversimplified view of the Christian life. A distinction must be made between a single principle that is *distinct* from others and a pervasive principle that is intermingled with others. There is no dichotomy between pursuing joy in God and pursuing Christian obedience. Rather, Piper’s message is: *God commands us to pursue joy in Him in the midst of all expressions of obedience.* Joy in God is pervasive, not peripheral. We are not just to *do* justice, but to *love* mercy (Micah 6:8). We are not just to *perform* acts of mercy, but to do so *with cheerfulness* (Rom. 12:8). We are to *joyfully* suffer loss (Heb. 10:34), give *cheerfully* (II Cor. 9:7), and find *joy* in the joy of others (II Cor. 2:3). A book that argues for the centrality of pursuing joy in God for one’s worship, love for others, reading of Scripture, prayer, money, marriage, understanding of missions, and suffering can hardly be said to offer an “oversimplified view of sanctification.” Rather, joy in God is pervasive in true evangelical obedience to all of God’s commands. As new creatures and adopted children, God is not just concerned that we do the right things, but that we do those right things from a heart aflame with love and delight in all that He is for us in Christ. Anything less is not truly Christian.

Delighting in God (Ps. 37:4) is the disposition of the heart that can truly obey the other commands in Psalm 37, such as “fret not,” and “be not envious, and “trust in the Lord and do good.” Satisfaction in God is an element of trust, and it enables the Christian to not fret or be envious of others, because he knows God will take care of him. It is not as if we stop delighting in God and then attend to God’s other commands. Delight in God pervades our lives in the obedience to those other commands. If it does not, then that other “obedience” becomes superficial and fleshly. Furthermore, I can make myself obey some external commands, but I

cannot make myself delight in God. Only the Holy Spirit can do that. So (perhaps ironically) Piper's model is actually more consistently Calvinistic than that of Masters.

The example of saving faith is helpful. Masters notes: "[Edwards] was anxious to distinguish between those who had real spiritual life, and those who did not. His language [God is glorified not only by His glory being seen, but by its being rejoiced in] here cuts between those two groups." Masters is unwittingly affirming that rejoicing in God is an essential element of saving faith. Those who *rejoice* in God's glory being seen are the ones who have "real spiritual life" whereas those who merely see His glory do not. This was Jonathan Edwards' position, and Piper has merely expounded on its implications in *Desiring God*.⁶ Without faith it is impossible to please God. Why? Because whoever would draw near to Him must believe that He exists and *that he rewards those who seek him* (Heb. 11:6). In other words, we must recognize that He is more alluring than anything in the world. A desire for God, albeit in a nascent form, is at the root of true faith.⁷ Note how Jesus describes the kingdom of heaven: "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). Note both the essential nature of joy in faith, and also the logic in both Matt. 13:44 and Heb. 11:6: The belief that God (and His kingdom) contained a reward was *the motivating force*. Joy was present in the motivation, and not incidental or a subsequent "comfort" upon the arising of difficulty. Self-denial for Jesus is for the attaining of a greater, more solidly enduring happiness.

⁶ Masters' surprisingly claims that Edwards provides no "endorsement for Dr. Piper's unique system of sanctification." In fact, not only in the quote above, but also sprinkled throughout Edwards' sermons are references to self-denial only being appropriate for the sake of gaining a greater pleasure. See Chapter 10 of What Jesus Demands of the World (by John Piper, Crossway, 2006) for several poignant examples.

⁷ There may be a similarity here to Christ's Lordship. Masters would probably hold to "Lordship Salvation," yet acknowledge that a believer's understanding of the implications of Christ's Lordship expands over time. Yet the moment of conversion includes the heart's acceptance (perhaps in nascent form) of Christ's Lordship, else true conversion has not occurred.

Masters' corollary argument to the "single-track" sanctification critique, the charge that Piper does not prepare Christians for suffering or for times when God withdraws (Isa. 50:10), is simply mistaken. Desiring God would teach such a Christian to say to his own soul: "Hope in God; for I shall again praise him, my salvation and my God (Ps. 42:11b)." It would remind him that "though the fig tree should not blossom, nor fruit be on the vines..." yet one duty remains: we are to *rejoice* in the Lord; and to *take joy* in the God of our salvation (Hab. 3:17-18). Pursuing joy in God remains foundational *especially* in seasons where we most lack it. Sorrow over the absence of God is likewise an expression of the heart's longing for God, and hence a prizing of God. It is like the tinge of sorrow in a man who misses his wife while traveling on business – the longing for her is a form of the joy she brings him. Even at our emotionally lowest points, the fight of faith (which is the Christian life) is a fight to see Christ (with increasing clarity and delight) as supremely valuable and hence preferable to any allurements sin might be offering at the moment.⁸

Conclusion

The need to pursue joy in God is pervasive both in Scripture and in the Christian life, not peripheral. External "obedience" is only *part* of what God commands. Joy in God is to motivate Christian obedience and to sustain us through suffering and sorrow. Christian joy is not a superficial, self-serving emotion, but an ever-increasing delight that terminates in a sovereign, wise, and loving God, who rewards those who seek Him, shows Himself strong to all who call upon Him, and is glorified most by those satisfied in Him.

⁸ These truths are set forth in greater detail in Future Grace (also by John Piper, Multnomah, 1995).