

Living to please God and win others

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Preacher: Nathan Severs

[0 : 00] I wonder if you've ever been in a situation where you're in some kind of performance management meeting,! No one ever goes in straight away with the negatives, and depending on who we're talking! the time taken to get to them varies. When the manager or the teacher can only muster a sentence or two of generic positives, you know you're probably in for a rough ride.

Perhaps as you've heard the first three chapters of Thessalonians preached, you've been encouraged by Paul's positivity. I hope you have. But at the same time, you've been thinking, but when does the telling off begin? There's usually a telling off. Come on, let's get it over with. Remember, as a quick recap, we're talking about a church whose most mature members are at most a few months old in their faith. The church was in a typical seaport city, similar to Corinth, in the mix of cultures, religions, and moral codes. These believers had come out of ritualistic Judaism, or others out of idol worship, and particularly sexual immorality. And they all lived with the temptation to go back to these things every day. And we know that they also faced persecution. In 1 Thessalonians chapter 1, verse 6, it tells us that they became imitators of Paul and the Lord in spite of severe suffering. This might have come from the same Jews who had run Paul and Silas out of town, that we read about in Acts, as well as the other Thessalonians who they had lived, worked, and worshipped with, up to their conversion. Their situation was tough, but Paul has had at least three chapters worth of good things to say so far. But it's today, in chapter 4, where Paul actually starts to give them some things to think about. But I think that we can still be encouraged by what Paul has to say to them, and us.

And as Paul's main thrust is, keep doing what you're doing. You're doing great, but now try and be even better. From this passage this morning, I want us to see, as it says up here, that if we are living to please God, which should be our desire, we will be holy, we will be pure, we'll love each other, and we will be a witness in the way that we live. So firstly, be holy. Another translation of that word is be sanctified. That's from verses 1 to 3. Be holy, be sanctified.

[2 : 57] Paul starts chapter 4 reminding the Thessalonians that when he had been with them, he had told them how to live in order to please God. And that this was not by his own authority, but by the authority of the Lord Jesus, verse 2. Paul then acknowledges that this is how they were living, according to Timothy's report, which we had in chapter 3. And now Paul encourages them to do this more and more.

How? Verse 3, by being sanctified. Paul reminds his readers that this is God's will for them. If they needed proof, they could go to their Old Testament, Ectus 31, verse 13, where the Lord says to the Israelites, so that you may know that I am the Lord who makes you holy. Again, holy, another word for sanctification. So, and the Lord who sanctifies you. Christian sanctification is being set apart to bring glory and honor to God by being made holy. We are sanctified as we become Christians, Christians, but no one becomes the perfect example of holiness the minute they accept Jesus into their life. We start to become more aware of the wrong things we do and perhaps feel more of a sense of guilt because of them. But we still get things wrong. But as we get to know God better and understand more of his love for us, we start to learn from our mistakes and to beat those sins that once ruled our life. And ultimately, we don't sin less because of any effort of our own. It's the Holy Spirit working in us so that we read the right things, so that we pray and ask for the right things, and we feel the right way about our sin and about God's love. We're made holy. We are sanctified at conversion. But throughout our Christian lives, we're also being sanctified as God works in us. That's why Paul could say, you are living in a way that's pleasing to God. They had been sanctified. But Paul can also say, do this more and more. He recognized that there is always room to live more for God. And this is the call to us, to live our lives, our whole lives for God. We can't fully live for God using some sort of tick list approach. When we've done enough godly things on our list for the day

we stop. No. That would be us determining what holiness looks like and ignoring what God says holiness is. Every aspect of our lives should be lived in holiness. And when we think we've got there, we just need to go back to verse one and read it again. And we urge you in the Lord Jesus to do this more and more. We'll always be able to be more holy. This shouldn't depress us. It should challenge and excite us. In his grace, God enables us to be more like Jesus. But Paul doesn't leave them to work out what this looks like in their lives. He preempts the question, but how? By telling them to be pure.

And particularly being sexually pure. So secondly, be pure. So we read in Genesis chapter 1, chapter 2, that God made man and woman and that that was his idea for relationships. When we look around us today, we see hundreds, if not more, of other possibilities to that design that we read about in God's word. And perhaps we think it's bad and that we're up against things that we're up against. But when you add to it the use of temple prostitutes and probably many more unthinkable things, we should recognize this as a description of Thessalonica and of Corinth and of many other cities that Paul planted churches in. The Thessalonians' situation was the same in these terms, if not worse than our own. So this is the first thing that Paul brings up as he seeks to encourage them to live lives that are increasingly holy. And he really emphasizes here who these instructions are from. These aren't just Paul's preferences. They were straight from God's preferences. They were straight from God. He's already reminded them in verse 3 that it is God's will that they should be sanctified. And then again at the end of this section, he points out that God called them to live a holy life. That's in verse 7. And therefore, the Thessalonians weren't answerable to Paul on these matters. They were answerable to God. Verse 6 says that God will punish them for all such sins. And verse 8 says that if they reject this instruction, they reject God.

If we're ever tempted to think that we can pick and choose what we accept from the teaching we receive, this should be a challenge to us. If we reject the words of the preacher or the prayer meeting leader or even the friend who wants to show you the error of your ways. If what these people are saying is faithful to God's word and we don't reject them, we reject God. And so God, through Paul, reminds them and us too to avoid sexual immorality, which was this umbrella term for this whole catalog of sexual sin. And this example is used as it was the biggest temptation they faced from day to day.

[9 : 45] But if they had lived in a society where the love of money and possessions was the biggest issue, or where the sanctity of life was increasingly ignored, or where selfishness ruled, Paul would have used these things as examples instead. His point is how we avoid unholy living.

So what's the answer? Verse 4 tells us by learning to control our own body in a holy and honorable way. We all know our own bodies and probably all recognize their weaknesses for certain things. These weaknesses are because we are inherently sinful. But there are two options with how to deal with those weaknesses. One is the right response, the other is easy. One takes discipline and the other results in sin. Giving into our body's weaknesses is easy, but it leads to sin. We have a thought and we act on it. It's almost the reflex, the thing we don't think about. We just do it. But fighting our body's weaknesses is hard, but it leads to holiness. We have that same thought, but instead we pray. We read God's word. We focus our attention on God and all he's done for us. This isn't the normal response. It takes discipline, but it is the way that we control or master our bodies. Peter, in 1 Peter 1, verses 13 to 15, says, How do we be pure and holy?

[11 : 58] we imitate Christ because he was the perfect example of self-control leading to holiness. If we're living to please God, we will be pure.

Thirdly, if we're living to please God, we will be loving. This is from verses 9 and 10. In those verses, we see Paul reminding the believers how they should be in relation to each other, namely loving each other.

During his time with them, perhaps he told them about the time Jesus had been challenged on what the greatest commandment was in Matthew 22, verses 37 to 39, where he says, in answer, Love the Lord your God with all your heart and with all your soul and with all your mind.

This is the first and greatest commandment. And the second is like it. Love your neighbor as yourself. Loving your neighbor is nearly as important as loving God.

But it wasn't actually Paul who had taught them to love each other. In verse 9, Paul points out that it was the Holy Spirit who had taught them. How was the Holy Spirit doing this?

[13 : 19] We know that a number of the Thessalonian Christians had come out of Judaism, so they would have known verses like Leviticus 19, 18, that Jesus quoted when he told them to love their

neighbor.

And we all know that where there is love and unity in any group of people, big or small, the situation is usually better than if there's hatred and disunity.

So, as the Holy Spirit worked in the lives of these new believers, he would have shown them this need for love by helping them learn from any mistakes they made and showing them that when they did love, their work and their efforts were blessed.

And this serves as a reminder to us to love each other now. Sometimes by bearing with one another, as Paul had to tell the Colossians and the Ephesians, but to love each other.

It also reminds us that as Christians, the Holy Spirit works within us, teaching us what he knows we need to know. We're blessed to be free, to gather together as God's people, to hear his word explained, and we're encouraged to do this as much as we can.

[14 : 41] But there are people who can't meet with other believers, who perhaps have a Bible, but that's it. Or maybe they only have part of a Bible, or just a Christian book, or perhaps nothing at all.

But God reveals himself in a number of ways to different people. And ultimately, it's the Holy Spirit entering people, which is what makes them a Christian.

In Acts 10, we read about possibly the first Gentile converts, Cornelius and his family. Although Peter did the talking, it wasn't until the Holy Spirit came on all those who heard the message that they were true believers.

So the Thessalonians had been, and were being, taught to love each other. And verse 10 tells us, again, that they were doing this, and that this love extended to all the brothers and sisters throughout Macedonia.

Macedonia was a region at the time, which included cities of Philippi and Berea. And as Thessalonica was a trade hub, it was likely that Christians from these other cities did business there.

[15 : 58] And whilst they were there, they sought out the other Christians who were there. And from verse 10, it's obvious that the Thessalonians had provided hospitality for these visitors, and that this report was taken back to the other churches in the region.

And again, this is another reason why Paul could say in chapter 1, verse 7, of 1 Thessalonians, and you became a model to all the believers in Macedonia and Achaia.

So actually that spreads further than just the region they were in. So here at Calvary, and me back at my church, we need to love each other.

And this love needs to extend to the churches around. And throughout the whole world. And how does this love manifest itself? It could be in simple hospitality.

It could be in the giving of time or resources. And it can always be in prayer. And what's the result of this love? In Philippians 1, Paul writes from prison, that he and others had always preached Christ in love.

[17 : 14] And it was his love, actually, that had got him put in prison. But then he says, in verse 12, Philippians 1, that what has happened to him has really served to advance the gospel.

So basically, as a result of his love for others, the gospel was advancing. So when we love each other, ultimately, the gospel should advance.

So we must love each other. And lastly, if we are living lives that are pleasing to God, we will be a witness.

Verses 11 and 12. We'll be a witness. In all that Paul has said so far, if the Thessalonians were getting it right, they were becoming more holy, and their lives were becoming more pleasing to God. So lastly, Paul gives them a few of the general ways in which the Christians could live increasingly holy lives so that they pleased God more. He tells them to lead a quiet life, mind their own business, and work with their hands.

[18 : 29] He tells you to lead a quiet life, mind your own business, and work with your hands. So that sounds a bit strange to us, perhaps. So why these particular things?

Paul evidently sees them as a potential place where the Thessalonians could fall down. Some suggest that shortfallings in these areas stemmed from the matter that Paul moves on to in the next section, which is the Thessalonians' anticipation of Christ's return.

Perhaps the Thessalonians were anticipating Jesus' return too much. What would this look like? Probably being quite vocal about the fact that Jesus was coming back.

Maybe some of the Thessalonians were taken to the streets with their, the end is nigh, judgment is coming, sandwich boards, and doing quite the opposite to living a quiet life.

And this links well with Paul's next piece of advice. Mind your own business, or you could translate it, be engaged in your own affairs.

[19 : 37] There is more than one way to tell people that Jesus is coming back to judge the world. Perhaps the Thessalonians were tempted to tell people just that, whilst forgetting to tell them about what Jesus had accomplished at the cross, and what that meant for all those who repented and believed.

And if they thought that what they were doing was best, they were likely to interfere with the efforts of others, telling them that they were wrong. And lastly, if you think that Jesus is coming tomorrow, or in the next week, or a month, what's the temptation?

To stop working. After all, what's the point? We don't take anything that we have in this life with us. Perhaps some of the Thessalonians had done just this, given up work.

They were just relying on others to provide for them whilst they waited for Jesus. Don't get me wrong. We are called to anticipate Jesus' return, to be expectant of it.

But when our actions, as a result of this anticipation, affect our holiness in other areas of life, we must be getting something wrong. The alternative explanation to these three of Paul's admonitions is that if we, along with the Thessalonians, live quiet lives, minding our own business, and working hard, we'll have the best conditions to grow in holiness.

[21 : 09] Living a quiet life would mean not chasing after all the world has to offer us, money, status, popularity, security, and so much more.

None of these things bring holiness. If our attention isn't captured by these things, we can focus on becoming more holy.

As Christians, minding our own businesses, we shouldn't be constantly focusing our attention on someone else, telling them how to make improvements and be more holy.

Instead, we should be spending most of our time working on our own works, walks with God.

Obviously, many of us have responsibilities in this area.

if we're parents, if we do children's work, if we are husbands and wives even, leaders of small groups, anything, we have responsibility for others.

[22 : 12] But it's only when our primary focus is on our own holiness and position before God that we can be helpful and encouraging to others in these same matters.

And how does working with our hands help with holiness? We could say that our jobs, whatever they are, are the things that distract us from advancing in holiness.

But working with your hands probably refers to the lowliest jobs that there were around at the time that Paul is writing. In other words, the jobs that you can turn up to, work hard at, and then go home from without having to think about it again until the next day.

So Paul is saying don't make work your life. Don't be constantly looking for the next promotion.

Don't put more time and energy into this than you really need to.

Again, this isn't going to allow you to become more holy. Again, we need to remember that we're told elsewhere to serve wholeheartedly in whatever occupation we have as if we're serving the Lord.

[23 : 21] that's in Ephesians 6, verse 7. But this must be balanced with the fact that we're likely to become more holy, to be sanctified, which is God's will for us, as we just get on with whatever work God has provided for us.

Not constantly seeking the next pay rise and promotion. And when we do lead quiet lives, when we do mind our own business, when we do just get on with whatever work we have, when we do all of these things, what's the result?

Verse 12, we win the respect of non-Christians. It's living like this, as well as having love for one another, being pure, that we become more holy and therefore better witnesses to the world around us.

And this is because this kind of living makes us stand out from the rest of the world. The rest of the world who are loud and interfering with their opinions and beliefs, who generally look out for number one and are much less inclined to love others, and who generally go by a much more relaxed set of morals.

So, what do our lives look like to outsiders? Are they any different to those around us? If not, we cannot be a witness.

[24 : 51] Are we only a little bit different, perhaps in one or two areas? Probably not different enough to be a witness. Do we still join in those conversations that we shouldn't and laugh at the rude jokes?

Do we still talk about others behind their backs? Do we agree with the harsh opinions that some have of others? Do we just accept that most of the country aren't living according to God's design for relationships?

What do we say when so-and-so is moving in with their girlfriend? What would we do if we were invited to a homosexual marriage? If we said no, would we make up some excuse or would we give the real reason?

We need to be completely different in every area whilst looking out for the opportunity that God gives us to explain why we're like this, as Chris prayed earlier, attributing it all to Jesus and what he has done for us.

So, we need to be a witness by the way that we live our lives. So, as we come to a close, if we're living to please God, which should be our aim, we will be holy, we will be pure, we will love each other and we'll be a witness in the way that we live.

[26 : 19] We'll be sanctified, becoming more and more holy as we get to know God better, but this isn't a passive process. We need to read more and pray more. We increase in holiness as we keep our lives pure and we do this by taking control of our own bodies, not giving in to their sinful desires by following the example of Christ.

We'll love each other more and more by the work of the Holy Spirit in us and when we do, God's work through us is more fruitful and this, like I said, should be our primary aim.

We will be a witness to others when our lives exhibit such a positive difference to the lives of non-Christians that they must find out what causes that difference and if we get these things right, we will be increasing in holiness and therefore living our lives in a way that is pleasing to God because his gospel is being proclaimed and just in case someone here thinks that you're doing all of these things, listen to Paul just once more.

Back to verse 1. Finally, brothers, we instructed you how to live in order to please God. As in fact you are living, now we ask and urge you in the Lord Jesus to do this more and more and again at the end, verse 10, do so more and more.

There will always be improvements we can make until Jesus returns and our sanctification is completed in him. Amen. Amen.