

Happy Holiness

One fine summer afternoon, I was working in the drive-through at Starbucks and had a customer order a Venti sugar-free, heavy-cream, no-whip Caramel Frappuccino Light. Allow me to translate. That's a 20-ounce Frappuccino made with sugar-free caramel syrup, but instead of milk, she wanted unwhipped whipping cream. But (and she was very clear about this) she didn't want any whipped cream on it.

As she pulled up to the window, I was curious to see what sort of person would order a Venti heavy-cream Frappuccino. I don't want to be insensitive, so I'll just say she looked the part. I chatted with her as her drink was being made and asked (as casually as I could) why she didn't want any whipped cream on her drink.

"It's because of the sugar in the whipped cream. I'm on a diet that lets me have as much fat as I want but no sugar."

As I handed it to her, I said, "Just so you know, the base syrup we use has a little bit of sugar in it. Not much, but a little."

"Oh," she said. "That must be why I haven't lost any weight."

I'm rarely left speechless, but words failed me. I just grunted some sort of goodbye as she drove off. Let me get this straight—that drink had almost 70 grams of fat, and she thought a couple of grams of sugar was the reason she wasn't losing any weight?

Even now I have to wonder. Did she really believe the sugar was the reason for her weight problem? Somewhere deep down, she must have known that losing all that weight might require a little more work than skipping the whipped cream on a 750-calorie drink. It's easy to point fingers because her problem was so visible, but all of us crave quick fixes to deep problems. And quick fixes usually make problems worse.

When I was young (but old enough to know better), I hated to stop playing when I had to go to the bathroom, so I'd just pee my pants. Cold days were the worst. I vividly remember that feeling of having to pee so bad but not wanting to go inside. There were a few glorious moments when I enjoyed the relief and the newly acquired warmth. But the relief was short-lived. Soon the warm turned to cold, and then came the chafing of my skin against the cold, wet denim, followed by that distinctive smell. I continued doing that until the third grade, my only year in public school. The shame of peeing my pants on a field trip motivated me to start using the bathroom.

Sin is the moral equivalent of peeing our pants. It begins as a shortsighted solution to a genuine problem or a short-lived pleasure at the expense of long-term happiness. I basically see God's rules like him telling us to use the bathroom.

The Big Lie

Why do we choose to sin? Because at the time, we believe we'll be happier doing what's wrong. That, of course, is a lie. It's not just any lie—it's a repackaging of the first recorded lie. The same lie is repeated down through the ages, telling us that sin is more fun than righteousness.

Now the serpent was more crafty than any of the wild animals the LORD God had made. He said to the woman, "Did God really say, 'You must not eat from any tree in the garden'?"

The woman said to the serpent, "We may eat fruit from the trees in the garden, but God did say, 'You must not eat fruit from the tree that is in the middle of the garden, and you must not touch it, or you will die.'"

"You will not certainly die," the serpent said to the woman. "For God knows that when you eat from it your eyes will be opened, and you will be like God, knowing good and evil" (Genesis 3:1-5).

Do you see what Satan is doing? Do you see his tactic? He's questioning God's goodness. "Here's this great gift," says Satan, "but God doesn't want you to have it. He's holding out on you." This lie works so well that he continues to use it again and again. Too often, Satan's lie seems plausible. If you were to ask 100 random people, "Who do you think is more fun, the devil or God?" who would get more votes? (If no one was watching, how would you vote?)

I once heard about the dean of a Christian college who routinely denied reasonable requests simply because he thought being told no was good for the students. Is that how you picture God? I think he must be troubled that so many people see him that way, especially since Jesus was so clear about what the Father is like.

Which of you, if your son asks for bread, will give him a stone? Or if he asks for a fish, will give him a snake? If you, then, though you are evil, know how to give good gifts to your children, how much more will your Father in heaven give good gifts to those who ask him! (Matthew 7:9-11).

This picture of God profoundly impacts me because I know how much I delight in giving good gifts to Grace and Sarah. It also helps me understand why God says no so often. How would I respond if my daughters asked to play with my sharpest kitchen knife? How should God respond when we ask for a snake instead of a fish? I'm convinced that we ask him for a lot of snakes, stones, thorns, and rabid squirrels because we're too foolish to know how harmful they are. Do his refusals mean he's a killjoy or that he's a loving and protective father?

My daughters don't always understand or like what I do as their father. When Grace was eight months old, she got a deep gash on her lip. The doctor said she needed stitches in order to avoid a scar. If she were a boy, a scar might have been fine, but not for my little princess. Do you know how they give stitches to a baby who is incapable of understanding the purpose behind the pain? By holding her down against her will and forcing her to lie perfectly still.

There were enough nurses to hold her, but I insisted on helping. I wouldn't let her go through that alone. I still get choked up when I remember pinning her arms down and trying to speak calming words as I struggled to hold back the tears. If I can love my daughter in ways that are incomprehensible to her, how much more can I believe that God is indeed good and compassionate in all he does as my Father? Maybe even his rules are good and perfect gifts.

**“Satan, not Christ, is the great
teetotaler, the joyless puritan,
the cosmic killjoy.”**

—LOUIS MARKOS

In the movie *Inception*, Leonardo DiCaprio’s character engages in corporate espionage by sneaking into people’s dreams to steal sensitive information. One client, however, wants him to do something everyone thinks is impossible—implant an idea in someone’s mind. That got me thinking. If I could implant just one idea into everyone’s mind, what would it be? Just this—“God’s commands bring joy.” One idea to contradict that one lie. I want people to believe at a gut level that God’s rules will bring joy, not misery. I don’t have that technology, so I wrote this book instead.

Rotten Fruit

One of the best things I’ve ever read about sin is C.S. Lewis’s *Screwtape Letters*. It’s written as a collection of letters from an experienced demon, Screwtape, to a new tempter. Lewis helps us think differently about the nature of sin and Satan. Gone are the comic images of horns and pitchforks or the suave and urbane Satan. Instead we see Satan and his demons as they really are. I once listened to a set of lectures about Lewis, and something the lecturer said struck me so hard that I went back and listened to it over and over again and wrote it out verbatim. That Sunday, my sermon was inspired by these words.

Lewis understood, as many Christians even may not, that it’s Satan, not Christ, who hates the physical appetites and the proper joy linked to them. It’s Satan, not Christ, who is the great teetotaler, the joyless puritan, the cosmic killjoy...“The thief comes only to steal, kill, and destroy; but I come that you might have life, and have it to the full.”¹

If Satan is more fun than God, it’s only in the same way that the drug dealer handing out free samples to junior high students is more fun than the police officer trying to chase him away. The fun is nothing more than the bait to lead us into misery. Screwtape writes about this.

[God] is a hedonist at heart. All those fasts and vigils and stakes and crosses are only a façade. Or like the foam on the seashore. Out at sea, out in His sea, there is pleasure, and more pleasure. He makes no secret of it; at His right hand are “pleasures for evermore”...

He has filled his world full of pleasures. There are things for humans to do all day long without his minding in the least—sleeping, washing, eating, drinking, making love, playing, praying, working. Everything has to be twisted before it is any use to us.²

For reasons both financial and philosophical, Marilyn and I are members of a local gleaners group. Gleaners gather and share past-date food donated by local grocery stores and restaurants. It’s like recycling but for food. Members sort through the food, putting like foods together and picking out food that’s too rotten to be redeemed. All the rotten food is thrown into a big trash can and taken home by some members to feed to their chickens.

Sin is not a random list of fun things God doesn’t want us to do.

Try to imagine that trash can, filled with moldy strawberries, smashed tomatoes, and other things you can’t quite identify. Think of the smell after it has sat in the sun and stewed in its juices. Think of the cloud

of fruit flies. Now imagine pulling out a handful of that goop and shoving it in your mouth. My gag reflexes just kicked in.

That is a picture of sin. Sin is not a random list of fun things God doesn't want us to do. Rather, our Creator, who loves us and knows how we tick, says, "Here is what will destroy you and those around you, what will destroy your relationships with other people and your relationship with me. Let's call it sin. Don't do it. It's rotten, it's poison, it's sickness—run away from it."

When the Bible tells me not to cheat on my wife, not to get drunk, not to love this world or the things of this world, I see God standing in front of that trash can saying, "Don't eat this! You think you want it, but you really don't." And when the Bible tells me to love my neighbors, to forgive others, and to be generous, I see him handing me a perfect peach—ripe, sweet, juicy, without a single bruise—saying, "This is what you really want. This is what I want for you."

The point is that wholehearted devotion to God is the best path to joy. Real joy. Earthly joy and spiritual joy. Joy in this life and joy in the next. It's not necessarily the shortest or easiest path to joy, but it's the path to the deepest, most permanent joy. By the way, there wasn't a sharp distinction between temporal and eternal joy in biblical thought. That was a later, nonbiblical addition. In her book *God and the Art of Happiness*, professor and theologian Ellen Charry shows how Greek philosophy (especially Neoplatonism) unduly influenced the early church to emphasize eternal joy at the expense of earthly. This unbiblical influence is with us still. 3

Duty or Delight?

It seems to me that complacent Christians don't believe that all of God's rules are meant to bring earthly joy, which means they don't believe that God genuinely wants our best. Our actions usually prove what we really believe. If we believed that obedience brings joy, we wouldn't need to be told to do the right thing. Instead, we see obedience as the spiritual equivalent of eating our lima beans. (I detest lima beans.)

Obsessive Christians don't really believe that obedience brings earthly joy either, so they obey God out of joyless obligation. Obsessive Christians keep shoving the lima beans down their throats because they're supposed to. They believe they have to suffer now in order to be happy in heaven.

When we're radically normal Christians, we obey God because we know that obedience brings joy and disobedience brings misery. Does that sound too self-focused? Many Christians assume it must be better to obey God out of a sense of duty than in hopes of reward. C.S. Lewis didn't think so.

If there lurks in most modern minds the notion that to desire our own good and to earnestly hope for the enjoyment of it is a bad thing, I suggest that this notion has crept in from Kant and the Stoics and is no part of the Christian faith. Indeed, if we consider the unblushing promises of reward and the staggering nature of the rewards promised in the Gospels, it would seem that our Lord finds our desires, not too strong, but too weak. 4

Far more often than not, God calls us to obey for our own sake rather than out of duty. Here are just a few examples.

Keep his decrees and commands, which I am giving you today, so that it may go well with you and your children after you and that you may live long in the land the LORD your God gives you for all time (Deuteronomy 4:40).

The longest chapter in the Bible is dedicated to knowing and obeying God's Law. This is how it begins.

Happy are those whose way is blameless,

who walk in the law of the LORD.
Happy are those who keep his decrees,
who seek him with their whole heart, who also do
no wrong,
but walk in his ways (Psalm 119:1-3 NRSV).

The Bible is filled with sacrifice and suffering for the sake of Jesus, yet he unashamedly calls us to die so that we may live and give up so that we may gain more.

Then Jesus said to his disciples, “Whoever wants to be my disciple must deny themselves and take up their cross and follow me. For whoever wants to save their life will lose it, but whoever loses their life for me will find it. What good will it be for someone to gain the whole world, yet forfeit their soul? Or what can anyone give in exchange for their soul? For the Son of Man is going to come in his Father’s glory with his angels, and then he will reward each person according to what they have done (Matthew 16:24-27).

Never forget that he sacrificed himself “for the joy set before him” (Hebrews 12:2). Shouldn’t our obedience and sacrifice be motivated by joy as well?

We never get away with sin.

Yes, we also obey in order to glorify God. As Jesus said, “let your light shine before others, that they may see your good deeds and glorify your Father in heaven” (Matthew 5:16). And yes, God occasionally commands things simply “because I said so” (such as when God told Israel to march around Jericho for seven days). Yet we have been listening to Satan’s lie that God is miserly for so long, we need to rediscover the Bible’s emphasis on obedience for the sake of joy.

Sin’s Slavery

We need to stop thinking of sin as something we get away with and start seeing it as something we’re saved from. We never get away with sin. We may be forgiven and restored, but sin always damages us and the ones we love.

We often don’t understand how sin will bring misery. The first step to being free from sin is to want to be free. Here’s a two-step process I’ve used when I can’t understand how obeying God will make me happier.

Think Through the Consequences

I’d like to invent a contraption I’d call the Consequence Inverter. This is how it would work. Let’s say I buy myself an expensive gadget we can’t afford—without telling Marilyn. The Consequence Inverter would make me suffer all the consequences before opening the box. I’d have to tell Marilyn about my dishonesty and spend months rebuilding trust. I’d have to pay off the credit card and explain to my daughters why we can’t afford to buy them new school clothes. After all that, I’d be allowed to play with my new toy. But the most important feature of the Consequence Inverter would be that I could return the gadget at any point and undo all of the consequences.

If you had a Consequence Inverter, how often do you think you’d push through all the negative consequences so you could “enjoy” a bad choice? That’s the purpose of this step—asking God (and perhaps a couple of wise friends or your pastor) to help you see the consequences of that sin you’re hanging on to. More often than not, you’ll be able to see how obedience will indeed make you happier.

As I clearly understand the consequences of sin and how easily we slide from little sins to big sins, sin becomes much less appealing. I know that any sin, left unchecked, can lead to hell on earth. For instance, when I'm tempted to gaze at an attractive woman other than my wife, I know that it won't be enough. Eventually I'll start looking at questionable images on my computer. That will lead to unquestionably bad images. If I continue on that path, it would cost me everything that means anything to me: my relationships with God, my wife, my family, and my church. Knowing all that, whenever I'm tempted to take that first look, I remind myself, "That's the doorway to hell on earth." I'm not being dramatic—I've seen it happen to others far too many times.

Trust God More than Yourself

What if we can't see the negative consequences? Just as my eight-month-old daughter couldn't understand why I let the doctor poke her with a needle, I fully expect that I won't always understand God's ways (what with him being God and me not). That is where trusting God comes in.

Trust in the LORD with all your heart
and lean not on your own understanding;
in all your ways submit to him,
and he will make your paths straight (Proverbs 3:5-6).

This passage doesn't discourage critical thinking. The entire book of Proverbs praises wisdom and clear decision making. "Lean not on your own understanding" means that whenever your understanding doesn't line up with what God says, you trust him more than yourself. It means you assume that he knows more than you do.

Many Christians don't believe that the entire Bible is "God-breathed" and feel free to dismiss the parts that they don't like or understand. But isn't it convenient that the supposedly uninspired parts just happen to be the parts they don't agree with? I mean, why shouldn't the "God is love" part be man-made and hell be the only true part?

I don't understand the entire Bible, and I honestly don't like parts of it, but I start with the assumption that God's ways are above mine, and I seek to learn what he has to teach me even in those parts. When I approach Scripture with that humility, I frequently discover that the parts I like the least are the ones I need the most. For instance, I struggle with how often the psalmists attack their enemies so vindictively. But C.S. Lewis points out, "If the Jews cursed more bitterly than the Pagans this was, I think, in part because they took right and wrong more seriously."⁵ Those psalms help me realize how casual I am about sin's scourge in the world.

At its core, all sin is a type of unbelief, of not trusting God and his character. We believe we'll be happier and healthier ignoring him and doing things our way. Trusting God more than yourself begins with one of the best, most honest, and most powerful prayers in the Bible: "I do believe; help me overcome my unbelief!"⁶ You may not yet be ready to get rid of your sin, and you may not yet believe that obedience will bring joy, but you're choosing to submit to God's will instead of your own.

Holiness isn't an obligation as much as a benefit of following Jesus.

Once you start wanting to obey (on any level), you're switching teams and working with God, not against him, as he helps you remove your sin. And God, who is rich in mercy, grace, and forgiveness, is also patient. He knows how weak you are. He isn't surprised by your failures. He wants to free you from the sin that entangles you. This is never about being good enough for God or earning his approval. If it

were, we'd all be sunk—without the cross this chapter would be as theoretical as driving to the moon. Without grace, we could no more be righteous than my '92 Buick could take me to the Apollo 11 landing site.

The purpose of this chapter isn't to convince you to try harder to be good. Rather, I want to help you recognize that righteousness is one of the best gifts God can give. Holiness isn't an obligation as much as a benefit of following Jesus.