

Pleasing People Or Pleasing God

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[0 : 00] Well, I'd like us tonight for a few minutes to turn together to the chapter that we read in 1 Thessalonians and in particular we are going to focus on verse 4, but let me read verse 3 as well. Paul writes, What I would appear does not spring from error or impurity or any attempt to deceive, but just as we have been approved by God to be entrusted with the gospel, so we speak, not to please man, but to please God who tests our hearts.

When we think of our lives as Christians, one of the things that we'll often try to talk or think about is the fact that as Christians we face temptations. Now that's true for those of us who've maybe been following the Lord, have been part of the church for years, or for those who are maybe not quite sure where you stand before the Lord or maybe are still seeking. We're all on the same boat. We all face temptations and that's a daily battle for every one of us. There's many things that tempt us. We can hear something about people and there's the temptation to gossip.

We're let down by somebody and it hurts and so we can be tempted to be unforgiving. When no one's watching us, it can be really tempting to be lazy. When things don't go our way, it can be really tempting to be angry. And I know that you could add to that list, I've been guilty of giving in to all of those temptations in my life and we face temptations and battles as Christians.

The verse before us tonight talks about one of the biggest temptations we face as Christians. The temptation to be a people pleaser. People pleasing is one of these things that at first glance sounds good. I mean we want to please others, we want to be a positive blessing in their lives and as Christians we definitely don't want to go around causing others as much displeasure as possible.

So this verse is not saying stop being a people pleaser and start becoming a people miserable a fire. That's not what it's saying at all. But having said that, there is danger in people pleasing, particularly when pleasing people comes ahead of pleasing God. I know of a great illustration of this from a Christian who was in school when I was there and they wore one of these wee badges on their jacket, the little fish symbol that you obviously have cars and badges.

One day that Christian was asked by a friend, what does that badge mean? And then he said, don't tell me it means that you've got the kura, that you've become a Christian.

[3 : 16] And the Christian who was wearing the badge kind of stumbled and stuttered and ended up saying, I don't really know what the what the badge means. Because even though they knew exactly what the badge meant, they were too worried about what the classmate would think of them.

And the reason I know that story is because the Christian wearing the badge was me. So when I talk about people pleasing tonight, I'm talking about something that I've struggled with through the 20 years that I've been a Christian, or the 25 years it is now.

People pleasing is often the manifestation of two sins, pride on the one hand and fear on the other. It's a manifestation of pride because it's so easy to love the approval of others. So when we say and do the things that we know the people around us will like and that will impress them, then that can make us feel so much better about ourselves. And so it can really feed that pride that that can often be a bad influence in our lives. But perhaps even more often, people pleasing arises out of fear. It's so easy to be scared of what other people think, to be scared that we'll offend them, or that they'll think less of us or talk about us or even criticize us. And that fear of people can be incredibly powerful in shaping our behavior.

And if you want proof of that, if you want proof of that, you only need to go to the Nicholson, where you will see that there are certain hairstyles, certain clothes that you'll never see.

[5 : 25] And usually the ones that you'll never see now are the ones that we had when we were there. And so whether it's hair, clothes, phone, whatever, there's pressure from what other people will think about in terms of what we wear. But it's not just school, you see it at work. One of the ways

that you see it a lot just now is that many of you working with colleagues will find that you possibly find the case that it's very common that people want to deflect responsibility away from themselves.

So in other words, whatever was wrong, everyone wants to make it clear, it's not my fault, that they're not the ones to blame. That's a fear of people. And you can even find it in church, where there's just a fear of what people will think, and it can become very dominant in shaping what we do. And so I think the reason why there's temptation to please people, the reason it's so strong is because it can feed our pride and it can indulge our fear.

And as I said before I say anything else in this sermon, I am acknowledging to you that I am guilty of both of these sins and have been many times. But here in First Thessalonians, Paul is giving us brilliant teaching about how to avoid and overcome this temptation. And he's showing us that our desire to be people-pleasers must be replaced by a determination to please God. And in saying that, Paul is not just speaking as somebody who just knows the right things to say. And when you look at the background of this letter, you see proof that Paul wasn't just saying this, Paul lived by it. First Thessalonians is one of the earliest of Paul's letters, and it arose out of the events that are recorded in Acts chapter 16 and chapter 17. In those chapters, Paul travels to mainland Europe, so across from Asia Minor, which is the main part of Turkey, over into what then was Macedonia. He went first to Philippi, then he went to Thessalonica, where this church was, then he went to Berea. In each of these places, Paul preached, people were converted, and then he was attacked. [7 : 50] And he had to flee. And he mentions that in verse 2, he says that we suffered, we are shamefully treated at Philippi, as you know. We are boldly to declare the gospel to you in the midst of much conflict. This was the pattern that Paul faced. And one of the reasons why he wrote to the Thessalonians was because he'd had to leave them there so quickly. So the reason it's one of the earliest letters is because it's just a year or so after he had been there that this letter was sent. He had been taken away from them very quickly. And as he said at the end of this chapter, he was torn away from them. So when Paul speaks about pleasing God and not man, he knows exactly how costly that can sometimes be. But how do we do that? How do we please God? Well, in verses 5 to 10, we have a wonderful explanation from Paul. And I want to just go through these verses bit by bit together this evening. But before we do that, I want to notice what Paul doesn't say. Paul does not say that pleasing God means that we can be harsh or cruel or unkind towards others. And I say that because that's an easy trap to fall into, to think that, you know, if we're pleasing God, then we can just walk over people. Jesus rebuked the Pharisees for doing exactly that. They had said that instead of looking after their parents, they're going to devote their resources to God. And as a result, they don't need to look after their parents in the way that others might. Jesus said, don't dare think that that is pleasing to God. In the same way, I can say to my children, oh, I'm not, I can't play with you tonight. I'm studying. I'm going to do a bit more work. Or we could say, well, we're going to keep away from our neighbours because we know that they believe things that we don't agree with as Christians. We can say these things. None of that is appropriate. None of it is pleasing to God. We must never ever use the idea of pleasing God as an excuse for bad behaviour. That would be like trying to put out a fire with petrol. It only results in the very opposite of what you claim to be doing. So Paul is not saying that we can do anything we like and claim that it's pleasing to God, not people. Instead, he gives us very clear examples of what pleasing God looks like. And I want us to go through these together. And as we do that, I want you to think about how this is going to shape your behaviour in the week ahead. We're going to pick out seven things that are going to be very brief. So number one, this week, you can please God through your speech. We see that in verse five.

Paul talks about his words among the Thessalonians and he says, I never flattered you. Neither did I come with a pretext, what we would maybe call a hidden agenda for greed. He wasn't trying to impress them with compliments. He wasn't, as we might say, sucking up to them. Neither was he speaking with a concern for what he might get out of it himself. He didn't pretend to be their friend in order to get them money. In other words, he wasn't using them. Instead, he was what every single one of us should strive to be every day. He was a man of integrity. What he said was honest, genuine and authentic.

He didn't twist his words. He didn't play games. He just spoke with integrity. And that's a fundamental characteristic of a life that pleases God. And of course, the opposite of integrity is what? It's hypocrisy. And Jesus leaves us in no doubt whatsoever about how displeasing hypocrisy is to God. It's a reminder that for us this week, we must never use people either to massage your

egos or to fulfill our own agendas. We want to speak with a loving honesty to one another, not just saying what people want to hear. And it also means that we have to be ready to admit our own mistakes and weaknesses as well. All of that is tough, but it's pleasing to God.

Number two, this week, you can please God through your motives. That's what Paul speaks about in verse six. He says, we didn't come here looking for glory, even though they could have made a very big deal about the fact that they were apostles of Christ. And they didn't say, you know, you must respect us because of who we are. And I think that's really relevant today, because all around us, there's a big emphasis on being respected. People want their opinions respected, their needs respected, their preferences respected. And of course, not all of that is bad. Some of it's incredibly important. Respect is a massively important part of society. But I do think that sometimes the demand for respect can be used as a mask for the demand to get other people to do what we want them to do. And that's when it's perhaps good to remember that respect isn't really something that we are to demand. It's first and foremost something that we are to give.

And it's something that we are to earn. Paul wasn't interested in making a big show of who he was. If he was around today, I doubt very much he would have had a blog called theaposopol.com.

[13:42] His motives were much better. His burning desire was to serve, honour and please God. And we want that to be through of us this week as well. And it can be difficult because we do want to be the best that we can be the week ahead. Whatever we're doing, we want to be the best we can be as husbands, wives, children, parents, colleagues, pupils, friends, neighbours. We want to be the best we can be and rightly so. But I guess the key question we need to ask with a verse like this is, which audience do I worry about the most? Am I wanting to do my best so that people will admire me? Or am I ready to do my very best even if no one can see me except God?

Guarding our motives is a battle, but to do so is pleasing to God. Number three, this week you can please God through your gentleness. We see that in verse two, seven, and this is such a wonderful counterbalance to what Paul says in verse four. If you take verse four alone, it's so easy to think, well, I'm just going to please God and if that means offending people and hurting people on the way, then so be it. Tough. I've got to please God. And there may be one or two occasions in life when that's through their work times when even Jesus himself had to cause offence. But verse seven here is a wonderful reminder to us that God-pleasing behaviour will also be gentle behaviour. Now, when I say gentle, do not think for one second that that means weak.

Paul uses the example of a mother looking after a newborn baby. A mother looking after a newborn baby is no weakling. And so what it means is not being weak, it means that we mustn't be harsh or aggressive or rude or cruel. And the greatest example of that balance between strength and gentleness is Jesus. In him, we see an unflinching commitment to please his father.

In him, we see the gentlest person who has ever lived. So in the week ahead, we will please God by being gentle. So if you have to discipline your children, parents, and you've already will, do it with gentleness. If you're working with someone and you have to correct an employee or a colleague, do it with gentleness. If you disagree with someone, which you might, and it is okay to disagree with people, but do it with gentleness. And if you are on the receiving end of advice, or instruction, or even warning, receive it with gentleness too. All of that gentleness takes a lot of courage, but it's pleasing to God. Number four, this week, you can please God through your willingness to share yourself. We have that before us in verse eight. I think this is a remarkable lesson in evangelism in this verse that's before us. Paul talks about sharing the gospel in this version. That's what we think about when we talk about evangelism. Telling people about Jesus. And of course, that's absolutely crucial. But in Paul's evangelism, the gospel wasn't the only thing he shared. He and his companions were also willing to share their own selves. In other words, Paul didn't just tell him the gospel and then keep his distance. He shared his whole life with them, lived among them, ate with them, worked with them. He got involved in their whole lives. And we do that ourselves. I'm sure you can all think of examples of the ways in which you do that, but we tend to reserve that sharing of ourselves only with those who'd closest to us. So maybe we have family who will have lunch with every Sunday. Maybe there's certain people that we'll meet up with to go for a walk. Maybe there's even some people that we'll go on holiday with. And all of that is brilliant. But Paul is reminding us that that circle must not be closed. It must be open to the whole church family and to everyone who's seeking to come in.

And a remarkable bit of information arises when we ask the question, how long did Paul know these Thessalonians? So how long did he know these Thessalonians? What do you think?

[19 : 05] Often that kind of sharing of ourselves is something that we do with people we've known for a very long time. Well, Paul had known these Thessalonians for a few months.

And he may have been with them for only a few weeks. At the very most, I think he'd known them a year. Yet he was ready not just to share the gospel, but himself.

And so this week as a disciple of Jesus, I want to ask you, who are you going to share yourself with a little bit more? I think that's a great question to ask ourselves. And you can do that in so many ways. You can do that through sharing a prayer point with someone, saying, please, can you pray for me about this or that? You can do it through asking someone for a meal or going for a walk with somebody that you've never gone for a walk with before. Go for it. Just go for it.

But sharing ourselves like that takes effort and it takes guts, but it's pleasing to God. Number five, this week you can please God through your work. Now, verse nine is a very interesting verse because it's an easy verse to misunderstand because you start it and you read through it. You say, so Paul says, for you remember, brothers, our labor and toil. Now, when you see labor and toil, you instantly think, oh, that's his work as a preacher and as an evangelist.

That's what I immediately think of Paul's work as an apostle, sharing the gospel. But if you read on into the rest of the verse, it tells us that that that he did that work night and day, that we might not be a burden to any of you while we proclaimed to you the gospel of God. And so that's implying that that the work was in addition to the proclaiming and that the whole reason to it was to not be a burden to them in terms of life and living costs and everything. What this means is that I'm going to teach you a new word here that maybe you've not heard before. And the second half of the verse is what we call epexegetical of the first half of the verse. That means that the second half helps explain the first half epexegetical. It's a very cool word. The labor and toil wasn't the preaching and teaching. The labor and toil was earning a living. And we know from Acts 18 that Paul's trade was tent making. And so what that's telling us is that while Paul taught these Thessalonians about Jesus, he also worked as a tent maker so that he could earn a living and not be a burden to them. Remember he said, I didn't come with a pretext for greed. I'm not here to make money.

[22 : 11] Instead, he grafted away so that he could be a benefit to the church, not a burden. And it's a great reminder that pleasing God doesn't just mean doing church stuff.

And so for every single person here who's going to work tomorrow morning or getting involved in some kind of activity in the community or whatever it may be, when I say work, I am still including people who are retired because I know that the people who are retired here are just as busy as they've ever been. But whatever your work is, paid or unpaid this week, it is an amazing opportunity for you to please God as you do your job. Whatever it may be, working, retired, studying, looking after responsibilities at home, the same principle applies. The day to day routine of working and living in a community is a wonderful opportunity to please God. And there's loads of ways you can do that. Here Paul speaks about not being a burden to others. Now, I think in this context that's primarily referring to a financial burden, but I think the principle can be applied more broadly. As you work with other people, we want to do that in a way that's not a burden to them.

In other words, we don't want to weigh them down. We want to lighten their load. We want to be a blessing and an encouragement to them. Our work is often the place where we are under the most stress. It takes a lot of self-control to ensure that we don't take that out on other people around us. It's not easy, but it's pleasing to God. And then number six this week, you can please God through your conduct. It's another remarkable verse that we have here. Just think about what Paul is saying. He's sharing his whole life with these Thessalonians. So they've seen him, they've got to know him, nothing hidden. And yet he can say, we were wholly righteous and blameless towards you.

And if you've got any doubts about that, you can even ask God that God is also a witness to my behaviour. Holy, righteous and blameless. And I ask myself, is that how people would describe me? That's what we want to aim for, because that is what is pleasing to God. Now before we come to our seventh and final point, I want us just to notice that in all of these things, God is not asking you to do anything that he himself doesn't first do towards you.

[25 : 12] He's not asking you to do anything that he's not willing to do himself. So when God speaks, it is with impeccable integrity. He is never going to mess you about. When you look into God's motives, you see the purest desire he only wants good for you. There's never a hidden agenda.

When you look at God's heart, you see perfect gentleness. So in amongst the immeasurable might and strength of God, you have incredible gentleness, always tender, always kind, always gracious,

always loving. When we talk about us sharing ourselves, God does that far more. In fact, God, the Holy Spirit, has come to dwell in your heart. He's promised to never leave you, to walk with you through every step of your life, every step you take this week. He's with you. And he's promising to pour his love into your heart. And so when we share ourselves as nothing compared to how much God is sharing himself with you, when you think about your work and compare it to God's work, God has worked across all the ages of history to make a plan of salvation, Jesus has fulfilled every single detail of the work the Father gave him to do. And now, God, the Holy Spirit, is working in you to transform every part of your life. And while God does all of that work in you, he does it in millions upon millions of others at the same time. And he just holds up the universe by the word of his power at the same time. He's working, working, working for you. And in terms of our conduct, God is never, ever anything less than holy, righteous and blameless. Often, when we think about pleasing people, we can think that we can please people by being like them, or at least pretending that we're like them. Maybe that's true. [27 : 53] A much better version of that pattern is found in the fact that we will please God simply by being more like him. So for the week ahead, we can recap. You can please God through your speech, through your motives, through your gentleness, through your willingness to share yourself, through your work, and through your conduct. But the seventh point is the most important of all. And if you remember anything, I want you to remember this one. This week, you can please God. Full stop. This week, you can please God. That takes us back to verse four. Everything that Paul is saying is arising from the astonishing fact that this week, you can please God. Now, why is that so, so important? Well, the reason I think it's so important is because I am pretty sure that nearly everyone here is thinking that in the week ahead, you are far more likely to disappoint God. And it is so easy to feel like that. I can understand why that thought would go through your mind. It goes through my mind. But I don't want you to focus on that. I want you to seize the opportunity that you have to please God this week. And I want you to recognize the fact that the whole reason why God cares about our conduct is because God cares about you. And the way you live your life this week matters to God because you matter to him this week. No matter how you feel about yourself, whether positive or rubbish or strong or weak or whatever, no matter how you feel about yourself, this week you can please God. You can make God smile. And whatever this week brings, that reality makes this week worth living. And it makes this week blooming exciting. And that is the difference it makes to be a follower of Jesus. Is this week going to be a normal week? Or do you know as a Christian there's no such thing as a normal week? This week's an amazing opportunity for you to please God in your life. It's one of many, many reasons why being a Christian is absolutely brilliant. Amen. Let us pray. Father, we acknowledge that so often we worry too much about trying to please or impress others. And instead we want to be those who prioritize pleasing you. And so we ask that by your grace in the week ahead that we would please you through our speech, our motives, our gentleness, our sharing of ourselves, our work, our conduct, may it all, God, be pleasing to you. Amen.