

Godly Ambitions

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[0 : 00] Please have a seat and I'll pray for us. Dear God, our Heavenly Father, we love you and we thank you for breaking into our lives through your Son.

Thank you for the life he lived and the death he died in our place and for his resurrection as well. And we pray that we would live our whole lives under Jesus, loving, trusting and submitting to him always and that this sermon would be good preparation for that.

We pray in his name. Amen. Friends, I come today with a very profound conviction about the Christian life and the conviction is this.

I believe that the Christian life is not meant to be burdensome. It's not meant to be burdensome. One of the pleasures of 1 Thessalonians, especially today's reading in it, is that you actually get to see the Apostle of God, Paul, give a commendation to a church.

You get to see the Apostles say, well done, well done. And this whole tone of patting on the back, you're doing it, keep going, is a great commendation and encouragement because it shows us that the Christian life is positive.

[1 : 23] It's not necessarily meant just to be a burden, which I think sometimes we subconsciously, we act like that, don't we? Some of us think the Christian life is just a negative cycle of failure, confession, grace, more failure, confession, grace.

Now those things are part of the Christian life, but it's not the whole Christian life. The Christian life is eminently doable. The Christian life is livable and enjoyable.

That's the Christian life. Now I know the frustrations of being a Christian today. I know that we live in a fallen world and we're not in heaven yet.

And this side of heaven, there will be inevitable frustrations and enigmatic sufferings and repeated failures that we will make, that you will make.

But the picture of the New Testament is this, that we live both in the now and in the not yet. That both things are true.

[2 : 29] We're living in two different ages. There's much that hasn't been delivered yet from God. There's the not yet. You know, in heaven there's no more suffering, no more frustration, no more crying, no more sinning, no more temptation, no more failures.

That's in heaven. But there's still a lot in the now that I think we forget. There's a lot of good stuff right now that God has promised to us.

He sent his son to wash away all our sins by his blood and to break the power of sin. He's given us his Holy Spirit to inwardly transform us from the inside out.

That is a process of sanctification that has begun and continues today, now. That's a now reality. Here's another way to kind of put this question.

Do you think that it's possible for you to please God? Do you think that's possible? Is it possible for you to live a day loving God, trusting in Jesus, obeying him, and get to the end of the day and actually think that you've pleased God?

[3 : 41] I want to argue today that I think that's possible. That's possible. And we actually saw it in last week's reading in 1 Thessalonians 4, verse 2, or verse 1, where God says, I urge you in the Lord Jesus, as you learn from us how you ought to live, and to please God.

You learn from us how to please God. And then in brackets it says, as in fact you are doing to the Thessalonians, they are living to please God. It's possible. It can be done in the faithful Christian life to please God.

And then there's the encouragement, you should do so more and more and more. So not only is it possible, but it's something that we should be increasing in, in living in a way that pleases God, to receive his commendation, to receive his pat on the back.

Some of us are so cynical, we think that God is a hard taskmaster and that we never really please him, that we've always just got to sort of be grovelling. But in the Lord Jesus, as we live for him, trusting him, it's much more positive than that.

And it's not even that Paul's saying, oh yeah, you please God in the little stuff, but you've got to work on the big stuff, like loving each other. You know, you please God in some little way, in your Bible reading or something, but you don't love each other enough.

[4 : 59] Now he says, even in your love for each other, job well done. Have a look at verse 9. Now concerning love of the brothers and sisters, you do not need anyone to write to you, for you yourselves have been taught by God to love one another.

So saying you're doing it. You're loving one another as you should in the power of the Spirit following Jesus. You are doing it. And in fact, the word here is that they have been God taught.

They have been theodidactos. You know, they've been God taught. God has engraved on the heart of the Thessalonians love for their brother in Christ, love for their sister in Christ.

Paul says, I can see it in you. It's on your heart from God. He's taught you himself. You are God taught. I mean, see at one level, you go to a Christian bookshop, there's unlimited resources in how we should love each other.

There's DVD courses. There's books written every day on it to train us, to teach us, to exhort us to be better at loving each other. But at some basic level, you need to be taught by God.

[6 : 14] God needs to engrave it on your heart to love one another. If you find yourself in a place where you feel very little love for the people of God, very little brotherly love, then the starting point is actually to ask God to engrave it on your heart.

Ask God himself to teach you directly to love people in the church, not just to love the people that you like, but to love the people that are hard to love in the church.

You know, brotherly love, sisterly love is an expectation for the whole body, not just for those in our Bible study group or those who are our age or share our interests or our hobby horses or whatever.

You know, we are called to love each other and God is, that's what God is trying to teach us. Paul even says, you don't just love your own church, you love everyone throughout Macedonia.

So you love your whole region, you love your whole state. You know, do you love the church in Melbourne? Do you love other churches? Do you pray for other churches?

[7 : 21] Do you give money to other churches? Do you love the church in Victoria? Who are you praying for? And in our age of incredible access to information and global technology of communication, you know, do we love our brothers and sisters around the world that we know about, that we know are in trouble?

Has God taught you to love them? You know, why do we support global gospel missions if not because God has pressed it on our hearts the needs of our brothers and sisters in Christ who are undergoing hardship?

Now, this is a commendation, so they love each other. Paul says, in a way, although it's, I don't know, he says, you don't need me to write to you. But then he says, you're already doing this, but I urge you, beloved, to do so more and more.

And at that level, I think they do need Paul to write because they need Paul to write to them to encourage them to keep going in what they're doing. See, some people have a wrong view of Bible teaching in this respect and probably a lot of people in this church.

The idea that you're a kind of an intellectual shopper when you hear a sermon and that you're just processing, thinking, I know that already, I know that already, I know that already.

[8 : 47] You're just looking for stuff that's new or novel. That's actually not how Paul speaks. He says, you're doing this and you need to do it more and more and you need me, I need to urge you to do it more and more.

You know, you should not listen to any Bible teaching of any form, whether in a Bible study or a sermon or whatever, and just be thinking, I already knew that, that's not for me. If you're in that place, that's a dangerous place to be because that shows that you're numbing yourself to the Word of God.

You're hardening yourself to the Word of God. I mean, just imagine if you're a Thessalonian and Paul says, now concerning love of brothers and sisters, they could have thought, oh, well, we're good at that and Paul says we're good at that.

Let's go to chapter 5. But no, no, they can't do that. They need chapter 4. They need Paul's encouragement just like you do. So when you're encouraged to do things that you're already believing in or already working on, that's good food for you.

See, I like this image of the Bible as a meal, the Bible as food. Food is something that you need to process again and again and again to have strength to live. I can't sit down at the dinner table and tell Helen, she puts the meal down, I say, oh, Helen, there's a problem with this meal.

[10 : 04] What is it? I've eaten it before. I need to eat it again. I need to eat it again and again and again because it gives me strength. You shouldn't switch off a sermon because you think, I've heard that before or I already believe that.

It's not about novelty. It's about letting the word of God transform you and feed you again and again and again. And what God does, I think, is when we're open to him in that way, we see new angles and new insights on what we think we already know that we didn't actually know anyway.

For example, let me share with you how Paul talks about what love entails. You have a picture. When I say love one another, when Paul says love one another, you have a mental picture of what that looks like in terms of Bible studies or shared lives or caring and probably hugging for some of you, not me.

So you've got a picture for that of what love entails but let's see what Paul thinks that means. Verse 11, we urge you to love each other more and more, verse 11, to aspire, to live quietly, to mind your own affairs and to work with your hands.

Now here, the word aspire, it's a strong urge. It's a word like to be zealous for, to strive diligently to live quietly.

[11 : 30] That's unusual to think you've got to work hard to live quietly. Normally you work hard at something to make a noise but you work hard at something to live quietly. We're to love living quietly in the church.

It's one of the ways we're going to love each other is by striving for quiet living. Now quietness is actually a theme in the New Testament. It's well worth if you've got one of those books that does like words of the New Testament or a concordance.

Just look up quietness and look up every verse that talks about quietness. I'll share a couple with you. In the second letter to the Thessalonians he says this in chapter 3. He says, We hear that some of you are living in idleness, mere busybodies, not doing any work.

Now such persons we command and exhort in the Lord Jesus Christ to do their work quietly and to earn their own living. And that's a very similar exhortation to 1 Thessalonians 4 to do your work quietly and to earn your own living.

Or Paul in 1 Timothy 2 says when the church gathers they shall pray for kings and all who are in high positions. Hence why it's good for us to gather and pray for the government which we do.

[12 : 48] And he says we pray these prayers so that we may lead a quiet and peaceable life in all godliness and dignity. So what's godliness? What's dignity? A quiet life.

That's what we are striving for. Christians are to seek to be good quiet citizens not stirrers of trouble in society or in the church.

We are to be contributors to the common good of those around us. We are not meant to be upsetting the peace but in involuntary good works contributing to the well-being of those around us in society.

And one of the best ways I think we can do this according to Paul's injunction is basically to mind your own affairs. And you know that means what it sounds like mind your own business.

That's what he's talking about. You know whatever responsibilities you have exercise them faithfully and work hard in them. So if you're called to be an accountant work hard in that a husband work hard in that a father work hard in that if you're called to care for family members work hard in that if you're your ministries in church work hard in those and do it in a way that just minds your own business and don't compare yourself to other people don't talk about what other people are doing wrong or how they're not doing their bit just focus and mind your own business.

[14 : 15] To put it bluntly Paul's talking about minding your own beeswax. That's what he's talking about. He's spoken about love in the church and here's what it looks like for Paul.

We love each other by minding our own business. It's that simple. Ironically there are some Christians who in the name of love appoint themselves to be the kind of scorekeepers on love in the church.

So they think God has gifted them to the commentary box on love and they're always rating people and making a commentary on how the church is failing or not in the area of love and the ironic thing is that in doing that they're busy bodies and they're not minding their own affairs and they're not loving people in the church.

Paul says mind your own affairs. I have a love-hate relationship with Bible verses on plaques. They're a good idea, they're not a bad thing but we pick two easy verses for our plaques.

Just imagine I gifted Holy Trinity on my farewell Sunday, you rock up, I've had made a woodcut under this one, same font, same style, mind your own business.

[15 : 39] Okay? It's in the Bible as much as that verse is. What would people think coming to this church? What kind of church are we that we've got to put that up? It would prick consciences, wouldn't it?

And maybe some people would walk out. It'd be hard to take communion with that verse under there as well as the top one. Paul says aspire to live quietly, mind your own affairs, and to work hard with your hands.

Probably a lot of the Thessalonians were just working class, you know, manual labourer kind of jobs. They're to love Jesus and they're loving the church by working hard in their jobs.

A large part of the Christian life is just plain working hard, working and working very hard. You know, and that applies to all day.

It's not like you work hard in your job and you come home and ignore the wife and kids and just plonk on the couch. You know, you work hard, you come home and you work hard even more. And then you go out to Bible study and you work hard even more after that.

[16 : 44] Do you know what I mean? And then you get up early and read the Bible. The Christian life is hard work. You know, and everything we do with our hands is serving Jesus.

Everything we do with our hands, however menial, whether it's paid or unpaid, is a way of worshipping Jesus, is a way of living out his calling in our lives.

And there's a positive benefit for this. If we can be like this as a church, it's a great witness to the outside because it means we're not kind of leeching off people in laziness.

Because Paul says, work hard as we directed you so that you may behave properly toward outsiders and be dependent on no one. people in people in life.

So the purpose here also of working hard is so that we won't be dependent in a way on outsiders that we don't need to be. You know, that we won't unnecessarily be leeching off non-Christians for their money when we could actually just be earning our own living and actually giving more away.

[17 : 49] A great example of this is from the time of the Protestant Reformation. There weren't many Protestants in France and especially after the Saint Bartholomew Day's massacre where they killed a lot of them and they all fled.

But when they were in France, they were called the Huguenots and there was a proverb about the Protestant Christians in France of the day that non-Christians or those outside the Protestant church would have the phrase, as honest as a Huguenot.

As honest as a Huguenot. That is, these Protestant Christians worked so hard, were so honest in their labour, you know, if you hired one to fix, you know, your plumbing or build your house, they did such a good job.

There was just this proverbial line, as honest as a Huguenot, say, you know, Bob's as honest as a Huguenot. You know, it doesn't mean he is a Huguenot. It doesn't mean he's a Protestant. It means he's like one. Could that be said of Christians today in Australia?

Is that our reputation? Do people talk of Christian accountants and doctors and builders as being the most honest and the most hard working in their field?

[19 : 05] If they're not talking like that, I would ask why not? Because that's what the Word of God is commanding us today. It's not a very good witness, is it, when we are sloppy or lazy in our work.

It's a bad witness, especially if you combine that with a kind of a self-righteousness. I can remember, I think I've shared this story, but I remember one job I had in IT, I could tell my new boss was a bit on the dodgy side, so I told him from day one, I'm not going to lie for you in this job.

And he kind of expected that a lot, I could tell. But I also had to combine with that, I had to be his best worker. I had to be the best person on his team. So I wasn't just sort of like a lazy, self-righteous Christian, you know, that's a bad witness in the workplace.

And it's not good if we are unnecessarily financially dependent on non-Christians. That's not a good witness. If we can avoid it, we should not do that.

Paul says we ought to be dependent on no one but to be net contributors if God has given us the ability. Now let me share with you a quote on this matter that is much more challenging than anything I've said so far and it's from Martin Lloyd-Jones who was a great Welsh preacher of the 20th century.

[20 : 20] Maybe the greatest preacher of the 20th century. Here's what he says. Whatever the Christian does, he should always be doing it at its very best. I lay that down as a general proposition.

The Christian child should be a better child than any other child. The Christian husband, a better husband. The Christian wife, a better wife. The Christian family, the best type of family in the world.

The Christian businessman, the best businessman conceivable. The professional man, the best man in the profession. That captures well exactly what Paul is talking about.

Martin Lloyd-Jones goes on, I do not mean from the standpoint of ability. Okay, that's clear. He's not talking about natural giftedness. I do not mean from the standpoint of ability but from all other aspects.

Everything the Christian does should be done with all his might and with a thoroughness and with an understanding with which nobody else is capable of. That is the challenge to God's people in society today.

[21 : 27] I mean just imagine if for whatever reason on 60 minutes tonight there was a film crew here filming our service and interviewing people just to share about what it's like being a Christian.

And so you knew going to work tomorrow morning, you are on 60 minutes tonight. What would have to change in your work in order to not be a hypocrite when you go to work tomorrow morning? You know what I mean?

What would have to change? Now as I was reflecting on this, I had last week's sermon from Andrew in my head. It was hard to get out of my head.

It was a great sermon. And I was wondering about where does Paul's logic run? Last week in the verses preceding Paul was talking about pleasing God by abstaining from sexual immorality and controlling your own vessel and not exploiting people with sex.

It was a great sermon and get it off the website or get the CD if you missed it. But I wonder what's the relation between sexual immorality and godliness and working hard in the workplace?

[22 : 36] In Paul's mind, how do those two link? Do you wonder that? That's kind of a puzzle that I was trying to solve. And I think there's a link in this way. And I'll read you a quote which I think links them.

This is from a Sydney Anglican. I'm quoting here. Michael Jensen from the Sydney Anglican website. He's got an article about boredom. It's a great article. I've never read an article on boredom but it's a Christian reflection on boredom.

And he says, a culture's obsession with sex and sexuality is evidence of its deep boredom. Pornography is evidence of a man's boredom as much as his lust.

I'm not saying boredom is the only problem but you can see how if you are idle, you know, the devil finds work for idle hands. You can see how if you have too much free time, that you're, if you're not working with your hands, if you're leeching off others financially, then you're going to be prone to the kind of temptations that come to people who have too much free time.

The busyness that we always complain about, the busyness that we feel swamped by and guilty about may actually be more of a blessing than you otherwise might have thought.

[23 : 56] And some of us actually need to be busier for God and busier in the service of others so that we can just be occupied and not be tempted to sin.

Endless free time is not a Christian ideal. Endless free time is not a Christian ideal. And I suspect that God has spared you many temptations through giving you mundane, busy tasks, through giving you health problems, through giving you family members and family problems that are a real burden to you in order to actually give you some work to do for him.

I suspect God has used those things to spare you many, many temptations and much consequent suffering that giving you to temptation causes. So your life, your busyness is a gift from God to be embraced.

Well let me summarise. God's injunction to us today is this. Live quietly. Love each other by living quietly.

Mind your own affairs. Work hard with your hands so that you can be a blessing to others. This is what it means to love your neighbour. We need to correct this.

[25 : 17] A lot of us I think have this kind of hippie 1970s view of church and loving one another that loving means kind of stepping on each other's toes and always sort of interfering with each other's lives such that we kind of all feel guilty for living in our own homes that we haven't sold up and formed a Christian commune yet.

You know, we feel guilty about because we're not that kind of love. Well here in 1 Thessalonians love is actually minding your own business. Taking care of your own family. You know, it's a very different view to that hippie view of love.

You know, working hard so that you provide for your own and then have capacity to serve others. And friends, putting all this together, this is how we can live to please God.

You know, you can live to please God in the power of the Spirit, trusting Jesus in this way you can please God. Don't just think God is impossible to please and then kind of numb yourself to the guilt that causes.

Actually realise, no, you can please God and don't just be spiritually numb and deadened to him but live to please him day by day. Be prayerful in all the work you do every day.

[26 : 30] Pleasing God is possible and it is enjoyable. Are you living to please God? Are you living to love your brothers and sisters?

Are you living, are you striving to live quietly and to work hard with your hands? I'd like to pray for us now that we would live to please God. Let's pray for that. God, our Father, we love you and we thank you for forgiving our sins through your Son and giving us your Holy Spirit.

We pray, Father, that by that power of your Spirit we would faithfully live lives that please you in our work, in our homes, in the church, in all the volunteer things we do, in working with our hands, in minding our own business.

We pray, Father, that we would truly please you and know your commendation in our day-to-day life. For Jesus' sake and for his glory we ask. Amen.