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A Life Pleasing to God

1 Thessalonians 4.1-12

Doug Scalise, Brewster Baptist Church

Everyone lives to please someone. Some people live to please themselves. This is expressed in song lyrics like, *"You can't please everyone, so you've got to please yourself"* (Garden Party by Ricky Nelson 1972) and *"I did it my way."* Some of us are focused on pleasing other people – our parents, our spouse, our children, our friends, our boss. Ultimately this is an unsatisfying way to live because you can't please everybody so you're setting yourself up for failure and disappointment. As a philosopher (Lao-Tzu) observed, *"Care about what other people think and you will always be their prisoner."*

In today's passage from 1 Thessalonians Paul describes a third way of living that is the most satisfying and that leads to contentment and joy. **That is living to please God. A life pleasing to God** will also be pleasing to ourselves and sometimes, but not always, to at least some other people.

"**4** Finally, brothers and sisters, **we ask and urge you in the Lord Jesus** that, as you learned from us how **you ought to live and to please God** (as, in fact, you are doing), **you should do so more and more.** ² For you know what instructions we gave you through the Lord Jesus. ³ For this is the will of God, your sanctification: that you abstain from fornication; ⁴ **that each one of you know how to control your own body in holiness and honor,** ⁵ not with lustful passion, like the Gentiles who do not know God; ⁶ that no one wrong or exploit a brother or sister in this matter, because the Lord is an avenger in all these things, just as we have already told you beforehand and solemnly warned you. ⁷ **For God did not call us to impurity but in holiness.**

⁸ Therefore whoever rejects this rejects not human authority but God, who also gives his Holy Spirit to you.

⁹ Now concerning **love** of the brothers and sisters, you do not need to have anyone write to you, for **you yourselves have been taught by God to love one another;**

¹⁰ **and indeed you do love** all the brothers and sisters throughout Macedonia. **But we urge you, beloved, to do so more and more,** ¹¹ to aspire to live quietly, to mind your own affairs, and to work with your hands, as we directed you, ¹² **so that you may behave properly toward outsiders** and be dependent on no one."

1 Thessalonians 4 begins and ends with the way the Thessalonians are to live, walk, or behave. Paul urges them to focus on pleasing God, not people. Pleasing God is a lifelong journey that requires our effort, discipline, and determination. Paul tells the church you're living to please God, and "**you should do so more and more.**" Choices and decisions become easier when our will to please God outweighs our will to please anyone else. Paul is encouraging them and us to have an Audience of One.

Each of us needs to ask ourselves, **if I'm being truly honest with myself which of these is the greatest part of my life, my decisions, my actions: am I living to please myself, to please others, or to please God?** What would someone think who observed our life closely? On what basis would they decide? Most of us when we're very, very young, want to please ourselves. When we're babies and we're hungry we make a fuss until someone feeds us. If we need a diaper change, we make a racket until someone gets the message and changes us. If we want to be held, we either try to look adorable, or again, make a fuss until someone holds us. Sadly, some people don't seem to move much beyond this stage. Even as we get older, we must fight against selfishness and thinking that everyone else exists to meet our needs. There are people in their 70's and older whose behavior is still very childlike. As followers of Christ we guard against thinking only of our own desires to the neglect of the needs and desires of other people. Even knowing all this, it doesn't mean you and I won't have to fight continually against wanting to please our self and a spirit of "*I want what I want when I want it.*" Acting selfishly doesn't reflect the Spirit of Christ who humbled himself and came not to be served, but to serve and to give himself as a ransom for many.

As we grow as children, we become increasingly aware of how our behavior impacts other people. Some things we do make other people happy, some things we do make them sad, mad, or disappointed. Some of us, and I'm in this category, like to make other people happy, but that can lead to focusing on pleasing people. The trap in this is that we are handing the key to our sense of self and identity to other people. If they're happy with us, praise and affirm us, we're good. If our behavior or actions disappoint other people, we're down. If we feel like the love other people have for us is dependent on them being happy with us and our doing what they want and expect us to do, that can lead us to living in fear of doing the wrong thing or disappointing the people who matter

the most to us whose approval or disapproval is very powerful in impacting our sense of who we are. We can be fearful of failing, making a mistake, doing something wrong, and having the other person withdraw their love or acceptance of us. This can lead to a desire to impress other people and a sense of perfectionism, anxiety and second guessing ourselves, *“Did I say the right thing? Did I look good?”* this is very different than thinking of God as our Audience of One and asking, *“Did I do what God is calling me to do?”*

In 1 Thessalonians 4, Paul tells us What we are to do and How we are to do it.

What we are to do: Live our lives in a way that is pleasing to God. In verses 1-2 Paul insists that human conduct is answerable to God and exists to please God. This makes some people uncomfortable. God didn't create you so you could be your own god and make your life all about you and what you want. God didn't make you to be what somebody else wants you to be either. God didn't make you to be what your parents or children want you to be, what your girlfriend or boyfriend wants you to be, what your spouse wants you to be, or what your boss or your friends want you to be. God made you to be *you*. If you're going to become all you can be, you must refuse to be defined by others, and instead be defined by your relationship with God and living to please God. Paul goes on to talk about 3 areas of our life in which we're to please God.

How we are to please God:

1. Be holy and pure. In verses 3-8, Paul warns against sexual conduct like that of *“the Gentiles who do not know God”* (v. 5). This is like a parent standing in the doorway as a kid goes to play at another kid's house, (that sort of thing actually used to happen once upon a time), and the parent saying, *“Behave yourself, remember you're a Smith!”* Without ever being told what it means to *be* a Smith, the child learns that her behavior is to be consistent with that identity. Down the street, other kids with different names are hearing the same advice, maybe with an additional warning, *“We are not like those Scalises! Don't act like them! Behave!”* By insisting that the Gentile converts who make up the church conduct themselves “in holiness and honor,” Paul is drawing an invisible boundary around the community of faith. Those who are a part of the church are not to be indistinguishable in their conduct from those outside the church. There should be a discernible difference. Paul's making the point that one of the things that is to set

Christians and the church apart is how we behave and how we treat other people when it comes to relationships and sex. God doesn't call us to impurity, but in holiness. Christians act, not even out of concern for our own reputation, but for the pleasing of God. We never abuse or take advantage of another person. As with any form of temptation, when we resist sexual temptation, it enables us to develop greater self-control, which is a fruit of the Spirit. True freedom is not found in being driven by our glands or lust. The person who masters his or her body is the one who has genuine freedom. Paul wrote about this in **1 Corinthians 6:18-20** where he states, *"Shun fornication! Every sin that a person commits is outside the body; but the fornicator sins against the body itself. Or do you not know that your body is a temple of the Holy Spirit within you, which you have from God, and that you are not your own? For you were bought with a price; therefore glorify God in your body."* Paul urges us to engage in relationships in holiness and honor in a way that is pleasing to God. Being holy and pure is the first way we lead a life pleasing to God. The second thing Paul states is to

2. Love all the believers (9-10). These are the "Philadelphia" verses about the Love of Brothers and Sisters in the community of faith. They've been taught the most basic thing to Christ following – love another and Paul affirms that indeed they are doing that, but just like with pleasing God in verse 2, he writes (10), **But we urge you, beloved, to do so more and more.** We can always love other people more deeply, more fully, more compassionately, more thoughtfully, more generously, we will never arrive at a point, like a mountain peak, where the journey of love ends. I don't think it's an accident that Paul writes about loving all the believers after writing about holiness and purity regarding sexual conduct because Christians can be more judgmental about issues around sex and relationships than just about anything else. We need to exercise grace and love and care when discussing issues of a deeply personal nature. I often wonder why people will ask about or in some cases obsess about some issues that they claim to not be dealing with at all personally, while ignoring their own life and their own issues. Christians so often forget and neglect Jesus' teaching in the Sermon on the Mount (Matthew 7.1-5), ***"Do not judge, so that you may not be judged. For with the judgment you make you will be judged, and the measure you give will be the measure you get. Why do you see the speck in your neighbor's eye, but do not notice the log in***

your own eye? Or how can you say to your neighbor, 'Let me take the speck out of your eye,' while the log is in your own eye? You hypocrite, first take the log out of your own eye, and then you will see clearly to take the speck out of your neighbor's eye." What a difference it would make in our lives and the world if the first thing "not yet Christians" thought of when they thought of the church was how Christians love one another and take care of each other, rather than thinking how judgmental we are. As Annie Downs noted, ***"When people fall in love with the people of God, they're going to fall more in love with God."*** **Be holy and pure, Love all the Believers, and**

3. Lead your Life Well. Verses 11-12 are about Life in Community. Paul basically says be quiet, mind your own business, "do your job." It's a call to work and lead your own life well. Don't focus on other people and what they're doing. One of the issues for the Thessalonians may have been that they thought the return of Christ was imminent and so folks may have been casting off restraint, not living honorably, or feeling like, why do I need to work if Jesus is coming back soon? I can just kick back and be lazy. Paul mentions two values of work: (1) it gains respect and (2) it keeps us from being dependent on others. The value of work is not found in the wealth it produces but in the personal responsibility work reflects, the respect it earns, and in the opportunities its earnings give us to do good and be generous in sharing with others. Leading our life well in all its' aspects includes understanding that it's not enough to say the right words or even think the right things. We must live them out. Paul argues that when the Word doesn't find expression in the daily life of the believer, it hasn't really been heard. He's encouraging behavior that will strengthen the community of believers, setting boundaries that will protect the community and make being a part of the Body of Christ attractive to others who might respond to the call to become a follower of Christ.

Paul wants us to understand our purpose in life is to please God, not people. God alone examines the motives of our hearts. Last month our family watched the classic movie *The Ten Commandments* which focusses on the life of Moses. **Hebrews 11:24** says, *"By faith Moses, when he had grown up, refused to be known as the son of Pharaoh's daughter"* (NIV). Moses had an identity crisis. He was born a Hebrew slave but raised as Egyptian royalty, the grandson of Pharaoh. When he grew up, he faced two options: He could pretend to be Pharaoh's grandson for the rest

of his life and live a life of luxury, fame, and power. Or he could admit who he really was - a Jew. If he admitted who he really was, he would lose all that came with a life of privilege and his family would kick him out to live with slaves the rest of his life. He'd be disgraced, humiliated and live a life of pain and drudgery. Which would you choose? There are people today, maybe even some who are listening, who are living lies. They're trying to be people they're not to please themselves or other people. But Moses refused to live a lie because he was a man of integrity. He insisted on being who God made him to be despite all kinds of peer pressure. Here's my question for you: **Who are you letting determine your identity?**

Is it your friends and family? Maybe you have parents who died years ago, but you're still trying to live up to their vision for your life. Perhaps you are hanging on to what your ex-husband or ex-wife said to you, and you're trying to prove that person wrong. Or maybe you are trying to keep up with what social media and culture say you should be. Paul writes in 1 Thessalonians 2:4 (NRSV): ***"we speak, not to please mortals, but to please God who tests our hearts."*** Are you living to please God who tests your heart? **The resolution you need to make is this:** *"I resolve that I will no longer let other people press me into their mold. I'm going to be who God wants me to be. I'm going to do what God wants me to do, and I'm going to fulfill the plan that God has for my life, not somebody else's plan for my life."*

Real success is living a life pleasing to God. Sometimes people will claim they're trying to please God while seeking to justify behavior that God would not approve. We can't use, abuse, or neglect people and use God to justify our actions. A life pleasing to God will always treat other people with love, respect, and dignity, period. But ultimately, it's not human approval we're seeking. Paul declares in **Galatians 1:10**, ***"Am I now seeking human approval, or God's approval? Or am I trying to please people? If I were still pleasing people, I would not be a servant of Christ."***

I invite you to **lead a life pleasing to God by trusting, loving, enjoying, obeying, and serving God**, your Audience of One, and by doing so, I believe you'll find that your life will be more pleasing to you too.

Blessing Romans 12:1-2

I appeal to you therefore, brothers & sisters, by the mercies of God,
to present your bodies as a living sacrifice, holy & acceptable to God,
which is your spiritual worship.

Do not be conformed to this world, but be transformed by the renewing of your minds,
so that you may discern what is the will of God—what is good & acceptable & perfect.

Questions for Discussion or Reflection

1. If you were completely honest with yourself would you say your life has been about pleasing yourself, pleasing people, or pleasing God? What evidence is there for your answer?
2. What can you do to please God *“more and more,”* as Paul urges the Thessalonians to do?
3. Why does Paul say it’s important for Christians *“to control your own body in holiness and honor?”*
4. Paul urges the Thessalonians to love all the believers and to do so more and more. Why is loving **all** the believers so important for us as individuals and for the sake of the church? Are there some believers you find harder to love than others? What can you do about that?
5. In verses 11-12 are about life in community and how we conduct ourselves. Why is it important for us to lead our life well?
6. Who are you letting determine, influence, or shape your identity?
7. How would you describe what a life pleasing to God looks like to someone else? What is the value or benefit of living to please God?