**LIVING TO PLEASE GOD**

November 8, 2020

1 Thessalonians 4:1–12

Key Verse 4:1 “As for other matters, brothers and sisters, we instructed you how to live in order to please God, as in fact you are living. Now we ask you and urge you in the Lord Jesus to do this more and more.”

As we studied, Paul went to Thessalonica, preached the gospel and led the Thessalonians to Christ. But he knows the pull of old habits, the push of a godless, sexually deviated culture. The Thessalonians just came out of the sexually immoral culture. They were tempted to go back to the former way of life. Paul is very concerned about the Thessalonians and he wants to share this concern with them. If he had his choice, he would go and tell them face to face, but he couldn't get there, so he has to write. Paul says clearly, “In spite of cultural habits, in spite of your old patterns, the Lord does not tolerate sexual sin.” The church can’t live like the world. It doesn’t matter how the world lives. Just because the world sinks deeper and deeper into sexual depravity, doesn’t mean that we sink with it. Just because they lower their standards lower and lower doesn’t mean we lower ours a little bit. Talking about sexual immorality makes us uncomfortable. But Paul had to address this issue because living a holy life is crucial in pleasing God. Besides living a holy life, Paul gives two more instructions on how to please God, namely, love one another and work with your hands.

First of all, pleasing God is the basis of Christian ethics. Many people regard Christian life as a set of rules to be obeyed or a list of prohibitions. Especially for those who grow up in a church environment, it is easy to think that living a Christian life is following a set of routines, such as praying before meals, attending Sunday worship service, reading the Bible and writing testimonies, and doing good works. These are all necessary things to do. But Christian life cannot be summed up by these activities. Christian life is union with Jesus through faith in him. Out of this union arises the desire in our hearts to love and please God. This inner motive and purpose to please God is the guiding principle for our Christian lives. In verse 2:4, Paul had already mentioned that he lived not to please people, but to please God who tests our hearts. In Galatians 1:10 Paul also said, “Am I trying to please people? If I were still trying to please people, I would not be a servant of Christ.” The best example of pleasing God is Jesus. He said, “The one who sent me is with me; he has not left me alone, for I always do what pleases him” (Jn 8:29).

In truth, everyone lives to please someone. The question is: “Who am I trying to please?” Myself, my spouse, my parents, my children, my boss, my friends? Whether we live to please God or someone else makes a huge difference. Living to please people, whoever they may be, results in bondage to their expectations. This makes people very sensitive to what others are thinking about them or saying about them. They develop a people-pleasing disease (PPD). This robs people of the joy and beauty of life. Many very talented people are paralyzed by PPD. God has created each of us with a unique personality and gifts and talents to do something for him that no one else can do. God wants each of us to develop this uniqueness as we seek to please him. As we do, he begins to use us to bless his church and the world. We can understand this through the Biblical analogy of the church and the human body. Our physical bodies have many parts, but they all make up one body. When each part functions well, doing its share, the body as a whole is healthy and powerful to do its work. In the same way, we are all members of the body of Christ. When we each live to please God and develop our unique gifts and talents to the fullest for his glory, our church can be healthy and strong. When we please God, God gives us true freedom, joy and peace. We are free from people’s expectations. More than that, God gives us the power to live a fruitful and meaningful life. This is why Augustine said, “Love God and do as you please.”

Look at verse 1. “As for other matters, brothers and sisters, we instructed you how to live in order to please God, as in fact you are living. Now we ask you and urge you in the Lord Jesus to do this more and more.” Paul acknowledged that the Thessalonians were already living to please God. They began to please God the moment they accepted the gospel; it didn’t start after many years of training. As soon as they heard the gospel message, they were changed and began to imitate gospel workers and the Lord Jesus. They became a model to all believers in Macedonia and Achaia. Pleasing God is not just a one-time event, but an ongoing struggle. It is a lifetime pursuit. Paul urges them in the Lord Jesus to do this more and more.

Before believing in Jesus, we mainly lived to please ourselves. To some degree we might have tried to please others, especially their parents. But we hardly ever thought about pleasing God. It may never have even crossed our minds. But after repenting of our sins and believing in Jesus, God gives us his Holy Spirit, who radically changes our minds and hearts. Now we have a new way of thinking, a new desire, a new passion: we really want to please God. Why are we so eager to please God? It’s because now we love him. Why do we love him? It’s because of what Jesus has done for us on the cross. We have tasted his love and grace personally, and we can’t help but love him back. We used to be worried about what people thought of us. But now we are most concerned with what our loving God and Father thinks of us. We want to live a life worthy of God and please him in every way (2:12a; cf. Col1:10a). What a beautiful new desire! But our new desire to please God needs to translate into reality and into our practical living. Before believing in Jesus, we adopted all kinds of life practices and formed all kinds of life habits. And not many of these things actually please God. Sometimes we are not even aware that these practices and habits are still governing our lives. So often we are surrounded by people living according to the pattern of this world, and we so easily tend to conform (Ro12:2). So we need constantly to be evaluating our lives honestly in light of God’s word. Every day we need to find out what pleases the Lord (Eph5:10). It may seem vague. So Paul gives three specific examples: Live a holy life; love one another, and work with your hands.

**First**, live a holy life. Look at verse 3. “It is God’s will that you should be sanctified.” Here, “sanctified” means “made holy.” It is to be dedicated to God with loyalty and to become like him. It is expressed by separation from a sinful life and conforming to a godly life. 1 Peter 1:14-16 says, “As obedient children, do not conform to the evil desires you had when you lived in ignorance. But just as he who called you is holy, so be holy in all you do; for it is written: ‘Be holy, because I am holy.’” In verse 3b Paul gives a specific instruction: “avoid sexual immorality.” Paul wrote this letter from Corinth. Both Corinth and Thessalonica were infamous for sexual immorality. They worshiped Aphrodite, the Greek goddess of beauty and sexuality, whom the Romans referred to as “Venus.” They taught that if you have relationships with a priestess, you are communing with the deity she represents. The way to get in touch with the deity was by a sexual relationship with a priestess. The temple in Corinth, for example, had 3,000 temple prostitutes to get people in contact with the deity, by the way, a very popular and convenient form of religion. In that context, Paul exhorted them to avoid sexual immorality. He urged each of them to learn to control their own body in a way that is holy and honorable, not in passionate lust like the pagans who do not know God (4-5). Then and now, when people do not know God, they tend to live immoral lives. Sexual immorality clearly is a problem even for Christians. Sanctification starts with our sexuality.

Human sexuality is a powerful thing. Some people think sex is inherently sinful, but it’s not. God created us as sexual beings and saw that it was very good. God himself created sex. Sexuality is a gift from God. It should be enjoyed honorably within the bounds of godly marriage. Marriage partners should not take advantage of each other, but respect and honor each other (6a). Hebrews 13:4a says, “Marriage should be honored by all and the marriage bed kept pure….” This is the way to enjoy a blessed and happy life. When marriage is honored as God intended, it is most blessed. When husbands love their wives, and wives respect their husbands, they enjoy a robust relationship and bear godly children. This reveals God’s love, wisdom and life-giving power to the world in darkness. This pleases God and blesses the world. But fallen human beings make sex an idol, and people today are definitely worshiping the idol of sex. It makes people kind of crazy, willing to risk everything for just a moment of pleasure. On the internet the biggest industry worldwide is pornography. Lustful images are just a mouse click away, even from children. Pornography is a big problem even among Christians, even among missionaries and pastors.

Look at verse 6a. “and that in this matter no one should wrong or take advantage of a brother or sister.” Sexual sin harms others besides those who engage in it. In adultery, the spouse is always wronged. The adultery in church community affects the whole church. Premarital sex wrongs the future partner by robbing him or her of purity that should be brought to marriage. Most of all, we hurt God who calls us not to be impure but to live a holy life (7). Sadly, people try to find self-worth through being able to have sex with others. But just the opposite happens. Sexual sin fills us with more self-hatred, guilt and shame. People try to comfort themselves through sexual sin, but it turns into ever-increasing wickedness (Ro6:19). People may think they can get away with it, but God himself will punish them. Verse 6b says, “The Lord will punish all those who commit such sins, as we told you and warned you before.”

So what should we do? How can we overcome sexual sin? Because we know God, we should want to be holy like God. Random and reckless, passionate lust is not holy. We should want to use our bodies the way God intended. We should want to honor God with our bodies. It requires controlling our bodies. Paul says the same thing in 1 Corinthians 6:18–20: “Flee from sexual immorality. All other sins a person commits are outside the body, but whoever sins sexually, sins against their own body. Do you not know that your bodies are temples of the Holy Spirit, who is in you, whom you have received from God? You are not your own; you were bought at a price. Therefore, honor God with your bodies.” Look at verse 8. “Therefore, anyone who rejects this instruction does not reject a human being but God, the very God who gives you his Holy Spirit.” God gave us the Holy Spirit to make us holy and helps us to be holy. Not only did God call believers to salvation but he called them to sanctification and continually breathes his Spirit into them for the purpose of producing holiness. 1 Corinthians 6:11 says, “You were washed, you were sanctified, you were justified in the name of the Lord Jesus Christ and by the Spirit of our God.” When we came to Jesus, God washed away all our dirty sins and made us like pure virgin brides. So engaging in sexual immorality nullifies Jesus’ work on the cross. That’s why Paul says in Ephesians 4:30, “Do not grieve the Holy Spirit of God.” To live in sexual sin is to literally reject God, who gave His Spirit. May God help us to live a holy life.

**Second**, love one another. Look at verses 9-10. “Now about your love for one another we do not need to write to you, for you yourselves have been taught by God to love each other. And in fact, you do love all of God’s family throughout Macedonia. Yet we urge you, brothers and sisters, to do so more and more.” This is an amazing testimony of the change of the Thessalonians. Before knowing Christ, we human beings do not know what God’s love is. Our concept of love was largely emotional. Some noble people try to practice brotherly love. But we had no idea about God’s love—agape love. When we accept the gospel, we can know God’s love and love others with God’s love. 1 John 3:16 says, “This is how we know what love is: Jesus Christ laid down his life for us. And we ought to lay down our lives for our brothers and sisters.” God’s love is sacrificial, unconditional, unchanging, and unfailing. God’s love is so deep and wide and high that we can grow in it without end. Paul urges the Thessalonians, who had begun to practice God’s love, to do so more and more.

**Third**, work with your hands. Look at verses 11-12. “and to make it your ambition to lead a quiet life: You should mind your own business and work with your hands, just as we told you, so that your daily life may win the respect of outsiders and so that you will not be dependent on anybody.” This is the final way Paul says how to live in order to please God. We need to work with our own hands. It means to earn our own living and not try to depend on fellow Christians’ generosity. When we are busy working with our hands, we tend to live a quiet life, minding our own business. But when we are not working with our hands, we tend to talk too much and get involved in other people’s business unnecessarily. In other words, do not be a drama queen, always seeking attention to yourself. A quiet, hardworking, giving life wins the respect of outsiders.

May God fill us with the desire to please him. May he help us do so practically by avoiding sexual immorality, loving one another more and more, and living quiet, hardworking lives.

Big Idea: In order to please God, live a holy life and love others deeply, and work with your hands