

Let's Talk About Moralistic Therapeutic Deism

I did not grow up in a Christian family.

My whole life changed when I was converted about 10 years ago. Every day became a new adventure as I saw everything and everyone through the new lenses I was wearing. As I studied and learned more and more, many things surprised me, but perhaps nothing caught me more off-guard than a strange phenomenon I observed among "church folks." At the time I didn't know what to call it, but since then a couple of researchers have identified and named it:



Moralistic Therapeutic Deism.



"What the heck is that?" you ask.

It happens to be a preferred religion of Western culture, which usually (and tragically) goes by the name *Christianity*.

Sociologists Christian Smith and Melinda Lundquist Denton published a book in 2005 to summarize the findings of the *National Study of Youth and Religion* research project, for which thousands of teenagers were interviewed regarding their religious beliefs.

The crazy results of the study were pretty similar to the confusing things I was noticing as an outsider coming into church culture for the first time while also studying the Bible and the historic faith.

As the authors state it:

"A significant part of Christianity in the United States is actually only tenuously Christian in any sense that is seriously connected to the actual historical Christian tradition, but has rather substantially morphed into Christianity's misbegotten stepcousin, Christian Moralistic Therapeutic Deism."

So what is this *MTD* so many people believe in?
Its beliefs can be summarized by...

The Five Points of Moralistic Therapeutic Deism:

- A god exists who created and ordered the world and watches over human life on earth.
- God wants people to be good, nice, and fair to each other, as taught in the Bible and by most world religions.
- The central goal of life is to be happy and to feel good about oneself.
- God does not need to be particularly involved in one's life except when God is needed to resolve a problem.
- Good people go to heaven when they die.

Why is it called *Moralistic Therapeutic Deism*?

- ***Moralistic***: We should be good, moral people. Not born-again followers of Jesus Christ – just, you know, “Good people.”
- ***Therapeutic***: The goal of this religion is to provide therapeutic benefits to its adherents. Not to worship, adore, and obey the living God. God wants us to feel good about ourselves and have high self-esteem.
- ***Deism***: God exists and created the world, but then kinda just leaves us alone unless we need him to fix a problem or provide us with something.

This is the religion of many people who call themselves Christians.

The god of this religion is passionately focused on serving us while making us feel really good about ourselves. He'll mind his own business until we need something, and then he will spring into action. It's not about *him*, he requires nothing of us. It's all about us. He is at our beck and call.

He's like a toady butler



or a fawning genie.



Put those two guys together and you get

*the god of
Moralistic Therapeutic Deism:*



HELLO THERE! YOU RANG?
HOW CAN I MAKE YOU FEEL
BETTER RIGHT NOW? HOW
CAN I SERVE YOU? WOW
YOU'RE LOOKING NICE
TODAY! YOU ARE JUST
THE GREATEST THING
EVER, AREN'T YOU!
MAN AM I LUCKY TO
BE YOUR GOD!

This is the god of many people who call themselves Christians.

Why is all of this so tragic? Because MTD is not Christianity.
It's not even a *version* of Christianity.

Moralistic Therapeutic Deism is a false religion created by and for members of the most rich, catered, defensive, politically-correct, over-protected, over-nurtured, over-fed society the world has ever known, and the fact that it uses the name *Jesus* and various select Christian buzzwords allows it to be passed off as Christianity.

It has nothing to do with biblical Christianity. It's not in the Bible.
Jesus didn't teach it. Paul wouldn't recognize it.

And yet it calls itself *Christianity* and it's taught every Sunday by pastors in church buildings all over the place.



Western society is a perfect environment for these
"me-centered" teachings to flourish.

Add to that parents (especially fathers) and churches who fail to teach
the truth (especially the harder truths) to the people entrusted to them...



Previous night, at youth group...



...and you've got an epidemic.

That's where we are right now – in the middle of an MTD epidemic.



Be honest with yourself.

How many people do you know who check "Christian" get live as practical Moralistic Therapeutic Deists? Who think God wants them to have everything they want? Who minimize and justify sin – maybe not the sins of others, but the ones *they* like, for sure? Who clearly do not live biblically but would offer a quick, "Judge not!" were someone to question them about that fact? Who can't explain even the most basic biblical theology so many saints have died for in the history of the faith? Who think the extent of following Jesus is to say a prayer one time, "inviting Him into their heart"? Who only call on God when they have a problem or need something? Who assume that because their parents are Christians, or because they grew up in the Bible Belt, or because they pray before meals or attend a church service every now and then, that somehow these things make them Christians, no matter how else they live or what else they believe?

Be honest with yourself.

How many people do you know who subscribe to this fake, watered-down, imposter of a religion?

Be honest with yourself.

Do you?

Adam4d.com

What is the Gospel?

The gospel is not behavior modification, becoming a better person or learning to become more moral. It is not taking the life of Jesus as a model way to live or transforming/redeeming the secular realm. It is not living highly communal lives with others and sharing generously in communities who practice the way of Jesus in local culture. These may all be good things but they are not to be confused with the gospel. They should accompany the gospel, and should not be separated from the gospel and while God may use them to authenticate the gospel and make our proclamation of the gospel more fertile in hardened hearts yet they are not to be viewed as replacements for the gospel.

Did you notice the one characteristic of all of the above activities has nothing to do with what Christ has done for us, but all about what we do for him. The true gospel, rather, is news about what Christ the Saviour, has already done for us (in his life, death and resurrection) rather than instruction and advice about what you are to do for God. Christ's accomplishment, not ours, is the essence of the gospel. Above all, the gospel of Christ brings good news, rather than instruction about our behavior. The gospel is not about what we do, but our acts inevitably spring up and overflow in thanksgiving due to what Christ has done for us.

In short, the Gospel is the life-altering news that Jesus Christ, the eternal Son of God, became man, lived a sinless life under the Law, died for sinners and rose again to reconcile them to himself, eternally victorious over every enemy that stood between God and man. Now, because of this redemptive work, there is nothing that separates those who believe from their Creator and all the benefits that He promises in him. D.A. Carson says the gospel centers "upon Jesus Christ and what God has done through him. The essential points of the gospel are Jesus Christ's status as the Son of God, his genuine humanity, his death for our sins, his burial, resurrection, subsequent appearances, and future coming in judgment. That no one is justified but in the gracious work of Jesus Christ in his death and resurrection. It is not merely a recital of theological truths and historical events; rather, it relates these truths and events to situations of every individual believer."

But in order to fully understand what the Gospel is, it is important to understand why the Gospel is needed.

It is helpful to see the gospel in the context of human history starting with God's creation of all things, man's rebellion against the Creator, his subsequent fall into corruption and God's redemption of that which was lost. Adam, the first man, had the capacity to do every good work the law required; which men, since the fall, have not. Having fallen headlong into sin, God cursed Adam with death (Gen 2:17, 3:19-22), and with the removal of His Spirit (1 Cor 2:14), a penalty he passed on to all his posterity. Man squandered his stewardship and put himself in the position of a moral debt he cannot repay. Now mankind's spiritually bankrupt condition and fallen nature, which is beyond repair, render it necessary that if he is to be restored,

the help will have to come from the outside. That redemption comes from God and comes in the form of the gospel. This gospel is not something man made up or a well-informed opinion, but is good news directly revealed from Almighty God regarding what He has done in Jesus Christ to rescue all those who have called on His name. Yes, it is a divine rescue, a complete deliverance ... not advice, not a moral improvement program, nor a philosophy of life, since we need sovereign mercy, not assistance. The proud, or those who fail to see their moral impotence to save themselves, will reject this gospel. But this is GOOD NEWS to the poor and broken hearted, (the spiritual bankrupt who have lost all confidence in their own efforts) ... So all you poor, broken sinners, abandon despair and banish your laments because of what God has done in His Son, Jesus Christ the Messiah to deliver His people from their sins.

I once heard it said that there are two religions in the world: 1) human attainment and 2) Divine accomplishment. Lets consider the first one; human attainment, which is the natural inclination of us all. In His Law, God calls us to perfect obedience to His holy commands, yet an honest assessment of ourselves will force us to acknowledge that we all fall woefully short of doing so, leaving no hope in ourselves. But in the Gospel, Jesus mercifully obeys the commands for us. Christ's full obedience to all the prescriptions of the divine law...and His willing obedience in bearing all the sanctions imposed for our disobedience to that law is both the ground of God's justification of sinners like us and makes available a perfect righteousness that is imputed or reckoned to those who put their trust in him. In other words, The gospel is not about any merit I have, but is based upon Jesus' Person and merit alone. It is not what we have done for Jesus, but what Jesus has done for us (Rom 5:19, 2 Cor 5:21, Phil 2:8). Where Adam failed, Jesus prevailed. It is God's promise to us, not our ability to keep our promise to Him. In the covenant rainbow sign with Noah, God says He "remembers" never to flood the world again, so likewise in the covenant in Christ's blood, God "remembers" not to treat us as we justly deserve for our sins. The mystery of God has been made manifest in the Person and work of the Son, who, in his wrath absorbing sacrifice, frees the prisoners, gives sight to the blind, breaks loose the chains and changes hearts of stone into hearts of flesh. We were once taken captive to do Satan's will and could not escape using our own resources, but Christ has set us free. Christ, in His cross work, does for us what we could not do for ourselves. He lived the perfect life that we should have lived and died the death we should have died, in order to free us so that we might then proclaim His excellencies, make known his gospel and spread justice and mercy to the poor.

Dr. Tim Keller once said "...the gospel is news about what God has already done for you, rather than instruction and advice about what you are to do for God... In other religions, God reveals to us how we can find or achieve salvation. In Christianity, God achieves salvation for us. The gospel brings news primarily, rather than instruction. " ...the gospel is all about historic events, and thus it has a public character. "It identifies Christian faith as news that has significance for all people, indeed for the whole world, not merely as esoteric understanding or insight."

[Brownson, p. 46] ...if Jesus is not risen from the dead, Christianity does not "work". The gospel is that Jesus died and rose for us. If the historic events of his life did not happen, then Christianity does not "work" for the good news is that God has entered the human "now" (history) with the life of the world to come....the gospel is news about what God has done in history to save us, rather than advice about what we must do to reach God. The gospel is news that Jesus' life, death, and resurrection in history has achieved our salvation...Jesus does not just bring good news; he is the good news."

There is no salvation outside of the Lord Jesus Christ. So trust in Christ and not in your own righteousness. But some refuse the free gift of God because they trust in their own goodness. As the Puritan Thomas Watson once said:

[Some people think] ...they are so good, that they scorn God's offer of mercy. Indeed these are often in the worst condition: these are they who think they need no repentance (Luke 15:7). Their morality undoes them. They make a "savior" of it, and so on this rock they suffer shipwreck. Morality shoots short of heaven. It is only nature refined. A moral man is but old Adam dressed in fine clothes. The king's image counterfeited and stamped upon brass will not go current. The moral person seems to have the image of God—but he is only brass metal, which will never pass for current. Morality is insufficient for salvation. Though the life is moralized, the lust may be unmortified. The heart may be full of pride and atheism. Under the fair leaves of a tree, there may be a worm. I am not saying, repent that you are moral—but that you are no more than moral. Satan entered into the house that had just been swept and garnished (Luke 11:26). This is the emblem of a moral man, who is swept by civility and garnished with common gifts—but is not washed by true repentance. The unclean spirit enters into such a one. If morality were sufficient to salvation, Christ need not have died. The moral man has a fair lamp—but it lacks the oil of grace."

Jesus is Lord and creator - the only rightful king of all creation ... king of all things both seen and unseen. To those who worship the false idols of their hearts (any God-replacement) take heed ... Jesus will soon be invading with His armies and will overthrow his enemies and all injustice with the breath of His mouth. But He is offering pardon in advance of His invasion to all those who receive Him (John 1:12, 13). Those who have joined themselves to Him now before He invades will be considered His ally and He will raise them up to be co-heirs with Christ as sons. The alternative is to be under the wrath of the king. We herald this announcement: that the True King is on the throne and he'll be invading. The gospel is not merely an invitation it is a command to all those going their own ways. Will you heed the command? Jesus is Lord, repent and believe."(Bill Wilder) But because of the blindness sin has cast over us, Jesus says, no one can believe in Him unless the Father grants it through the regenerating work of the Holy Spirit (John 6:63-65). So those who, by the grace of God, trust in Jesus and His work can be assured, on the sure testimony of Scripture, that their sins are forgiven and have the promise of

God: eternal life.

To Summarize:

Man was created to glorify God & Enjoy Him forever

"Worthy are you, our Lord and our God to receive glory and honor and power, for You created all things." (Rev 4:11) "Do all to the glory of God" (1 Cor 10:31)

Man has failed to glorify God & is under His just condemnation

"For all have sinned..." (Rom 3:23) The wages of sin is death (Rom 6:23) "These will pay the penalty of eternal destruction" (2 Thes 1:9)

Jesus fully bore the wrath and suffered the punishment sinners deserve

Not wishing that sinners perish forever, God determined to save a people for Himself in the Eternal Son who became a man and lived the life we should have lived and died the death we justly deserve. God loves sinners and sent His Son to be the wrath absorbing sacrifice for their sin (1 John 4:10; John 6:37) he "...gave His life as a ransom for many" (Mk 10:45) & "rose again" from the dead (2 Cor 5:15) on their behalf.

All who, by the grace of God, turn to Jesus in submissive faith are forgiven

If you confess you are a sinner in need of Christ then God has begun to work in you a life-changing, eternally satisfying relationship with Himself! "Repent and believe the gospel (Mk 1:5) "In Your presence is fullness of Joy (Ps 16:11). So leave your self-righteousness, and your sins. Fly unto the Lord Jesus Christ, and receive his righteousness to be your covering, and his blood to be your atonement. If your trust is in Jesus alone for your salvation (that is, if you have no hope save for Christ's mercy alone) then you can be assured that your sins are forgiven and He has granted you eternal life.

For Further Study

[The Gospel is Historical](#) by Tim Keller

[The Gospel Of Jesus Christ](#) by D.A. Carson - 1 Corinthians 15:1-19 (.pdf)

[Paul's Definition of a Christian](#) by John Hendryx

[Difficult Questions, Certain Answers](#) (.pdf) by Nathan Pitchford - A redemptive historical gospel tract

[Is there More Than One Way to God?](#) by John Hendryx

[The Gospel: Offer or Command?](#) by John Hendryx

[The Sum of Saving Knowledge](#) Westminster Assembly Supplemental Document - A Brief Sum of Christian Doctrine, Contained in the Holy Scriptures, and Holden Forth in the Foresaid Confession of Faith and Catechisms; Together with the Practical Use Thereof

[All of Grace](#) by C.H. Spurgeon

[The Everlasting Righteousness](#) by Horatius Bonar

[Monergism](#) Copyright © 2009

Understanding God's Glory

What is God's glory? (John Piper, July 6, 2009)

Wow. That's a good question, because we talk about it endlessly, don't we? And we should know what we're talking about. And yet it is very difficult to define. I'll make a stab at it.

The reason it is so important is because in the Bible I don't know of any truth that is more fundamentally pervasive than God's zeal to be glorified, which means his zeal for us so to think, so to feel, and so to act as to make him look as glorious as he is. We don't add to his glory.

So we want to make God's glory shine. We want to make it visible. "Let your light so shine before men that they may see your good deeds and glorify your Father who is in heaven" (Matthew 5:16). So the goal of my life should be to so live that when people know me well enough, they would say, "God is glorious!" Not "John is glorious," but "God is glorious!" (Which is probably why God lets us sin as much as he does. But that's another question.)

What is it? I believe the glory of God is the going public of his infinite worth. I define the holiness of God as the infinite value of God, the infinite intrinsic worth of God. And when that goes public in creation, the heavens are telling the glory of God, and human beings are manifesting his glory, because we're created in his image, and we're trusting his promises so that we make him look gloriously trustworthy.

The public display of the infinite beauty and worth of God is what I mean by "glory," and I base that partly on Isaiah 6, where the seraphim say, "Holy, holy, holy is the Lord God Almighty. The whole earth is full of his—" and you would expect them to say "holiness" and they say "glory." They're ascribing "Holy, holy, holy is the Lord God Almighty. The whole earth is full of his—" and when that goes public in the earth and fills it, you call it "glory."

So God's glory is the radiance of his holiness, the radiance of his manifold, infinitely worthy and valuable perfections.

Why did God Create the World? (John Piper, September 22, 2012)

But now thus says the Lord, he who created you, O Jacob, he who formed you, O Israel: "Fear not, for I have redeemed you; I have called you by name, you are mine. ² When you pass through the waters, I will be with you; and through the rivers, they shall not overwhelm you; when you walk through fire you shall not be burned, and the flame shall not consume you. ³ For I am the Lord your God, the Holy One of Israel, your Savior. I give Egypt as your ransom, Cush and Seba in exchange for you. ⁴ Because you are precious in my eyes, and honored, and I love you, I give men in return for you, peoples in exchange for your life. ⁵ Fear not, for I am with you; I will bring your offspring from the east, and from the west I will gather you. ⁶ I will say to the north, Give up, and to the south, Do not withhold; bring my sons from afar and my daughters from the end of the earth, ⁷ everyone who is called by my name, whom I created for my glory, whom I formed and made."

After the question: "Does God exist?" to which God answers, "I Am" (Exodus 3:14), the next question that has shaped us most deeply at Bethlehem is: Why did God create the world?

The short answer that resounds through the whole Bible like rolling thunder is: God created the world for his glory. We'll talk in a moment what that means, but let's establish the fact first.

Notice the key verses in Isaiah 43:6b-7, "Bring my sons from afar and my daughters from the end of the earth, everyone who is called by my name, whom *I created for my glory*, whom I formed and made." Even if the most narrow meaning here is "I brought Israel into being for my glory" the use of the words "created," "formed," and "made" are pointing us back to the original act of creation. This is why Israel *ultimately* exists. Because this is why all things ultimately exist — for the glory of God.

The Bible Is Clear

When the first chapter of the Bible says, "So God created man *in his own image*, in the *image of God* he created him; male and female he created them" (Genesis 1:27), what is the point? The point of an image is to image. Images are erected to display the original. Point to the original. Glorify the original. God made humans in his image so that the world would be filled with reflectors of God. Images of God. Seven billion statues of God. So that nobody would miss the point of creation. Nobody (unless they were stone blind) could miss the point of humanity, namely, God. Knowing, loving, showing God.

The angels cry in Isaiah 6:3, “Holy, holy, holy is the Lord of hosts; *the whole earth is full of his glory!*” It’s full of millions of human image bearers. Glorious ruins. But not only humans. Also nature! Why such a breathtaking world for us to live in? Why such a vast universe. I read the other day (can’t verify it!) that there are more stars in the universe than there are words and sounds that all humans of all time have ever spoken. Why?

The Bible is crystal clear about this: “The heavens declare the glory of God” (Psalm 19:1). If someone asks, “If earth is the only inhabited planet and man the only rational inhabitant among the stars, why such a large and empty universe?” The answer is: It’s not about us. It’s about God. And that’s an understatement. God created us to know him and love him and show him. And then he gave us a hint of what he is like — the universe.

The universe is declaring the glory of God and the reason we exist is to see it and be stunned by it and glorify God because of it. So Paul says in Romans 1:20–21:

His invisible attributes, namely, his eternal power and divine nature, have been clearly perceived, ever since the creation of the world, in the things that have been made. So they are without excuse. For although they knew God, they did not glorify him as God.

The great tragedy of the universe is that while human beings were made to glorify God, we have all fallen short of this purpose and “exchanged the glory of the immortal God for images resembling mortal man” (Romans 1:23) — especially the one in the mirror. This is the essence of what we call sin.

So, why did God create the universe? Resounding through the whole Bible — from eternity to eternity — like rolling thunder is: God created the world for his glory.

To Help Us Feel It

Isaiah states it plainly in Isaiah 43:7 (“created for my glory”), and presses home the reality over and over to help us feel it and make it part of our fabric of our thinking:

Isaiah 40:4–5, “Every valley shall be lifted up, and every mountain and hill be made low; . . . And *the glory of the Lord shall be revealed*, and all flesh shall see it together, for the mouth of the Lord has spoken.”

Isaiah 42:8, “I am the Lord; that is my name; my glory I give to no other, nor my praise to carved idols.”

Isaiah 44:23, “Break forth into singing, O mountains, O forest, and every tree in it! For the Lord has redeemed Jacob, and will be glorified in Israel.”

Isaiah 48:9–11, “For my name’s sake I defer my anger, for the sake of my praise I restrain it for you . . . I have tried you in the furnace of affliction. For my own sake, for my own sake, I do it, for how should my name be profaned? My glory I will not give to another.”

Isaiah 49:3, “And he said to me, “You are my servant, Israel, in whom I will be glorified.”

Isaiah 60:2, “For behold, darkness shall cover the earth, and thick darkness the peoples; but the Lord will arise upon you, and his glory will be seen upon you.”

Isaiah 61:1–3, “The Spirit of the Lord God is upon me, because the Lord has anointed me to bring good news to the poor; . . . to give them . . . the garment of praise instead of a faint spirit; that they may be called oaks of righteousness, the planting of the Lord, that he may be glorified.”

Glorify Is Different from Beautify

This is why God created the world — “that he may be glorified.” Which does not mean: “that he may be *made* glorious.” Don’t take the word “glorify” and treat it like the word “beautify.” To beautify means to take a plain room and make it beautiful. We don’t take a plain God and make him beautiful. That is not what glorifying God means.

When God created the world he did not create out of any need or any weakness or any deficiency. He created out of fullness and strength and complete sufficiency. As Jonathan Edwards said, “Tis no argument of the emptiness or deficiency of a fountain that it is inclined to overflow” (Yale: *Works*, Vol. 8, 448). So we don’t glorify God by improving his glory, but by seeing and savoring and showing his glory (which is the same as knowing, loving, showing).

Or switch to the word “magnify” (so Philippians 1:20, “that Christ be magnified” *megalunthesetai*). We magnify his glory like a telescope not a microscope. Microscopes make small things look bigger than they are. Telescopes make unimaginably big things look more like what they really are. Our lives are to be telescopes for the glory of God. We were created to see his glory, be thrilled by his glory, and live so as to help others see him and savor him for what he really is. To know, to love, to show his glory.

That is why the universe exists. If this takes hold of you the way it should, it will affect the way you think and feel about everything. Now you know why everything exists. You don't know everything. There are billions of things you don't know. But you are never at

a loss to know something important about everything. Because you know that everything exists for the glory of God. You know something about everything. And this is one of the most important things you can know about anything. And so to know this one thing — that all things exist for the glory of God — is to know something supremely important about everything. Namely, for what purpose it ultimately exists. That is amazing.

Why This Particular World?

But we can't leave it here. It's too general. It's too disconnected from the specific persons of the Trinity and from the flow of history the way God is guiding it. The question is not just, “Why did God create the world?” but why this world? — why these thousands of years of human history with a glorious beginning, and a horrible fall into sin, and a history of Israel, and the coming of the Son of God into the world, a substitutionary death, a triumphant resurrection, the founding of the church and the history of global missions to where we are today? Why this world? This history?

And the short answer to that question is, *for the glory of God's grace displayed supremely in the death of Jesus*. Or to say it more fully: This world — this history as it is unfolding — was created and is guided and sustained by God so that the grace of God, supremely displayed in the death and resurrection of Jesus for sinners would be glorified throughout all eternity in the Christ-exalting joys of the redeemed. Or let's just keep it short: this world exists for the glory of God's grace revealed in the saving work of Jesus. Which means that Bethlehem is not just a God-centered church, but a Christ-exalting church and a gospel-driven church. For us there is an unbreakable connection between the glory of God, the glory of grace, the glory of Christ, the glory of the cross.

.....

So we ask in conclusion: “Why did God create the world?” And we answer with the Scriptures: God created the world for his glory. God did not create out of need. He did not create the world out of a deficiency that needed to be made up. He was not lonely. He was supremely happy in the fellowship of the Trinity — Father, Son, and Holy Spirit. He created the world to put his glory on display that his people might know him, and love him, and show him.

And why did he create a world that would become like this world? A world that fell into sin. A world that exchanged his glory for the glory of images? Why would he permit and guide and sustain such a world? And we answer: for the praise of the glory of the grace of God displayed supremely in the death of Jesus.

Some Concluding Questions

Which means that the ultimate reason for all things is the communication of the glory of God's grace for the happy praise of a redeemed multitude from every people and tongue and tribe and nation. All things are created and guided and sustained for the glory of God, which reaches its apex in the glory of his grace, which shines most brightly and the glory of Christ, which comes to focus most clearly in the glory of the cross.

So I ask:

- Is the glory of God the brightest treasure on the horizon of your future. Paul expressed the Christian heart in Romans 5:2, “We rejoice in hope of the glory of God.”
- Is the glory of grace the sweetest news to your guilty soul?
- Is the glory of Christ in your life the present, personal embodiment of the grace of God?
- Is the glory of the cross the saddest and happiest beauty to your redeemed soul?

God Is Most Glorified in Us When We Are Most Satisfied in Him

Philippians 1:12–26:

I want you to know, brothers, that what has happened to me has really served to advance the gospel,¹³ so that it has become known throughout the whole imperial guard and to all the rest that my imprisonment is for Christ.¹⁴ And most of the brothers, having become confident in the Lord by my imprisonment, are much more bold to speak the word without fear.¹⁵ Some indeed preach Christ from envy and rivalry, but others from good will.¹⁶ The latter do it out of love, knowing that I am put here for the defense of

the gospel.¹⁷ The former proclaim Christ out of selfish ambition, not sincerely but thinking to afflict me in my imprisonment.¹⁸ What then? Only that in every way, whether in pretense or in truth, Christ is proclaimed, and in that I rejoice.

Yes, and I will rejoice,¹⁹ for I know that through your prayers and the help of the Spirit of Jesus Christ this will turn out for my deliverance,²⁰ as it is my eager expectation and hope that I will not be at all ashamed, but that with full courage now as always Christ will be honored in my body, whether by life or by death.²¹ For to me to live is Christ, and to die is gain.²² If I am to live in the flesh, that means fruitful labor for me. Yet which I shall choose I cannot tell.²³ I am hard pressed between the two. My desire is to depart and be with Christ, for that is far better.²⁴ But to remain in the flesh is more necessary on your account.²⁵ Convinced of this, I know that I will remain and continue with you all, for your progress and joy in the faith,²⁶ so that in me you may have ample cause to glory in Christ Jesus, because of my coming to you again.

In our series on the 30-year theological trademarks of Bethlehem we focus on Christian Hedonism. And let's be clear from the outset that Bethlehem has not been built around a slogan or a label. The term "Christian Hedonism" is not in any of this church's official documents. It's not in our constitution, or our church covenant, or our Elder Affirmation of Faith, or Values booklet, or our Ten Dimensions of Church Life. It's catchy, it's controversial, it's not in the Bible, and you don't need to like it just because I do. So the point of this message is not at all to push a label or a slogan. The point is to talk about the massive and pervasive biblical truth that some of us love to call Christian Hedonism.

So this sermon is packed with some of the juiciest, most wonderful things that I love to know and experience. We need to get to work. Here's the outline:

- First, there's a problem that needs be solved because of my second message in this series.
- Second, Christian Hedonism is the biblical solution to that problem.
- C. S. Lewis, and St. Paul give the basis for that solution.
- Fourth, this solution — Christian Hedonism — changes everything in your life. (Eleven examples!)

That's a tall order for one sermon. So here we go.

1. What I said in the second message created a problem.

I asked, Why did God create the world? And I answered: God created this world *for the praise of the glory of his grace displayed supremely in the death of Jesus*. The problem is that, at the heart of that answer is God's self-promotion. God created the world for his own praise. For his own glory.

Oprah Winfrey, Brad Pitt, the early C. S. Lewis, Eric Reece, Michael Prowse all walk away from such a God. They stumble over God's self-promotion.

- Oprah walked away from orthodox Christianity when she was about 27 because of the biblical teaching that God is Jealous — he demands that he and no one else get our highest allegiance and affection. It didn't sound loving to her.
- Brad Pitt turned away from his boyhood faith, he says, because God says, "You have to say that I'm the best. . . . It seemed to be about ego."
- C. S. Lewis, before he became a Christian, complained that God's demand to be praised sounded like "a vain woman who wants compliments."
- Erik Reece, the writer of *An American Gospel*, rejected the Jesus of the Gospels because only an egomaniac would demand that we love him for than we love our parents and children.
- And Michael Prowse, the columnist for the London Financial times, turned away because only "tyrants, puffed up with pride, crave adulation."

So people see this as a problem — that God created the world for his own praise. They think such self-exaltation would be immoral and loveless. That may be how you feel.

2. Christian Hedonism is the biblical solution to this problem.

Christian Hedonism says, God is most glorified in you when you are most satisfied in him. That's the shortest summary of what we mean by Christian Hedonism. If that is true, then there is no conflict between your greatest exhilaration and God's greatest glorification.

In fact, not only is there no conflict between your happiness and God's glory, but his glory shines in your happiness, when your happiness is in him. And since God is the source of greatest happiness, and since he is the greatest treasure in the world, and since his glory is the most satisfying gift he could possibly give us, therefore it is the kindest, most loving thing he could possibly do — to reveal himself, and magnify himself and vindicate himself for our everlasting enjoyment. "In your presence there is fullness of joy; at your right hand are pleasures forevermore" (Psalm 16:11).

God is the one being for whom self-exaltation is the most loving act, because he is exalting for us what alone can satisfy us fully and forever. If we exalt ourselves, we are not loving, because we distract people from the one Person who can make them happy forever, God. But if God exalts himself, he draws attention to the one Person who can make us happy forever, himself. He is not an egomaniac. He is an infinitely glorious, all-satisfying God, offering us everlasting and supreme joy in himself.

That's the solution to our problem.

- No Oprah, if God were not jealous for all your affections, he would be indifferent to your final misery.
- No Brad Pitt, if God didn't demand that you see him as the best, he wouldn't care about your supreme happiness.
- No Mr. Lewis, God is not vain in demanding your praise. This is his highest virtue, and your highest joy.
- No, Erik Reece, if Jesus didn't lay claim on greater love than your children do, he be selling your heart to what cannot satisfy forever.
- No, Michael Prowse, God does not crave your adulation, he offers it as your greatest pleasure.

God is most glorified in you when you are most satisfied in him. God's design to pursue his own glory turns out to be love. And our duty to pursue God's glory turns out to be a quest for joy. That's the solution to the problem of God's self-exaltation.

3. Third, C. S. Lewis, and St. Paul give the basis for that solution — the basis for Christian Hedonism.

Lewis saw the basis in human experience. St. Paul shows it the letter to the Philippians. Here is the great discovery as I first found it in Lewis's book, *Reflections on the Psalms*. He is discovering why God's demand for our praise is not vain.

The most obvious fact about praise — whether of God or any thing — strangely escaped me. I thought of it in terms of compliment, approval, or the giving of honor. I had never noticed that all enjoyment spontaneously overflows into praise unless . . . shyness or the fear of boring others is deliberately brought in to check it. The world rings with praise — lovers praising their mistresses, readers their favorite poet, walkers praising the countryside, players praising their favorite game — praise of weather, wines, dishes, actors, motors, horses, colleges, countries, historical personages, children, flowers, mountains, rare stamps, rare beetles, even sometimes politicians or scholars. I had not noticed how the humblest, and at the same time most balanced and capacious, minds, praised most, while the cranks, misfits and malcontents praised least....

I had not noticed either that just as men spontaneously praise whatever they value, so they spontaneously urge us to join them in praising it: "Isn't she lovely? Wasn't it glorious? Don't you think that magnificent?" The Psalmists in telling everyone to praise God are doing what all men do when they speak of what they care about. My whole, more general, difficulty about the praise of God depended on my absurdly denying to us, as regards the supremely Valuable, what we delight to do, what indeed we can't help doing, about everything else we value.

I think we delight to praise what we enjoy because the praise not merely expresses but completes the enjoyment; it is its appointed consummation. It is not out of compliment that lovers keep on telling one another how beautiful they are; the delight is incomplete till it is expressed.¹

There it was. God's relentless command that we see him as glorious and praise him is a command that we settle for nothing less than the completion of our joy in him. Praise is not just the expression, but the consummation, of our joy what is supremely enjoyable, namely, God. In *his* presence is fullness of joy; at *his* right hand are pleasures forevermore (Psalm 16:11). In demanding our praise, he is demanding the completion of our pleasure. God is most glorified in us when we are most satisfied in him.

That Christ Be Seen As Great

And that is what we find in Philippians 1:20–21.

It is my eager expectation and hope that I will not be at all ashamed, but that with full courage now as always Christ will be honored [*magnified — to cause to be seen as great*] in my body, whether by life or by death.²¹ For to me to live is Christ, and to die is gain.

Paul says that his great passion in life — I hope it's your great passion in life — is that in his life Christ would be seen as great — supremely great. That is why God created us and saved us — to make Christ look like what he really is — supremely great.

Now the relationship between verses 20 and 21 is the key to seeing how Paul thinks that happens. It's going to happen, Paul says — Christ is going to be magnified in my body by life or death — "because to me to live is Christ and to die is gain" (verse 21). Notice that "life" in verse 20 corresponds to "live" in verse 21 and "death" in verse 20 corresponds to "die" in verse 21. So Paul is explaining in both cases — life and death — how Christ is going to look great.

He will look great in my *life* because “for me to *live* is Christ.” He explains in Philippians 3:8, “I count everything as loss because of the surpassing worth of knowing Christ Jesus my Lord.” So Christ is more precious, more valuable, more satisfying than all that life on this earth can give. “I count everything as loss because of the surpassing worth of knowing Christ Jesus my Lord.”

This is what he means when he says in Philippians 1:21, “To me to live is Christ.” And *that* he says is how his life magnifies Christ — makes him look great. Christ is most magnified in Paul’s life when Paul, in his life, is most satisfied in Christ. That’s the plain teaching of these two texts.

Death As Gain?

And it gets even plainer when you consider the death half of Philippians 1:20–21. Christ will be magnified in my body by death, “because to me to die is gain” (verse 21). Why would death be gain? The answer is in verse 23b: “My desire is to depart and be with Christ, for that is far better.” Death is gain because it means a greater closeness of being with Christ. Death is “to depart and be with Christ.”

This is why Paul says in verse 21 that to die is gain. You add up all the losses that death will cost you (your family, your job, your dream retirement, the friends you leave behind, your favorite bodily pleasures) — you add up all these losses, and then you replace them only with death and Christ — if when you do that you joyfully say, *gain!*, then Christ is magnified in your dying. Christ is most magnified in your death, when you are so satisfied in Christ, that losing everything and getting only Christ is called gain.

Or to sum up both halves of the verse: *Christ is glorified in you when he is more precious to you than all that life can give or death can take.*

The Centrality of the Cross

That’s the biblical basis for Christian Hedonism: God is most glorified in us when we are most satisfied in him. And this really was already implicit in the second message in this series. God created the world *for the praise of the glory of his grace displayed supremely in the death of Jesus*. Which means that the pursuit of his own praise reaches its climax at the place where it does us the most good, the cross. At the cross God upholds his glory and provides our forgiveness. At the cross God vindicates his own honor and secures our happiness. At the cross God magnifies his own worth and satisfies our soul.

In the greatest act of history, Christ made it come true for undeserving sinners that God could be most glorified in us by our being most satisfied in him.

4. Christian Hedonism changes everything: 11 illustrations

Death

1. We’ve just seen how it changes death. If you want to make Christ look great in your dying, there is no big performance or achievement or heroic sacrifice. There is simply a child-like laying yourself into the arms of the one who makes the loss of everything gain.

Conversion

2. Christian Hedonism changes how we think about conversion. Matthew 13:44, “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.” Becoming a Christian not only means believing truth. It means finding a treasure. So evangelism becomes not only persuasion about truth but pointing people to a Treasure—that is more valuable than everything they have.

The Fight of Faith

3. Christian Hedonism changes “the good fight of faith” (1 Timothy 6:12). John says in John 1:12, “To all who *received* Jesus, who *believed* in his name, he gave the right to become children of God” (John 1:12). Believing Jesus is receiving him. As what? As the infinitely valuable Treasure that he is. Faith is seeing and savoring this Treasure. And so the fight of faith is a fight for joy in Jesus. A fight to see and savor Jesus is more precious than anything in the world. Because this savoring shows him to be supremely valuable.

Combating Evil

4. Christian Hedonism changes how we combat evil in our lives. Jeremiah 2:13 gives the Christian Hedonist definition of evil: “My people have committed two evils: they have forsaken me, the fountain of living waters, and hewed out cisterns for themselves, broken cisterns that can hold no water.” Evil is the suicidal preference for the empty wells of the world over the living waters of God’s fellowship. We fight evil by the pursuit of the fullest satisfaction in the river of God’s delights (Psalm 36:8).

What Hell Is

5. Christian Hedonism changes how we think of hell. Since the way to be saved and go to heaven is to embrace Jesus as your source of greatest joy, hell is a place of suffering, a place of eternal unhappiness, prepared for people who refuse to be happy in the triune God.

Self-Denial

6. Christian Hedonism changes the way we think about self-denial. Oh, it is really there in the teachings of Jesus, “If anyone would come after me, let him deny himself and take up his cross and follow me” (Mark 8:34). But now the meaning becomes:

- Deny yourself the wealth of the world so you can have the wealth of being with Christ.
- Deny yourself the fame of the world to have the joy of God’s approval.
- Deny yourself the security and safety of the world to have the solid, secure fellowship of Jesus.
- Deny yourself the short, unsatisfying pleasures of the world so that you can have fullness of joy and pleasures forevermore at God’s right hand.

Which means there is no such thing as ultimate self-denial, because to live is Christ and to die is gain.

Money

7. Christian Hedonism changes the way we think about handling our money and the act of giving. Acts 20:35, “It is more blessed to give than to receive.” 2 Corinthians 9:7, “Each one must give as he has decided in his heart, not reluctantly or under compulsion, for God loves a cheerful giver.” The motive to be a generous person, is that it expresses and expands our joy in God. And the pursuit of deepest joy is the pursuit of giving not getting.

Corporate Worship

8. Christian Hedonism changes the way we do corporate worship. Corporate worship is the collective act of glorifying God. But God is glorified in that service when the people are satisfied in him. Therefore, the worship leaders — musicians and preachers — see their task primarily as breaking open a fountain of living water and spreading a feast of rich food. The task of the worshippers is to drink and eat and say a satisfied "Ahhh." Because God is most glorified in those worshippers when they are most satisfied in him.

Disability and Weakness

9. Christian Hedonism changes the way we experience disability and weakness. Stunningly, paradoxically, Jesus says to the weak and thorn-pierced Paul, “My grace is sufficient for you, for my power is made perfect in weakness.” To which Paul responds, “Therefore I will boast all the more gladly [yes this is the voice of the thorn-pierced Christian Hedonist] of my weaknesses, so that the power of Christ may rest upon me” (2 Corinthians 12:9).

Love

10. Christian Hedonism changes the meaning of love. Paul describes the love of the Macedonians like this: “In a severe test of affliction, their *abundance of joy* and their extreme poverty have overflowed in a wealth of generosity on their part” (2 Corinthians 8:2). In verse 8, Paul calls this "love." "Abundant joy" in “severe affliction” and “extreme poverty” overflowed in loving generosity. Still poor. Still afflicted. But so full of joy it overflowed in love. So Christian Hedonism defines love as the overflow (or the expansion) of joy in God that meets the needs of others.

Ministry

11. Christian Hedonism changes the meaning of ministry. What is the ministry aim of the great apostle Paul? 2 Corinthians 1:24, “Not that we lord it over your faith, but we are workers with you for your joy, for you stand firm in your faith.” All ministry should be one way or the other a working with others for their joy. That’s why God created you. That’s why Christ died for you. That’s why we serve you as your pastors. And that is why I have preached this message. We are workers with you for your joy in God. Because God is most glorified in you when you are most satisfied in him.

¹C. S. Lewis, *Reflections on the Psalms* (New York: Harcourt, Brace and World, 1958), 93–95.