

Living to please God

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[0 : 00] And I thought, well, since I'm working with students in Brighton, the Christian unions in Brighton and Sussex universities, how do we please God?

Let's just consider that question before we dive into a little bit more detail in the passage. How do we please God? Now, of course, there is a really big religious question to ask, isn't it? Different religions have different ideas about that.

And while they may fundamentally disagree on who God is, how many gods there are, what God is like, once we've got past that question about God, then we need to ask the question, well, how do we please God? And, of course, Islam have the idea of the five pillars of Islam, the praying and giving and fasting and pilgrimage and the profession of faith, which is their kind of five core beliefs and practices.

Hinduism, as far as I understand it, has these rituals and offerings that they have. And different religions have different ideas about how we please God. Why please God? Well, I suppose to be acceptable to him, to win his favor, to attain salvation.

That's what the case is, as far as I've understood it. For most world religions. But for Christians, for us, it's different, isn't it? Because we receive salvation not as a reward for the good things that we do, but actually as a gift.

[1 : 35] It's because of God's goodness, out of his love. In that famous verse, John 3.16, it says, For God so loved the world that he gave his one and only Son, that whoever believes in him shall not perish but have eternal life.

So God loved the world before anybody in the world lived for God and was obedient to God and had a life that was pleasing to God. Already, God loved the world and he gave his Son out of that love. And that eternal life that is on offer is received not through living a perfect life and doing things that please God, but just through believing in Jesus. So through believing the good news about Jesus, we've been brought from death to life.

We've been born again. We've been made new. Before trusting Jesus, our lives were displeasing to God. The Bible uses the language of being enemies of God or being children of wrath.

Really strong language about how actually our lives were really displeasing. And although God in his love, he really loved us and sent Jesus into this broken world, actually our lives were not pleasing to him.

[2 : 38] We'd done nothing to deserve God's love and attention. But he loved us before the foundation of the world. He chose us in Jesus to be holy and blameless. So now as Christians, we have trusted in Jesus and follow him.

And through that transition that's happened now, God is pleased with us. Not because we live perfect lives, not because we've got everything sorted, but Jesus' perfect righteous obedience to his Father has now been given to us.

There's been this great exchange of our sinful rebellious ways with Jesus' perfect obedience to his Father. We've had that great substitution in God's mercy.

The Bible says that God has removed our sins as far as the east is from the west. Our sins cannot be any more removed from us. That's the good news, isn't it? That we are acceptable to God.

There's nothing we can do to make him love us more or love us less. We are perfectly pleasing to the Lord. There's a great psalm, Psalm 45, that I read the other day.

[3 : 45] I was really encouraged by it. First, I really didn't understand it, to be honest with you. But as I looked into it and read a commentary to help me understand it, I saw that actually this psalm applies to Christ and the church.

And it's a wedding psalm. The author of Hebrews makes it clear that actually this does apply to Christ and the church. And there's a great line in that psalm that says, the groom is enthralled by the beauty of the bride.

Enthralled by her beauty, meaning that he's just so happy and so joyful when he looks at his bride. And applied to Christ and the church, that's how Christ thinks about the church.

In the book of Revelation, at the end of the Bible, the church is described as a bride beautifully dressed for her husband. And I don't know when you last went to a wedding. Gemma and I went to a wedding last week.

Do you remember the look on the face of the groom as he looked down the aisle and saw his bride walking up and standing beside him? I don't know if traditionally you're supposed to look back. I'm not quite sure about that.

[4 : 43] But eventually the bride is standing beside the groom and the groom's looking at the way that he looks at her and the love in his eyes for her and the way that he's enthralled by her beauty and just thinks, wow, this is my bride.

Christian theology teaches us that that's the way that God looks at the church. He's enthralled by her beauty. He has washed us from all sin. In his eyes, we are clean.

This is the eternal and definitive reality for everyone that trusts in Jesus and his work on the cross and his resurrection. We are perfectly pleasing to God.

That is an amazing truth, isn't it? Do you rejoice in that? We are perfectly pleasing to God through Jesus. And yet, the Bible calls us to please God.

And Paul, in 1 Thessalonians, in chapter 2, verse 4, says that he is not seeking to please men, but seeking to please God, who tests our hearts. And in this passage, in chapter 4, verse 1, he calls the Thessalonians to live in order to please God.

[5 : 47] And then in his letter to Timothy, in his first letter, in chapter 2, verse 4, he says our aim as soldiers for Christ is to please him. And then thinking about Jesus and his life, he was perfectly pleasing to God in the way that he lived.

When he was baptized in Luke 3, 22, the father says, You are my son whom I love. With you I am well pleased. And Jesus said that his aim was to please his father.

In 530, he says, I seek not to please myself, but him who sent me. As Christians, we're called to be pleasing to God, following Jesus' example. In fact, life as a Christian can be summarized as living to please God, the God of the Bible.

Is that how you think of your life as a Christian? Do you seek to please God in your decisions, in your relationships, in your priorities, in your actions?

Are they shaped by a desire to please God? God. The Thessalonians were. See, in verse 1, it says, As in fact you are living. They were living in a way that pleased God. But Paul urges them to do it more and more.

[6 : 56] But I wonder if you've noticed the dilemma that I've kind of been alluding to. The fact that on the one hand, we're perfectly pleasing to God. And on the other hand, we're called to please God. It seems kind of a strange thing in some ways.

Does that mean that we're not already pleasing to him if we are called to please him? Can you please someone who's already perfectly pleased with you?

I think I might have used the word pleased many times there. The answer, I think, lies maybe in the picture of a parent who unconditionally loves their child. Imagine a father who loves his daughter completely.

And yet, there is still, his daughter can still live in a way that pleases the father. The daughter can still make her father proud of her.

Even though he loves her completely, she can still live in such a way that he's pleased with the way that she's living. And I think it's the same for God and us. God loves us and accepts us as his people through Jesus.

[7 : 58] But he still wants us to please him with our lives. As those who have received such an abundant grace, such an abundant love, that God has shed his own blood on the cross.

We should want to please our lives, please God with our lives. As James says, that faith without works is dead. If we have genuine faith in God and follow him, then our lives should be different. We should actually have works of righteousness that reflect the heart of faith that we have in God because we want to please him. How do we please God?

That's the question that should be in our hearts throughout our life. And the answer is to know his will and to live in accordance with it. To make someone happy, you have to know what their expectations are.

You have to know what they want, don't you? Which is kind of their will, what they want. When you go to have food at a restaurant, you're more inclined to tip a lot of money when you are really happy with the food that you've been given, when you're happy with the service that you've been provided by the waiter or the waitress.

[9 : 05] They have made you happy. They have fulfilled your will. They have met or even exceeded your expectations. They have met your will. And to please God, we need to know his will.

What is his will? In verse three, it says, it is God's will that you should be sanctified. So the answer, what is God's will, is that we should be sanctified.

We should be made holy to become like God. Remember that Old Testament command, be holy because I am holy. In Jesus' words, be perfect as your heavenly Father is perfect.

Holy is about being set apart, about being different, wholly other in the way that God is. But what does being holy look like practically in our lives?

Well, the answer is that there's just so much we could say, isn't there? The Bible teaches us how to be holy. The most important first step, we must come to know God. And we get to know God through the Bible, through the revelation that we've been given in the Bible.

[10 : 10] And he is holy. He is the definition of holiness. The Bible teaches us about what God is like, about his holiness, primarily through Jesus in the way that he lived and the character, the way that he revealed the character of the Father.

But also, it teaches us not just through getting to know God, but there are some practical instructions that the Bible gives us, especially in these New Testament letters. And they are to help us to live in a holy way in whatever context that we're in.

Whether you're a banker or a nurse, a son or a friend, whether you're oppressed or you're in a position of power, the Bible gives us instructions about how we can live holy lives in those different contexts.

So, to summarize what I've said so far, Paul calls the Thessalonians to please God more and more. And that should be either side too. How do we please God?

To know his will. What is his will? That we be sanctified or holy like God. How do we be holy? Well, we need to come to know God to understand holiness by coming to know God.

[11 : 17] But practically, we need to go to the Bible. And now there's one area in particular in which Paul here wants to stress that they live holy lives. And that is in the area of sex.

In verse 3, he said, it is God's will that you should be sanctified, that you should avoid sexual immorality. So to be sanctified, to fulfill God's will, to please God, we should avoid sexual immorality.

Being sanctified, just to be clear, doesn't mean avoiding sexual immorality. It's just the area of sex just one area in which we can be sanctified and be holy. But it is an important and relevant area, isn't it?

People generally love sex. As soon as we're old enough, as soon as we're not children thinking that sex is disgusting, we're hugely intrigued by and probably want to have sex.

It's no surprise because our culture is obsessed with sex. You don't have to listen to the radio for very long before you hear these words. I'm in love with the shape of you. We push and pull like a magnet do.

[12 : 22] Although my heart is falling to, I'm in love with your body. And last night you were in my room and now my bedsheets smell like you. Every day discovering something brand new. I'm in love with your body. And that's Ed Sheeran, Shape of You, if you didn't realize.

Very popular song. Lots of really popular songs have references to or actually just about sex, aren't they? But it's not only songs. Also films and TV series.

It's hard to watch a film or TV series on the big streaming services that don't just have an explicit sexual scene in them. When Gemma and I watch a new film or TV series, we often actually look on IMDB at the parent's guide because we just don't want to be caught suddenly watching some really explicit sex scene that we weren't expecting and don't feel as inappropriate or helpful.

In a British sex survey in 2014 with a representative sample of different people across Britain, over a thousand people, they found that pornography, that 56% of people in the UK watch pornography

occasionally or regularly.

Sex in some form is a big part of our lives, of many people's lives. And our culture, culture in the UK cannot get enough of it. But how are we to express our sexuality?

[13:37] How are we to use the organs that God has given us for sex? Are there any limits? Some people would say sleep with whoever you want. It's not anybody's business to tell you who you should and shouldn't sleep with.

And that's what we see in society. Just to refer back to that sex survey, it's interesting that almost half of respondents have had a one-night stand. 20% have had sex with someone they didn't even know.

80% have had more than one sexual partner. Just over 40% have had more than five sexual partners. Some up to over 21 people. And 62% believe that prostitution should be legalized. Does this show that people think that they can sleep with whoever they want? Well, not exactly. Society clearly does have limits because it's still taboo to sleep with close family members or to sleep with children or to sleep with people who are not consenting.

It always has to be consenting on both paths, doesn't it? And monogamy, a relationship between just two people, still generally defines the acceptable boundary for committed relationships.

[14:43] 92% of respondents said that monogamy was desirable. So adultery is still looked down on. Though, of course, there are some people who would argue for polyamory or open relationships where you can have multiple sexual partners at the same time and that's okay.

And that's even healthy, perhaps, is what they argue. It's easy to say that the world thinks this way. But in reality, we live in a world of competing claims about what the boundaries should or shouldn't be for sex, both within Western culture but also across different cultures.

So, how can we know what the right boundaries are for sex? Do we just say live and let live as long as it's consensual, as long as people can legitimately consent, whether they be adults or teenagers that are old enough to consent?

Or, are there legitimate boundaries for sex as it's supposed to be enjoyed? Without God, it's difficult to say why there should be any boundaries or limits at all. Why should anybody tell you how you should or shouldn't use your body?

But from a Christian perspective, with God, we believe that actually God has given sex, that he has designed it for our good and given it to us. And he's revealed in the word, in the Bible, how we should enjoy it.

[15:58] In the passage, what does Paul expect of the sexual boundaries of the Thessalonians? Well, just to give a bit of background to this letter so far, chapter one, Paul has assured them of their salvation.

He said, yes, it seems like you really were saved. He wants to encourage them because the gospel came to them not simply with words but also with power, with the Holy Spirit and deep conviction. And because they suffered for the gospel, they welcomed the message with joy.

Their faith has rung out across the surrounding region. In chapter two, he talks about his ministry among them, about how he was faithful to the message of the gospel in his proclamation of it by not seeking money, not seeking to boost his reputation and also in his life and the way that he loved them and the way that he worked hard not to be a burden to any of them.

And in chapter three, he talks about the concern that he had that they may have been led astray by afflictions and been tempted to stop following God and so he sent Timothy to find out about their faith and Timothy's come back and said, no, they're still going, they're still doing well, they're still continuing in the faith.

And now in chapter four, Paul is reminding them of the instructions that he and his companions gave the Thessalonians. In verse one, we instructed you how to live. In verse two, for you know what instructions we gave you.

[17:17] In verse six, towards the end, it says, as we have already told you and warned you. And in verse nine, about brotherly love, we do not need to write to you for you yourselves have been taught by God.

So here in chapter four, he wants to remind them of the moral implications for their lives as those who have been saved by God to live and serve him.

There's a really key verse in chapter one, verse nine. They turned from idols to serve the living and true God. Being a Christian doesn't just mean believing.

Even the devil believes many of the things that we believe. That verse again, that James, faith without works is dead. Turning from idols to serve the living and true God implies a change of lifestyle, a change of the way that we live.

What might that have looked like for the Thessalonians in the area of sex? Well, let me just give you a bit of background to the Greco-Roman culture and the sexual culture of that world.

[18 : 22] They were even more sexually promiscuous than our society is today. Even the gods promoted sex. Aphrodite, who was a very popular god at the time, we know that because they've excavated many household images, little clay figurines from the city of Thessalonica.

Aphrodite was not only a popular god, but she was the symbol of sexual freedom. She was the patroness, which means supporter or champion of prostitution.

Sexual pleasure was promoted in society and by the gods. Those who alone were encouraged to go and find sex. And there was a presence of cult prostitution.

In the temple of Aphrodite, there were female servants who people could go and have sex with as part of the culture of worship. Was the act of sex itself an act of worship?

We're not entirely clear, but there was clearly a connection between worship and sex. And in some ways, Thessalonian society was similar to us today.

[19 : 23] Sleeping with another man's wife was universally condemned. That still didn't stop many, but it was looked down on. However, for men, having sex with women who weren't your spouse was widespread.

One Greek writer said this, mistresses we keep for the sake of pleasure, concubines for the daily care of our persons, but wives to bear us legitimate children and to be faithful guardians of our households.

So if you were a man, sex with your wife was somewhat of a necessity for having children. She was just there to keep your house in order. But fun, enjoyable, exciting, maybe even healthy sex was looked for outside marriage.

Having sex before marriage, whether with a prostitute or with your slave, was widely practiced and not looked down on. So, turning from idols to serve the living and true God for the Thessalonians may have meant giving up sex with temple prostitutes.

It may have meant rejecting the call to have sex with idols. Sorry, rejecting the call to have sex by the idols like Aphrodite. And it would have meant having sex in the way God has designed, given, and prescribed it.

[20 : 34] In the words of verses 4 to 5, it would have meant taking back control over their passions. It would have meant not being led to have sex with anyone and everyone who you felt like who was up for it.

And this idea of taking back control is an important one for us too. God calls us to master our bodies with His help, not to be mastered by them, not to be enslaved by our passions.

Jesus, when He was talking to His disciples in the Garden of Gethsemane, said, pray that you may not fall into temptation because the Spirit is willing but the flesh is weak. He calls them to pray because He recognizes the weakness of the flesh.

And in Galatians, Paul talks about this battle between the flesh and the Spirit and asks them to be led by the Spirit not by the flesh. Our passions, our lusts, our feelings can be powerful but Paul tells the Thessalonians to keep them in check.

In Jeremiah chapter 17 verse 9 it says, the heart is deceitful above all things and beyond cure. Who can understand it? In other words, don't trust your feelings.

[21 : 43] Don't follow your heart and be led by your passions. The heart is deceitful. Don't trust it. We encounter all sorts of temptations to commit sexual sin when we're on our devices alone and bored, when we feel tempted to embrace the chemistry between you and a colleague, when you push the boundaries with a girlfriend or boyfriend before marriage.

God calls us like the Thessalonians to learn to take control of our bodies not like the surrounding culture in passionate lust but holy, different, other and honourable.

Honouring the gift of sex and its rightful place. Honouring marriage as the proper place for sex. The Bible is clear. Sex is for marriage. It's the culmination of committed intimacy between a man and a woman.

The most intimate vulnerable giving of your whole self to another. The world may look down on the biblical view of sex but rather than having a very low view of sex, as Christians, if we're following the

Bible we should have a very high view of sex.

Sex is special. It bonds two people together for life. In Matthew's Gospel Jesus quotes Genesis talking about the institution of marriage and the place of sex.

[23 : 02] He says in chapter 19 verse 5, Restricting sex between a man and a woman for life may be seen as oppressive both in Thessalonian society and in our society.

To do that would have seemed baffling. It would have seemed like the boundaries were just too strict. But how else do we define sexual immorality? If we don't listen to God and his design for sex then how else do we define sexual immorality?

Just a quick aside this is a very controversial topic I know and I don't know how much you have thought about it before. Maybe what I'm saying is new maybe you're full of questions and maybe you struggle with this and think how can this be true?

How is this good? Let me just encourage you to speak to the leaders in your church speak to Phil speak to other wise Christians who know their Bible well and talk it through because it is a challenging thing and it's quite different to the way that our culture thinks so it can be quite difficult to hear for the first time.

So sex is for marriage it is the gift of God for marriage and biblical marriage is between a man and a woman. Let's not forget that sex is the means for new life and it's context marriage is the best context for new life to enter.

[24 : 38] What better environment to bring up a child than in a committed relationship for life between a man and a woman. Not only does the child have a male and female role model but also they stand the best chances of success in other areas too.

Let me just read some paragraphs from a Christian Institute article on the value of marriage in society. All the statements that they make are backed up by studies and they give reference to them in the article.

It says this children living with single parents are more likely to have been suspended from school and more likely to repeat a year than children living with continuously married parents. Boys likelihood to act out and eventually experience a school suspension is about twice as large in a sample of children raised by single mothers.

In an Australian study comparing married and cohabiting couples children of married couples were significantly more likely to do well at school. For babies born in England and Wales the stillbirth and infant mortality rates are lowest for those born within marriage.

The rate for infants under one born outside marriage was 15% higher in 2010 than the rate for the children of married couples. There's a couple more sentences. In 2009-2010 children in cohabiting families living in the UK were 1.5 times more likely to be living in poverty than children in married families after housing costs were considered.

[26 : 00] Children living in lone parent families were more than twice as likely to be living in poverty than children in married homes. Some quite shocking statistics but interesting. So the studies show that marriage is best for children and our children are the feature aren't they?

They are the feature politicians, bankers, police officers, lawyers, doctors, you name it. And how do children come about? Through sex.

Let's not forget that for most of human history the availability of contraception and abortion just wasn't there like it is today. Not only the availability but the acceptance of it and the prevalence of it. People's thinking has changed about the connection between sex and children. But sex is still God's good gift for marriage only. To have sex outside of marriage in verse 6 is to wrong your brother or sister to take advantage of him.

What does Paul mean by that? Well in a general sense I think it could mean that it kind of undermines the foundations of society because we're misusing sex. We risk bringing a child into this world who may not be wanted or looked after.

[27 : 15] It divorces sex and its rightful place in marriage. And in wronging your brother or sister sorry it wrongs your brother or sister to do that.

To take advantage or uses another for your pleasure to have sex outside of its rightful context. And in a more specific sense what he might mean by this where he may be referring to actually sleeping with another man's wife.

There's good reason to think that in this passage although it does apply to men and women remember that Thessalonian context of the availability of sex for men even more so much more so

than for women.

There's good reason to think that Paul was addressing the men in the first place before women. And so to sleep with another man's wife would obviously be wronging your brother.

Moving on then for the sake of time. It is God's will that we should be sanctified. One way we do that is by avoiding sexual immorality. Avoid it like the plague.

[28 : 17] It means take a different route. Use and store your laptop around others if need be. Use safe search or an app like Covenant Eyes which keeps you accountable to others. Don't walk down that street.

Don't share a bed with your boyfriend or girlfriend. I'm not laying these down as rules that we must follow but the principle, the basic point is to avoid sexual immorality, to not give an opportunity for the flesh.

Take back control with God's help. Don't be mastered by your passions. Don't put yourself in that place of temptation. Why? Because it's God's will.

And if you want to please God, then you want to listen to and follow his will. Paul's instructions come with a warning in verse six. The Lord will punish all those who commit such sins as we told you and warned you before.

Nothing goes unseen by the Lord and that includes sexual sin. So we need to give up our sexual sin today and once again return to God for forgiveness and help.

[29 : 19] Because God will punish those who commit and do not turn from sexual sin. This is a stark warning from Paul. The word in Greek is stronger than just warn. It's more like solemnly warn, as ESV says.

Imagine Paul saying, seriously, listen to me. You need to turn from this. Avoid it at all costs.

Because if you don't, you will face God's judgment. The Thessalonians needed to completely leave behind the sexual sin.

associated with their old lives. And we too need to have nothing to do with the sexual sin of perhaps our old life or the surrounding culture that we live in.

God did not call us to be impure, verse 7, but to live a holy life. Finally then, in closing, notice in verse 1, it says that these instructions, or even more strongly, we can understand as commands, are about pleasing God.

and these commands are not just from Paul, they are given in the Lord Jesus, verse 1. They are given by the authority of the Lord Jesus, verse 2. And to reject them, verse 8, is to reject not human being, but to reject God himself, who gives us his Holy Spirit.

[30 : 32] And so, we need to pay attention, we need to listen to these instructions and commands from God, and not to reject them, because to do so would be to reject God. we need to acknowledge that the instructions that Paul gives here are the very words of God, as Paul is thankful for, the way that they receive the words of Paul as the words of God in chapter 2, verse 13.

And we also thank God continually, because when you received the word of God, which you heard from us, you accepted not as the word of men, but as it actually is, the word of God, which is at work in you who believe. So, let me just say that if you do feel convicted of sin today, don't feel condemned.

God is gracious and kind. If you've trusted in Christ, then you are perfectly pleasing to him, but how you're living is not right. So, turn, kneel before the cross once again and say sorry, resolve to live for God, to please him with your body in this area of sex.

None of us are yet the finished product, are we? But we are being made into it with God's help. And so, to finish with these verses from chapter 5, verse 23, may God himself, the God of peace, sanctify you through and through.

May your whole spirit, soul, and body be kept blameless at the coming of our Lord Jesus Christ.

The one who calls you is faithful, and he will do it. Amen. Amen.

[32 : 04]