

Topic	A Life That Pleases God
Reference	1-Thessalonians 4: 1-2
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Our highest calling in life is simply to please God. One of the hardest things we do is contemplation, because you live in a generation of Google and Wikipedia and instant download, high speed, but if ask you to pause now and just ask how is your life pleasing God, would you be able to do that. We find it is more difficult but it is very-very meaningful.

Finally, then, brothers, we ask and urge you in the Lord Jesus, that as you received from us **how you ought to walk and to please God**, just as you are doing, that you do so more and more. For you know what instructions we gave you through the Lord Jesus. (1-Thessalonians 4: 1-2)

How do you see a life pleasing to God?

Some people will say, hey look at all this high profile people, preachers, elders, deacons, they do so much in church. They must be the one with a life pleasing to God and that kind of definition, public service, being very busy is seen as being pleasing to God. Another very common definition is seen on moral grounds. The guy is very moralistic, he doesn't do this, doesn't smoke, doesn't drink, doesn't listen to music, must be pleasing to God.

What we have here is an instruction to live a certain way. So you can always say, it is about obedience. If we look carefully at the Thessalonians, the Thessalonians were not in a bad shape. They are not like the Corinthian church. He says here

how you ought to walk and to please God, just as you are doing, that you do so more and more.

They are already doing well. So here is probably a definition for it. **Pleasing God is simply joyful obedience.** Some people in church have the joy, but they don't have the obedience. The other people have a lot of obedience but it is a superficial obedience, it is morality and there is no joy. You don't see love, you don't see kindness, you don't see grace, it comes up of guilt but joyful obedience that is our goal.

Subtle Obstacles in Pleasing God.

- *When you are trying to please others but you don't realize it.*

There might be a phase in your Christian life where you felt you are not making progress in your Christian life. You are trying to change but you have some habits you just can't break and you

are rock with guilt and shame and you are not so sure God is going to accept you. If you are not pleasing God then the simple question is, who are you pleasing?

2:4 on the contrary we speak as man, approved by God, to be entrusted with the gospel. We are not trying to please man but God who test our hearts.

What Paul is saying, if you are not pleasing God, quite likely you are pleasing others. We are much more pleasers of others than we care to admit. This is because we have the need for acceptance. Because human beings are social animals. We live in groups, we live in communities and we need that community to affirm us. So if you are in church and you speak to church people, you want church people to love you. When you are at work, you want your work people to affirm you. At home you want your family to affirm you. The three may all have separate values and they may clash.

For before certain men came from James, he used to eat with the Gentiles. But when they arrived, he began to draw back and separate himself from the Gentiles because he was afraid of those who belonged to the circumcision group. Galatians 2:12

Peter was very happy eating with gentiles but then suddenly this group came, whom he knew very well, who had very deep respect for him, who believe eating with gentiles is a sin and when this group came, he decided not to eat this food. It not only made him a hypocrite but basically he needed to please the other group. Now where is this founded upon? Because if you know the story of Peter, Peter understands that gentiles are not required to be circumcised. We see this in the Book of Acts. In the conversion of Cornelius, God reveals to Peter in a dream that all these are clean, so Peter knows his scripture and if Peter can stumble so can we. So what we have is a mind that says one thing but the heart that says something else.

When you are in social setting with other people, you feel pressured to conform and when you feel this pressure you behave in another way and the context of that comes in the first chapter, he says.

Am I trying to win the approval of human beings, or of God? Or am I trying to please people? If I were still trying to please people, I would not be a servant of Christ. Galatians 1:10

You show your true colors in a certain way and you show another colour to another. That means you project an image to the public but privately you project another image and we do this all the time. We all want to be accepted by our social grouping. This says a lot about church and how we treat one another as a family. From acceptance it takes to another one which is about recognition. The clearest example is the Pharisees and Jesus says this

And when you pray, you must not be like the hypocrites. For they love to stand and pray in the synagogues and at the street corners, **that they may be seen by others.** Matt 6:5

We want to show everyone that we are very Godly, very holy just like the Pharisee. The little-little things that we do that betray our real nature, but here is where the rubber hits the road. Acceptance leads to recognition but we do this because we need to feel loved. That's really the rubber that hits the road. It boils down that we are all hardwired for meaningful relationships and we want the other side to love us. That other side can be husband/wife, father/mother, friends or etc. That is what giving meaning to life. Some of the most tragic things we hear in church is when we see people in abusive relationships and you have one party hoping the other side changes, but you are too afraid to offend him/her and if you hope if you don't say this, you keep quiet the relationship will go on. Or in simple English, you have just made that person your God, and you say you cannot live without that person. That person is your approval. That person's emotional attachment for you is so strong, you take that person away you lose meaning.

Jesus said this in very strong terms. So when we look at the world joyful obedience, there are two components of it. First is a commandment, but I want to tell you in love, it is a gift. It is a gift to free you from unhappiness, bitterness and the subjugation of your sense of self-worth and Jesus strongly says this out. He says,

Whoever loves father or mother more than me is not worthy of me, and whoever loves son or daughter more than me is not worthy of me. Matt 10:37

But then he adds something to it. This is about obedience. He says,

And whoever does not take his cross and follow me is not worthy of me. Whoever finds his life will lose it, and whoever loses his life for my sake will find it. Matt 10:38

Sometimes little argument blows to big arguments and if I had an argument with my wife the night before, the next day I am depressed. The whole day I am thinking about it and what I do is that I want that problem to go away. Sometime God does allow it to go away and all of one is that problem to go away and my life goes back to normal, but what this verse teaches me is God is saying whether that argument goes away is not your call, what you do with during this time of difficult relationship with your wife, you please me and when I think that way on those few days I function better at work.

When you make pleasing God your top priority, you will find that obedience becomes joyful. It is a gift and suddenly the world doesn't grapple you so much, because you have just done what Jesus says. He just says this, *whoever loses his life for my sake will find it.*

- *When you have an unhealthy way of comparing your life to others.*

There is a healthy way of comparing and it is found in the first chapter.

And you became imitators of us and of the Lord...1v6

Meaning anybody you compare yourself with and you look at your life and you compare yourself and that comparison leads you to a closer relationship with God, that comparison is given by the Holy Spirit. When things go bad for you, you always say look at me my life is terrible, everything is very bad. What we don't do is to look at another person who is also struggling but that person has the ability to move on because that person depends on God. What we want to do is compare ourselves either in one way, we are very self-righteous like the Pharisee or we like to compare with others with better lives. Asians have one worst thing, beside comparing the material wealth we like to compare our children.

Generally, we have this habit of doing unhealthy comparisons. Those healthy comparisons, we don't do. We don't say, Lord I am thankful I am not like a refugee from Afghanistan, I am thankful I am not struggling with my finances. We compare ourselves with our peers. Here is something we can do as a church, if you take a profile here, most people here are upper income and can send their kids overseas. So if I am a poor person coming here and I barely can get my kid through school and I have no money to send him or her for higher education, how are you guys making that person feel like home. Either that, he is going to sit here and basically feel very ostracize.

It is all about unhealthy comparisons and in the end it really boils down to one thing, it is about preoccupation with our own life. It is like the pianist who plays and he plays a brilliant piece and the whole house gives him a standing ovation and then he looks unhappy and they ask him why, he says my teacher who sat there wasn't happy. In the end, it doesn't matter with everyone gives you accolades, whether your life is going well, whether that you have good health, your kids are in the best universities, you just have got a great life, in the end is God pleased with your life and it boils down to a simple thing. The simple truth is that, whether you are pleasing others or you are pleasing yourself, because you are blessed with good looks, money, a good family, they both have self-centeredness.

The Bible isn't saying you shouldn't please yourself or you shouldn't please others. What scripture is saying is that, everything goes through the lenses of pleasing God, why, again we go back to that comparison thing. From acceptance to recognition to love, the gospel tells us Christ accepted us as who we are. He recognizes us and gave us the right to call him Father and it demonstrated his love that he died for us on the cross and so great is that love. What scripture commands, is everything we do go through this.

This is much harder to practice. We see this again and again when we talk to people in church. They are always comparing themselves. If you are not pleasing God, you are pleasing yourself or pleasing others and this is really the foundation that you just got to recognize.

Planting the seeds to please God.

The first thing I am going to suggest; you have to be authentic. Authenticity is reflected in the little things you do in your daily walk.

For we never came with words of flattery, as you know, nor with a pretext for greed – God is our witness. 1: 5

If I ask you to do an audit of your life, Christians like to say, yeah I am a sinner. Here is a simple thing to do. You write now what you think of your sins and if you have someone very close to you, you trust, ask him to write down your sins and you match the two together. What are the chances that two list will match? It is very unlikely that the two lists will match.

What we like to do is to play down our wrongdoing. It is very hard to take an honest look at our own shortcomings. Doing an audit of your spiritual being basically leads you to auditing your emotional wellbeing. They are both connected and human behaviour is on the unconscious level.

It is very painful to hear your shortcomings, but it is very liberating. It is liberating when God's grace covers you. That's why it is called joyful obedience and if you can't audit yourself, you have no starting base. If you have no starting base, you are going to repeat and repeat your same issues.

Some people in church service go overboard in helping. When you ask them, they say they are doing it for the Lord. Actually, they are not doing it for the Lord, they are doing it for yourself, because you are empty and you are trying to fill that with that service:

1. so that people recognize you and they praise you
2. you then say look God I done this good stuff.

It is not pleasing God, it is pleasing yourself and you are trying to fill this vacuum with another vacuum and unless we fill it with God, you will continue hopping on and on and on.

So, the first thing I challenge you all, start by reflecting on your wrongdoings. If you can't do that, you are actually subjecting yourself to a lot of life of pain.

Is God saying, we should be perfect?

I had a talk with Dr Herbert Tan, he runs all the family life ministries in the Methodist church and he told me, Christians are under this pressure to be perfect families. He says, we don't need perfect families. I was quite stunned, I said what are you saying, should I argue in front of my daughter? He said, yes. Because if you argue in front of your daughter, your daughter sees what happens is not the argument is what you do after the argument and if your daughter sees that you both can move on and have a grace and forgiveness, you have just moved from trying to be a perfect family to being a redeemed family and by that we show the cross. Because if your kid can see mom and dad forgiving they understand forgiveness of Christ.

All of us don't like each other, you don't like me, I don't like someone, but despite that we need to have that grace because people see. If we have grace, then people see and they then see love and they see redemption. So authenticity and it is always in the little things. John Piper says, you make pleasing God your pleasure. The text finds its grounding in chapter 3.

...and may the Lord make you increase and abound in your love for one another and for all, as we do for you, so that he may establish your hearts blameless in holiness before God and Father, at the coming of our Lord Jesus with all the saints. 3:11

Blameless in holiness means pleasing God. If you can't love God, you won't love others. If you won't love others, you are not fixing your hearts and if you don't fix your heart, anything you do in church is not coming from the Holy Spirit. It is coming from self-righteousness, it is coming from duty, it is coming from guilt, it is coming from our need to show everyone you are very smart or you are very good. This is where you start off with.

The text is telling us that we have got to get our hearts right. If your heart is not right before God, it won't be right before others and if it is not right for others, there is no way you and I are going to please God. Even if you are a preacher, elder, deacon, ministry leader and you have done so many things for the church, you are not pleasing God. We have to check our heart and you start that by doing an audit and see how far your heart is. This is like a song we sing.

*When the music fades all is stripped away
And I simply come...
I'll bring you more than a song
For a song in itself is not what you have required
You search much deeper within
Through the way things appear
You're looking into my heart*

Some of us live very defeated lives. We say, I want to be Christian, I am trying to but I struggle with sin. I have this hidden area no one knows and if people know who I am, I really feel very

guilty, I am such a hypocrite. I live a defeated life. I tell you Jesus has defeated sin, you don't have a defeated life, what you have is the disobedient life. Once you understand that, you understand that I am not defeated, I am disobedient then God's grace fills you. His love fills you and you say, you know what I know I am disobedient, Lord be with me I am going to slowly start that journey to move from disobedience to obedience and I do that not by an external show, not because I am guilty, I do it by fixing my heart. I fix my heart and I say Lord teach me to love you and to demonstrate that love to love others and you find when you do that sin doesn't grapple you so much, the troubles of the world doesn't grapple you so much, you become more authentic and life becomes more worth living and you will have life to the fullest.

Pleasing God is a Relationship Process

Finally, then, brothers, we ask and urge you in the Lord Jesus, that as you received from us how you ought to walk and to please God, just as you are doing, **that you do so more and more**. For you know what instructions we gave you through the Lord Jesus. 4: 1-2

so as to walk in a manner worthy of the Lord, fully pleasing to him, bearing fruit in every good work and increasing in the knowledge of God... Col 1: 10

God has sowed seeds among all of you and a relationship simply means and I want to talk specifically about those of you struggling with sin and there are days where you are victorious and there are days where you are not. You could be struggling with bitterness, you could be struggling with some sexual habits, you could be struggling with emptiness, loneliness but is a relationship that grows more and more and there will be good days and there will be very bad days, but if you cling to God and say God fix my heart on a bad day, let me love you and I will tell you, joyful obedience is not only a commandment, it is a blessing.

1. Pleasing God is a family affair. We are family and family supports one another. If you are to please God, we do it together and as we move this new vision in our church, we are asking everyone to connect, to talk, to discuss, move beyond your silence, move beyond your little groups and reach out to people who are outside there. God's mandate for us is to look out for someone preferably outside of our comfort zone.

We see that the church in Thessalonian was so good, so such a modern example, the other churches start following it.

2. May we lead a life pleasing to God. We can only do it through Jesus Christ. Let us move as one body, people look at us as a family that is real. Yes, we are hypocrites, yes we are not consistent but may we show what redeemed people is, ones and all we are work in progress and God is slowly changing our hearts.