

# Working to Please God

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[ 0 : 00 ] One of the simple joys I have in life is actually to prepare dinner for my family. Now, don't get me wrong, I'm not that good a cook, really. I really only have about 10 to 12 dishes in my repertoire.

Bird's eye fish and chips, spaghetti bolognese, fried rice, and teriyaki chicken udon, amongst a few others. But thankfully, my daughters are not fussy eaters.

And so lo and behold, some of their favorites, like udon and spaghetti, happen to be on my repertoire. It seems like such a trivia thing, and maybe I should have high ambitions, but it's so satisfying, really, to see their smiles of approval whenever they get their favorite dish on the menu.

And sometimes it gets even better than that. And when they so approve of my plating skills that they put a photo of it on WhatsApp. So that photo, that was... I think the carrot's a bit...

Yeah, the carrot should have been in the bowl, not outside. But anyway, my mistake. Well, you can probably see from there that I'm a bit of a people pleaser, after all.

[ 1 : 11 ] It took me a while to realize that, but I am. Now, I don't know what kind of a pleaser you are, but tonight we're actually going to focus on being a pleaser of a different kind, that of being a God pleaser.

So let me ask you, perhaps you've thought of these questions before. What do you think it takes to put a smile on God's face, to have Him nod with pleasure and approval on you?

Now, we got a clue from that first reading, didn't we? Let's put those verses up again, verse 22 and 23 in 1 Samuel. When the prophet Samuel came to King Saul, he said that what delights the Lord is obedience, not sacrifices.

That is, listening to God's Word and then responding to it and following it is what matters. Not just doing stuff thinking that we're actually obeying, pleasing Him. And Samuel says in the second verse 23, not to do that is actually rebellion and arrogance and is as evil as idolatry.

Well, this is the same focus that Paul has in our passage tonight. For he says in verse 1, look with me, as for other matters, brothers and sisters, we instructed you how to live in order to please or delight God.

[ 2 : 24 ] Now, we know that from previous weeks, those of you who have been here, that it's not actually pleasing God that saves us, right? It's believing in Jesus and what He's done for us on the cross that saves.

But having believed the Word of God, we are then instructed on how to live, how to please the One who saved us. And in this passage tonight, Paul proceeds to highlight two areas that we can do that.

The area of holiness and the area of love or love for each other. But we need to realize that these aren't the only areas to please God in.

So chapter 5, when we get to it, has a whole list of other things as well. And there's many more in the rest of the Bible, which Paul doesn't mention. And so the question is, why these two areas Paul mentions? Well, I think perhaps they have been raised by the Thessalonians themselves.

So if you notice the phrase, as for other matters, it sort of suggests that Paul's referring to their questions. Later on in verse 9, and again next week in chapter 5 in verse 1, Paul also uses the phrase, now about your love, or now about the times and dates, all suggesting that these are their concerns that they're raising.

[ 3 : 33 ] So that could be one reason. Alternatively, it may be that Paul sees these as particular threats posed by the culture or the city against the believers.

But either way, what Paul does is it actually cultures these concerns in terms of a bigger picture. Because ultimately, this passage is not a matter of just following this or that specific rule.

But as a Christian, the big goal in life is to please God with all our lives. That's the motivation that Paul wants them to have. And he wants us to have as well.

So the first thing to note then is that Paul isn't raising any new teachings here. Rather, this is what Paul has been instructing them from the moment they believe. That's what he says.

And these instructions carry, he says now in verse 2, the very authority of the Lord Jesus himself. And the Thessalonians received them as such, as Jesus is teaching.

[ 4 : 34 ] And so much so that Paul can then say in verse 1, we have instructed you how to live to please God as in fact you are living. And so Paul isn't scolding them or disciplining them.

Rather, he's simply reminding them and urging them in the Lord Jesus to do this more and more. And we see that again in verse 9 where he says the same thing. So here then is the picture of the normal Christian life, of what it takes to please God day by day, year by year.

It's all about starting well and then continuing to do it more and more of the same. There's no sense in which new Christians sort of only do basic Christian things.

And then when we become mature, you know, we graduate to more spiritual or holy things. There's no special powers to acquire as if we're playing some computer game, you know, that the higher level you get to, the more powers you get, you unlock, and the more challenging the task.

No, whether we're a Christian of many years or a new Christian, we please God in the same way. The only difference is that as we mature, we become more consistent.

[ 5 : 45 ] Pleasing God then becomes second nature to us, a habit. And we do that in more and more areas of our lives. But we don't need a special anointing or a special outpouring of the Spirit.

No, all of us, all of us have what it takes to please God now. Now, Paul applies this then to the first area which we're going to look at, the area of holiness.

So in verse 3, if you look with me, Paul lays out four things. He says, it's God's will, number one, that we should be sanctified, number two, that you should avoid sexual immorality, number three, that each of you should learn to control your own bodies, and then four, further down in verse 6, that in this matter, no one should wrong or disadvantage brother or sister.

Now, I don't think we're meant to take this as a list of four instructions. Rather, I think what Paul is doing is he's going from the general to the specific. All right? He's not saying, here are four separate things, you just need to obey them one by one.

No. He's sort of drilling down with more detail as he goes as to how to please God in holiness. So the general principle, the first point, is to be sanctified, to be made holy, to set ourselves apart from the world through how we live distinctively.

[ 7 : 04 ] This is the will of God. This is what holiness is. But then we go on, how can we then live specifically in holiness? Paul singles out sexual immorality.

Avoid sexual immorality, he says, in the second point. And then thirdly, he says, but how do we do that specifically? How do we avoid sexual immorality specifically? Well, point number three, by controlling our own bodies.

Meaning, mastering our sexual desires instead of being mastered by them. Don't be like the pagan, Paul says, living in passionate lust because they don't know God.

And so friends, this is a very clear distinction, isn't it, between Christians and the world. And in Paul's day, sexual license and freedom actually ruled the day. Particularly for males in high society, it was not uncommon for them to take wives, to just bear children and carry on the family name, and then to have mistresses and concubines as well to satisfy their so-called sexual needs.

This was seen as normal. Sexual appetite had to be fed. And there was nothing wrong with doing that. That's not so different from today, is it? We hear, don't repress those natural desires of yours.

[ 8 : 20 ] It's harmful, or, you know, if you do that, it's hurtful to people. If you read the West Hill article, you'd pick up from that what some of these people are saying. It's the same thing.

But Paul says that if you know God, then you know that this isn't the case. You will know that we are made in God's image. And therefore, our bodies are used to serve God, not to serve our sexual desires.

Now, please don't mishear me. I'm not saying desires are bad. They're part of God's good design. But sexual desires are designed not to be used by us as we see fit, but actually only to be used in marriage between a man and a woman.

God designed sexual desire to help bind marriages through intimacy, and through that to build strong families. And so, as Christians, the holy thing to do is actually to control our bodies, to use our sexual desires and desires generally, for that matter, only for the purpose to which it's designed, only to please God.

It's sort of like a virtuoso who might, what he might do with his violin or her violin. Compare that with, say, a class of four-year-olds.

[ 9 : 37 ] We just started learning their violins. Have you ever heard four-year-olds play violins? It's adorable, but not very pleasant. Because why?

Because they don't really know what they're doing just yet, right? They're sort of butchering the true sound of the violin. My daughter learns violin as well. She's done three, four years, so she's much better now.

But imagine that a virtuoso comes to this class and he's giving a demonstration. Would you expect him to be playing the violin like a four-year-old? Or beautifully as it should be played.

I mean, I'm not even sure that a virtuoso knows how to play like a four-year-old anymore. And so you see, as Christians, whenever we look at other people practicing sexual immorality, we mustn't think, oh, we're missing out.

Actually, the opposite is true. It's not they who are using their bodies as God intended, but we who master our sexual desires. We are like the virtuoso.

[ 10 : 37 ] We're playing who plays his violin just as it was designed to be played. And so, brothers and sisters, be encouraged whenever you are tempted, but then you avoid sexual immorality because you've actually just done something that has pleased God.

You've done something that God has designed you to do. Now, as for the fourth point, Paul makes an added observation, and that is when we sin sexually, it often involves or impacts others as well.

And so we sin not only against God, but against others as well. So, for example, when you commit adultery with another spouse, you actually wrong the spouse as well as God.

And if you coerce another person to sin with you sexually, you've just taken advantage of them. Now, here Paul talks about wronging a brother or sister, but I don't take that to mean that he's just singling out believers, right?

Sexual immorality is wrong, whether it's done with believers or not. But I think Paul's point here is that it's even more grievous with a believer because you've just caused, when you do that, you've just caused another believer to displease God.

[ 11 : 48 ] Does that make sense? Not only you have displeased God, but another believer has displeased God as well. And so, for example, if you cross the boundary sexually with your girlfriend, you've not only displeased God, but you've also dishonored her as well and caused her to displease the Lord.

And so, instead of actually loving her, which is what you think you may be doing, you've done the exact opposite. You've caused her to stumble. You have not loved her. Now, I say all this quite bluntly, and I know that it's a very big struggle for many, but I want us to take in the importance of what is being said here by the Lord and work hard to please God in this area.

And if we look at verses 6 to 8, Paul actually gives us ample reasons for doing that. First, he says that if we give in to sexual immorality, we actually deny what God has done.

Christ died so that we're no longer mastered by our bodies. Christ died so that we can live holy lives. And we deny our calling, Paul says in verse 7, when we sin in this way.

And secondly, if we go on sinning like that, then we will reap the consequences. Verse 6, the Lord will punish all those who commit such sins. Now, Paul isn't talking about the repentant sinner who slips up and then tries to get up again and is repentant.

[ 13 : 10 ] No, he's referring to the arrogant, just like King Saul was in that Old Testament passage, who refused to obey God's word, who does not take God's instruction seriously.

And so, verse 8, when they do that, Paul says, they're not just rejecting a human being, they're actually rejecting God. And they're rejecting the work of God's spirit in them.

Now, I take that verse, verse 8, to be both a warning and an encouragement because it's precisely the gift of God's spirit that enables us to overcome sexual immorality.

Satan's clever lie is to make us think that we're still enslaved to sin, whatever the sin may be. But the truth is, we're not. When we believe in Jesus, God's spirit is actually given to us to overcome sin.

We have what it takes, as I said at the start, we have what it takes to walk away from temptation, be it pornography, sexual fantasies, or the like. We have what it takes now because we have God's spirit.

[ 14 : 13 ] All right, let's turn now to the second area of living. Here, it's about love for each other. Again, Paul uses a similar pattern of words, sort of, with another list.

And so, the first thing he says is that they are to love each other more and more. And again, Paul says, they're already doing that. They're doing that not just in their city of Thessalonica, but throughout Macedonia, which is the region around that city.

Such is their love that Paul feels like, actually, there's no need for me to write to you. After all, he says, you're actually being taught by God. God's spirit is teaching you what to do. Now, what is this love exactly?

I said last week that Paul actually doesn't go into a lot of detail in the letter, but I think probably it's around caring for each other's needs, protecting one another, particularly in the face of persecution, and then giving material and financial need to those in need, and perhaps to the other cities as well.

But then something sort of strange happens in verse 11 because Paul then seems to veer off into another topic because then he says he wants them to make it their ambition to lead a quiet life, to make, mind their own business and to work with their hands.

[ 15 : 26 ] Now, I think this is still related to love somehow. I think Paul is asking them to do these things as an expression of love for each other. It may be that actually they are able to love each other generally in all these other areas that I talked about, but this is the one specific area that they could perhaps do better in.

Now, it seems strange that Paul has tied loving each other with these things. So, what's the connection? Well, I think we get the clue in verse 12 which gives us the why. For there in verse 12, Paul says this, so that their daily life may win the respect of outsiders, number one, and number two, so that you will not be dependent on anybody.

So, I think if you imagine what's happened is that when they became Christians, they've established, all of a sudden, they have established new relationships in life.

Their primary loyalty as Christians is no longer to the Roman Empire or to the citizens in the city or even to their, I don't know, professional guild or whatever. Instead, by becoming Christians, they belong to God.

And as a result, they belong to God's people. And together with their brothers and sisters, they're now the body of Christ. This is now their primary identity.

[ 16 : 47 ] These are the relationships that matter, as it were. And I think it explains why if you read the rest of the letter, Paul keeps bringing up again and again their relationship with one another and also with other believers in the region.

At the same time, they've also been ostracized by their fellow citizens by becoming Christians. They've been cast out from their previous relationships and perhaps being persecuted by them as well.

And so, I think Paul is saying that in this sort of environment, he's urging them to just keep their heads down, work quietly, to provide for one another. Paul's telling them, don't agitate politically, don't try and seek protection from a prominent patron or whatever, don't try and draw any attention to yourselves.

Rather, those who can work who are still being given jobs in the city, well, they should work hard so that they can provide for those in the church who can't. And by living this kind of quiet life, they're showing radical love for each other and perhaps outsiders looking at them will respect what they've just done.

Further, when those who can work work, then they don't place a burden on the church because the church needs to provide for those who can't. And so, the result is that as a whole, the church can care for its own, care for itself without having to seek help from outside the church.

[ 18 : 14 ] I think that's sort of what is happening behind the background and if you put the ladder together and you can look at Acts as well, you get that sort of picture emerging. Now, that's in the past but how does that translate?

into our situation today? Does it mean, for example, that Christians shouldn't become involved in civic duties? They shouldn't seek to excel in the public area? Shouldn't become politicians, for example?

Well, probably shouldn't become politicians unless you're up for persecution but I don't think that's what Paul is talking about because our situation is slightly different to the Thessalonians people.

But I think the principles still apply. That is, those who can work should work and they should care for those in the church who are in need.

And whatever the case may be, our main focus should still be on God's people because the church, for those of us who are Christians, the church is where we belong. Our brothers and sisters, these are the ones that God has saved and are like us, waiting for Christ's return where we will be with him in glory.

[ 19 : 27 ] And so if this is our destiny, then this is where our heart should be, where our allegiance should be. It doesn't mean we don't care for others, but it is primarily in and through the church that God's will is being fulfilled.

And so therefore, we should give our efforts, our love and our attention to people in church. It is primarily among God's people that we're able to live lives that please God.

And so I think what happens then, what it should mean for us is that as Christians, we ought to order our lives and priorities to look something like this, which I've got on the slide, where God and his church is at the center and around which all the other things in our lives and relationships orbit.

it shouldn't be, for instance, like this other slide, where, just to pick an example, where work is at the center and then the church and God is at the periphery.

Because work in this world is not our end goal. It shouldn't be in that center. Being with Jesus and God's people, that's our end goal and that's why it needs to be in the center.

[ 20 : 42 ] And so when we work, which we should, we want to do it in a way that glorifies God, that attracts people to his church, to his people, that wins respect for God's people.

Our aim is not to work to make our mark in society, this world, or to make our way up the ladder, whichever ladder you're climbing, to bring honor to ourselves. Those are not the things that we should be focused on.

And so in large part, I think if you do it that way, what it does mean is that we strive to lead a quiet life. We stay out of, for example, office politics, we mind our own business, and just get on with doing the job.

Our hope is not in climbing the ladder. Our hope is in Christ. We're seeking to please God. We're not seeking to please people in power. It's interesting, with the Olympics, I had an article out there as well about six Christian athletes to watch out for in the Olympics.

It's an American article, so it's all American athletes. But the interesting thing to read, there was one New Zealand, anyway, one Kiwi, but the interesting thing to read with all their testimonies is that notwithstanding that they're at the pinnacle of their sport, they could be winning gold medals or whatever, all of them said that actually what they're doing is to glorify God.

[ 22 : 02 ] Whatever their focus is, it's not to win, but to bring glory to God. And so if this is true for people at the peak of whatever profession or sport they're in, then how much more it should be for us as well.

Now I'm going to pause here, and I've actually asked two people to think about this, but to come up, so Tiff Hall and Marcus Young, to come up and just to share a bit about how they might apply this passage.

So I've asked Tiff to focus on holiness, and then Marcus to focus on love and work. So I'll hand the time over to them now. Hi everyone.

One phrase put out to me in this section is, each of you should learn to control your own body in a way that is holy and honourable. I think it's easy to give in to our desires, to feel that it's too hard to resist, or that the stakes are low, it doesn't really matter what's the difference anyway when it comes to sexual sin.

But the phrase, learn to control our own body, says that we can learn self-control in the area of sex. It is possible to grow in our ability to resist giving in.

[ 23 : 11 ] We may stumble at times, but each time we resist giving in to desires is a step in the direction of learning self-control. We can form new habits. And this isn't just for the single person, it's also for the married person.

We all need to learn self-control. Sex serves the marriage, not the individual. A person doesn't need sex, a marriage does. Our sexual thoughts and feelings exist to create joy in the other that is our spouse.

So, those of us who are married, we need to learn to control our own bodies in a way that serves our husband or wife. I'm not sure what that looks like for you. If you're married, do you need to create some space for romance?

Do you need to book a weekend away? Has your sexual past haunted you and made it hard for you to enjoy marriage sex? Do you need to seek counselling for that? Could you read a book to get some tips?

I'm sure in the messiness of life, it gets harder to serve each other in every area, and so not just in the area of desires, but our sexuality is a servant of our marriage.

[ 24 : 14 ] If you're single, what does that look like for you? Maybe you find this hard to take from a married person, person, but you can learn to control your body. So when do you usually give in? You could identify times and then shut down those opportunities.

Use the Christian community because sin thrives in secret. So find someone to confide in. Throw yourself into serving a Christian family and throw your computer in the pool. There's people here who've been married a lot longer than I have been, and there's people here who've been single a lot longer than I have been, so ask them for wisdom.

But as a married person, I can tell you that I see the goodness in God's design for sex, which serves a marriage. I think there's great hope in this passage. There's hope for those who feel enslaved to the guilt and shame of porn.

There's hope for those in a sexless marriage. And there's hope for those who know they've wronged their brother or sister in the past. There's forgiveness in Christ for anything you've done. You can learn to control your body because we know the God who gives his Holy Spirit.

Thanks, Tiff. So I'm Marcus and I work for Telstra as an electrical engineer and I'm a team leader as well, so I help coordinate some of the projects in that division.

[ 25 : 30 ] And so I do want to clarify first that I'm very grateful for the job in which God has provided. Telstra's been a great place to work. It's been very flexible, their time for me to study at Ridley College and as well taking time off for the birth of Jemima.

However, six and a half years ago when I started at Telstra, I was fresh out of uni, I wasn't prepared for the drama and the politics which comes from working a corporate job.

So for me in my work experience, I've had the pleasure of dealing with ethical dilemmas such as work with stakeholders who don't play by the ethical rule book and some of them have been unfortunately quite senior.

working on unviable projects against our recommendation and having seen them inevitably fail, working with antagonistic colleagues and having projects cut unexpectedly which also hurts external companies and vendors financially.

I know this is a common experience for those who have worked in the office workplace or in any workplace, it just plays out in different ways.

[ 26 : 43 ] And because of this, the workplace culture tends to become cynical, scathing of leadership, cold and suspicious. And the pull is so strong to belong to that culture that I myself have personally had to repent on a daily basis of that sarcastic remark or that time when I vented my frustration to other colleagues.

You see, I don't want to be someone who misrepresents Jesus just because I'm that cynical engineer who confesses Jesus with his lips but acts the same as everyone else.

So now I've come to realize that this call in 1 Thessalonians 4 to live a quiet life is not easy. I thought it would be, but it's not.

Instead, it truly is about self-sacrifice and denial. And those are the words that Wes Hill used as well. It plays itself out in the workplace and it can be very painful.

And yet, my hope is in Jesus and not in my success at work or having a stress-free job. It might mean loving that sabotaging colleague or manager just as Christ loved and died for us.

[ 28 : 01 ] It might mean accepting that management's decision is final, even if I disagree, even if it will cause me more work, more grief, and I may have to pick up the pieces later on.

It may mean saying nothing, holding my tongue, not taking part in those office conversations. It might mean delaying hitting the respond button on that email until the next day so I don't do it in anger.

And of course, it's about dependence on God for wisdom and courage via his word, prayer, and ultimately his spirit working in me. And I know it's squirmish, it's agonizing, it sounds idealistic, and I fall short often, but I know that I've been saved by Jesus and now I must please God.

And I know I can do it and we can do it because God is transforming each and every one of us to be like Christ by his Holy Spirit. my hope at Telstra is that by God's spirit and his grace that I'll be able to win the respect of my colleagues and that they might ask me about my distinctive hope in Christ Jesus.

God is the judge of whether we are living lives that please him.

[ 29 : 29 ] And is there one area of life where you think you could apply this passage to? Well, I guess ultimately though, God is the judge of whether we are living lives that please him.

Only God can see into our hearts. But having said that, I want to actually encourage you because if it were up to me to say, it's not, but just looking out at you and talking to you, I think many of you here are actually like the Thessalonians.

I see a lot of you trying to live lives that please God. You're not perfect, no, by no means, but neither am I. But I see that in both these areas, there's a lot of encouraging things that says to me that you are pleasing to God.

So I think the word that we should take away tonight is not, oh, you've done a bad job, get better. No, I think the word that we are to hear tonight is the same word that the Thessalonians did.

You're already doing it, but keep doing it more and more.