

Heart Over Mind—The Erroneous Model of Christian Hedonism

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The following two statements and seven points were taken from a message preached by John Piper titled *Think Christ* (with Russian Translation) preached 10/12/09. It was part of a three part series on Christian hedonism. The individual titles were *Think Christ*, *Feel Christ*, and *Preach Christ*. Following these statements are my notes with various verses and then biblical examples showing the error of the Christian hedonistic model presented in the *Think Christ* sermon.

Piper says:

“So my point is: If you keep joy in God at the center of your ministry you will be protected from these kinds of extremes [legalism and charismatic extremes].”

“Now tonight I want to shift away from focusing on joy to focusing on how the life of the mind, how thinking relates to that joy. So let me state my main point in several different ways:”

1. Right thinking about God exists to serve right feelings for God.
2. Logic exists for the sake of love.
3. Reasoning exists for the sake of rejoicing.
4. Doctrine exists for the sake of delight.
5. Reflection about God exists for the sake of affection for God.
6. The head is meant to serve the heart.
7. Knowing truth is the proper means to admiring truth.

My notes follow:

At a glance these 7 statements may seem to some to have a ring of truth. However, upon close examination in the context of Christian hedonism’s axiom—“God is most glorified in us when we are most satisfied in Him” it becomes apparent that these statements are a contrast to biblical truth. By these 7 ways of stating his main point notice that Piper essentially makes the mind a servant to feelings, love, rejoicing, delight, affection, the heart, and admiration. The 7 points depict the mind (represented by the words: thinking, logic, reasoning, doctrine, reflection, head, and knowing) as existing to or as a means to satisfy feelings, love, rejoicing, delight, affection, the heart, and admiration. In other words, the king is feelings, love, rejoicing, delight, affection, the heart, and admiration all of which are served by the mind.¹ Consequently, if, feelings,

¹ This is consistent with the axiom by which one’s level of satisfaction in God determines the level God is glorified, thus, making satisfaction in God the primary basis for most glorifying God. Consequently, satisfaction becomes the goal of the axiom’s host. Clearly, in this axiom, God and his glory are not the end instead it is one’s satisfaction that becomes the end. It is not God Who is sought for Who He is. Rather, God is sought as a means for satisfaction. In this sense satisfaction is esteemed to be of more importance than God Himself. This is very similar to, if not the same as *ethical egoism* wherein the pursuit of one’s own happiness (satisfaction in this case) is the highest good (See Michael Vlach’s, *Philosophy* 101, Ethical Egoism).

love, rejoicing, delight, affection, the heart, and admiration are not satisfied the logical conclusion is that the mind is either wrong or insufficient because it has failed to properly serve its king. In essence, Piper sees the mind as the servant and joy (feelings, love, rejoicing, delight, affection, the heart, and admiration) as the master, thus, reversing the logical priority of the Bible's description of the mind in relation to the heart.

Clarification:

It is necessary to clarify from the beginning of this article that in discussing the necessity of the mind to lead or instruct the heart we are not talking about mere intellectualism or in other words, acquiring knowledge purely for the purpose of acquiring knowledge. Rather, our discussion pertains to the priority the Bible gives to the role of the mind in relation to the heart. It is the role of the mind to lead and instruct the heart in the light of information gleaned from the revelation of the Word of God. In essence then, the objective data the mind receives from the Word of God informs the subjective heart. Under this model the standard is neither the mind nor the heart. Rather, the standard is the Word of God.

As opposed to serving or existing for the sake of the rest of the person the Bible teaches us that the renewing of the mind [thinking] transforms the person (Rm. 12:2).

“¹ I urge you therefore, brethren, by the mercies of God, to present your bodies a living and holy sacrifice, acceptable to God, which is your spiritual service of worship. ² And do not be conformed to this world, but be transformed by the renewing of your mind, that you may prove what the will of God is, that which is good and acceptable and perfect.”

Romans 12:1-2

Under the Christian hedonist's model, feelings, love, rejoicing, delight, affection, the heart, and admiration sit as judges on what the mind thinks. In the Biblical model just the opposite is true. A simple comparison of Romans 12:2 and Hebrews 4:12 bears this out.

“For the word of God is living and active and sharper than any two-edged sword, and piercing as far as the division of soul and spirit, of both joints and marrow, and able to judge the thoughts and intentions of the heart.”

Hebrews 4:12

In this verse the phrase “able to judge” is the single Greek word “kritikos.” We get the English word “critical” from it. This verse explains that it is the nature of the Word of God to be critical of the thoughts and intents of the heart. Essentially, God's Word is the standard or Judge and our thoughts and intents are not permitted to take the bench but are to remain subject to and be measured in the light of the ruling of the Word of God.

Thus, between Heb.4:12 and Romans 12:2 which commands us to be transformed by the renewing of the mind, we see that the mind is to be renewed by the Word of God and consequently, the renewed mind transforms the person. In the light of the biblical model one could say that in the Christian, the mind informed by the Word of God results in transformation of life—sanctification.

Additional verses:

⁹ And this I pray, that your love may abound still more and more in real knowledge and all discernment, ¹⁰ so that you may approve the things that are excellent, in order to be sincere and blameless until the day of Christ; ¹¹ having been filled with the fruit of righteousness which comes through Jesus Christ, to the glory and praise of God.

Philippians 1:9-11 NASB

⁹ For this reason also, since the day we heard of it, we have not ceased to pray for you and to ask that you may be filled with the knowledge of His will in all spiritual wisdom and understanding, ¹⁰ so that you may walk in a manner worthy of the Lord, to please Him in all respects, bearing fruit in every good work and increasing in the knowledge of God; ¹¹ strengthened with all power, according to His glorious might, for the attaining of all steadfastness and patience; joyously ¹² giving thanks to the Father, who has qualified us to share in the inheritance of the saints in light. ¹³ For He delivered us from the domain of darkness, and transferred us to the kingdom of His beloved Son, ¹⁴ in whom we have redemption, the forgiveness of sins.

Colossians 1:9-14 NASB

⁸ But now you also, put them all aside: anger, wrath, malice, slander, and abusive speech from your mouth. ⁹ Do not lie to one another, since you laid aside the old self with its evil practices, ¹⁰ and have put on the new self who is being renewed to a true knowledge according to the image of the One who created him ¹¹ — a renewal in which there is no distinction between Greek and Jew, circumcised and uncircumcised, barbarian, Scythian, slave and freeman, but Christ is all, and in all.

Colossians 3:8-11 NASB

Paul, a bond-servant of God, and an apostle of Jesus Christ, for the faith of those chosen of God and the knowledge of the truth which is according to godliness...

Titus 1:1 NASB

² Grace and peace be multiplied to you in the knowledge of God and of Jesus our Lord; ³ seeing that His divine power has granted to us everything pertaining to life and godliness, through the true knowledge of Him who called us by His own glory and excellence.

2 Peter 1:2-3 NASB

⁸ For if these qualities are yours and are increasing, they render you neither useless nor unfruitful in the true knowledge of our Lord Jesus Christ.

2 Peter 1:8 NASB

Four Biblical Examples Depicting the Importance of the Mind's Role to Lead the Heart

"Now it came about when the king lived in his house, and the Lord had given him rest on every side from all his enemies, ² that the king said to Nathan the prophet, "See now, I dwell in a house of cedar, but the ark of God dwells within tent curtains." ³ And Nathan said to the king, "Go, do all that is in your mind, for the Lord is with you." ⁴ But it came about in the same night that the word of the Lord came to Nathan, saying, ⁵ "Go and say to My servant David, 'Thus says the Lord,' Are you the one who should build Me a house to dwell in? ⁶ "For I have not dwelt in a house since the day I brought up the sons of Israel from Egypt, even to this day; but I have been moving about in a tent, even in a tabernacle. ⁷ Wherever I have gone with all the sons of Israel, did I speak a word with one of the tribes of Israel, which I commanded to shepherd My people Israel, saying, 'Why have you not built Me a house of cedar?'"

2 Sam 7:1-7 NASB

When King David observed that he lived in a house of cedar but the ark of God dwelt in tent curtains, he experienced a desire in his heart² to build a house for God (7:2). David inquired of this with the prophet Nathan (2 Sam. 7:2 with Acts 7:46). Obviously, this desire of David's heart sounded good to Nathan. Therefore, Nathan told David to do all that was in his heart for the LORD was with him (7:3).

This desire to build a house for God was indeed a good desire, for God said that David did well that it was in his heart to build a house for Him (2 Chron. 6:8). However, David's good zeal for God was not according to knowledge from God. He had a good desire but not based on a specific Word from God. God made this clear to David when through Nathan the prophet, He informed David that he was not to build a house for Him (2 Samuel 7:2-7). Stressing the fact that God had given no Word on a house being built for Him, God asked David a rhetorical question in verse 7,

"Wherever I have gone with all the sons of Israel, did I speak a word with one of the tribes of Israel, which I commanded to shepherd My people Israel, saying, 'Why have you not built Me a house of cedar?'"

² 1 Chronicles 17:1-27 is the parallel passage to 2 Samuel 7. There in verse 2 the NASB translates the same Hebrew word used in 2 Samuel 7:3 (*lebab*) as *heart*.

For David to have proceeded with his good intentions to build without knowledge from God, he would have built against God. In this biblical example the priority of biblical knowledge rightly ruled the desire or feelings of David. The specific knowledge David received from God acted as a restraint on his good zeal (Pr. 19:2 and Rom. 10:2).

*Under the Christian hedonism model “the head is meant to **serve** the heart”, therefore, David would have been correct in proceeding with the building of the house even before he made his thoughts known to the prophet. Certainly, after his inquiry (Acts 7:46) and the prophet initially telling him to do all that was in his heart David could have proceeded with joy. However, God graciously intervened with knowledge of His will and spared David the consequences of living by desire even if it was a good desire. The knowledge God gave David (1 Kings 5:3; 1 Chron. 22:8; 28:3) instructed David’s heart and his life was conformed to God’s will. This is what we saw when we compared Romans 12:2 with Hebrews 4:12 and this is the biblical model—the mind informed by God’s Word instructing and directing the heart’s desire.*

We do not know what consequences would have occurred had David proceeded without the knowledge God graciously supplied but we can be certain the results would have been costly, inevitably providing the enemies of God an opportunity to blaspheme. Now consider some of the consequences we are aware of from Scripture when the head is servant to the heart.

We will begin with another event in the life of David and look also at Eve and Achan. In each case there was an explicit command communicating God’s will to the minds of each person. However, in each case the disposition of the person became one in which the head became servant to the heart, thus, the desires of the heart directed the mind to refuse the knowledge from God and accept only that which satisfied the heart’s desire.

The Scripture speaks for itself in these matters so my comments will be few. I list the command first and then the sin. In each situation notice the slippery slope of sin once the heart begins to rule the mind (See James 1:13-15).

David

The Commands:

¹³ **"You shall not murder.** ¹⁴ **"You shall not commit adultery.**

Exodus 20:13-14

¹ *Then it happened in the spring, at **the time when kings go out to battle**, that David sent Joab and his servants with him and all Israel, and they destroyed the sons of Ammon and besieged Rabbah. **But David stayed at Jerusalem.***

2 Samuel 11:1

This verse informs us that David was acting contrary to that which God had trained him to do. Instead of going to war he stayed at home. See 1 Sam 17:31-36; 2 Sam 22:35; Psalm 18:34; Psalm 144:1; 1 Chron. 28:3; 2 Chron. 6:8.

² Now when evening came David arose from his bed and walked around on the roof of the king's house, and from the roof he **saw a woman bathing; and the woman was very beautiful in appearance.** ³ **So David sent and inquired about the woman.** And one said, "Is this not Bathsheba, the daughter of Eliam, the wife of Uriah the Hittite?" ⁴ **And David sent messengers and took her, and when she came to him, he lay with her;** and when she had purified herself from her uncleanness, she returned to her house. ⁵ And the woman conceived; and she sent and told David, and said, "I am pregnant."

2 Samuel 11:2-5 NASB

⁹ **'Why have you despised the word of the Lord by doing evil in His sight? You have struck down Uriah the Hittite with the sword, have taken his wife to be your wife, and have killed him with the sword of the sons of Ammon.** ¹⁰ 'Now therefore, the sword shall never depart from your house, **because you have despised Me** and have taken the wife of Uriah the Hittite to be your wife.' NASB

2 Samuel 12:9-10

⁵ because David did what was right in the sight of the Lord, and had not turned aside from anything that He commanded him all the days of his life, **except in the case of Uriah the Hittite.** NASB

1 Kings 15:5

In Psalm 16:8 David wrote, "I have set the LORD always before me: because He is at my right hand, I shall not be moved." (KJV) However, in reference to Bathsheba, although David knew God and God's commands, David's heart turned his attention from both God and His command. His despising heart (2 Sam. 12:9) led his mind to consider what he had seen, then inquire, and then seize upon an opportunity as Uriah (Bathsheba's husband) was off to war. The result was adultery and eventually murder. As indicated in 1 Kings 15:5, this sin would stand out as a negative in the life and career of King David.

Eve

The command:

¹⁶ "And the Lord God commanded the man, saying, "From any tree of the garden you may eat freely; ¹⁷ but from the tree of the knowledge of good and evil you shall not eat, for in the day that you eat from it you shall surely die."
NASB

Genesis 2:16-17

¹ Now the serpent was more crafty than any beast of the field which the Lord God had made. And he said to the woman, "Indeed, has God said, 'You shall not eat from any tree of the garden'?" ² And the woman said to the serpent, "From the fruit of the trees of the garden we may eat; ³ but from the fruit of the tree which is in the middle of the garden, God has said, ' You shall not eat from it or touch it, lest you die.' " ⁴ And the serpent said to the woman, "You surely shall not die! ⁵ "For God knows that in the day you eat from it your eyes will be opened, and you will be like God, knowing good and evil." ⁶ **When the woman saw that the tree was good for food, and that it was a, and that the tree was desirable to make one wise, she took from its fruit and ate; and she gave also to her husband with her, and he ate.** NASB

Genesis 3:1-6

Verse two reveals that Eve was aware of God's command, yet Satan's words cast doubt on God's command and in doing so opened the door for Eve's heart to take lead over what she knew in her mind to be God's command. Notice it was at this point that the tree became in her eyes, "good for food" "delight to the eyes" and "desirable to make one wise..." Eve did no longer perceive the eating of the fruit of the tree as a violation of God's revealed Word, the result of which, according to God's command, would be death. Instead the tree and eating its fruit became a means to bring her heart satisfaction. Consequently, she took from its fruit and ate.

Achan

The command:

¹⁸ "But as for you, only keep yourselves from the things under the ban, lest you covet them and take some of the things under the ban, so you would make the camp of Israel accursed and bring trouble on it. ¹⁹ But all the silver and gold and articles of bronze and iron are holy to the Lord; they shall go into the treasury of the Lord." NASB

Joshua 6:18-19

²⁰ So Achan answered Joshua and said, "Truly, I have sinned against the Lord, the God of Israel, and this is what I did: ²¹ when **I saw** among the spoil a beautiful mantle from Shinar and two hundred shekels of silver and a bar of gold fifty shekels in weight, then **I coveted** them and **took them**; and behold, they are concealed in the earth inside my tent with the silver underneath it." NASB

Joshua 7:20-21

*Here again is a blueprint for sin as the mind is made to serve the heart. Achan saw those items which had been designated by God as being under the ban. There is not anything necessarily wrong at this point for seeing the items would be both consequential and necessary to accomplish God's will in destroying the city and taking certain items into the treasury of the Lord (6:19). However, we see that Achan's heart took the lead over what he knew in his mind to be wrong and so changed his mind to serve his heart to the point of finding a hiding place for the stolen goods beneath his tent. Twice, the Holy Spirit tells us explicitly that Achan acted unfaithfully (Joshua 7:1; 22:20). The ESV translates this behavior as breaking faith. To act unfaithfully or break faith is to act without regard for the Word of God. Achan was unfaithful to God's command. Instead of acting in accord with what he **knew** to be the will of God, Achan's mind followed his heart and he sinned.*

In each of these three preceding instances the consequences of the heart leading the head were devastating. God was dishonored, those sinning suffered greatly, as well as others whose lives were not specifically involved or even present when the sin occurred.

*Proponents of Christian hedonism might say in these last three examples I have proved their point showing that the head does serve the heart and that had the intentions of their hearts been good then the head would have served the heart with good. However, one must remember the **first** of the four examples. In that example the intention of David's heart was good but this good intention (2 Chron. 6:8) would have led him to sin had his mind served that intention.*

In 2 Timothy 4:2 the apostle Paul charged Timothy to preach the Word of God; to be ready at all times and to reprove rebuke and exhort, with great patience and instruction. Then in verses three and four he stated the reason,

"For the time is coming when people will not endure sound teaching, but having itching ears they will accumulate for themselves teachers to suit their own passions, and will turn away from listening to the truth and wander off into myths." ESV

Once again we see the Word of God depicting the danger of the passions of the heart leading the mind. When the heart leads it accepts from the mind only those teachings that it finds appealing to its desires ("having itching ears they will accumulate for themselves teachers to suit their own passions"). Notice the contrasting instruction to Timothy in the very next verse as Paul demonstrated to Timothy the priority of a sober mind so as to do God's will,

“As for you, always be sober-minded, endure suffering, do the work of an evangelist, fulfill your ministry.” 2 Timothy 4:5 ESV

Reminder of Clarification:

It is necessary to remember that in discussing the necessity of the mind to lead or instruct the heart that we are not talking about mere intellectualism or in other words, acquiring knowledge purely for the purpose of acquiring knowledge. Rather, our discussion pertains to the priority the Bible gives to the role of the mind in relation to the heart. It is the role of the mind to lead and instruct the heart in the light of information gleaned from the revelation of the Word of God. In essence then, the objective data the mind receives from the Word of God informs the subjective heart. Under this model the standard is neither the mind nor the heart. Rather, the standard is the Word of God.

Summary:

The pages of Scripture are replete with examples and statements teaching the logical priority of the head (mind) over the heart for the purpose of leading and instructing the heart in the light of biblical truth. Christian hedonism’s model of the mind as the servant and joy (feelings, love, rejoicing, delight, affection, the heart, and admiration) as the master reverses the logical priority of the biblical model of the mind’s role to instruct the heart. The consequences of reversing this priority are clearly shown time after time in the pages of Scripture to be devastating. At its core, Christian hedonism undermines biblical truth as it establishes subjective elements as the criterion for discernment—a movement that inevitably draws people not to the God of light but toward the deep dark chasms of human experience.

“Therefore, to the one who knows the right thing to do, and does not do it, to him it is sin.”

James 4:17