

LIVING TO PLEASE GOD

1 Thessalonians 4:1-12

Key Verse: 4:1

“As for other matters, brothers and sisters, we instructed you how to live in order to please God, as in fact you are living. Now we ask you and urge you in the Lord Jesus to do this more and more.”

In chapters 1-3 Apostle Paul defended his gospel ministry against false accusations to strengthen the faith of the Thessalonian believers. When they were standing firm in their faith during persecution, Paul was alive and full of joy. Night and day he prayed most earnestly to see them and supply what was lacking in their faith. In chapters 4-5 he instructs them in specific ways to build up their faith: live a holy life, increase love for one another, and have a right view of Jesus' second coming. Furthermore, he gives general exhortations to promote their spiritual well-being, such as: work hard, rejoice always, pray continually, and give thanks in all circumstances.

Before giving these instructions and exhortations, Paul lays down the basic principle of Christian living; it is to please God. In pleasing God, faith in Jesus is most important (Heb 11:6). When we live by this faith, we can overcome the world. Faith is not just knowledge; it is the power of God to transform our lives. If someone claims to have faith, but is not being transformed, something is wrong. In today's passage Paul instructs the Thessalonians how to live by faith to please God. We can discover what should motivate our Christian life and two important principles to practice in order to live by faith that pleases God.

First, pleasing God is the basis of Christian ethics (1-2). Verse 1 begins with the words **“As for other matters.”** With these words, Paul begins to instruct them in practical ways. The words **“you know what instructions we gave you”** (2) and **“as we told you and warned you before”** (6) imply that his initial instruction had been more thorough and complete. What he shares in this passage is a review with highlights for emphasis. His instructions are based on a general principle of how to live to please God. Pleasing God is the basis of Christian ethics. Many people regard Christian life as a set of rules to be obeyed or a list of prohibitions. Especially for those who grow up in a church environment, it is easy to think that living a Christian life is following a set of routines, such as praying before meals, attending Sunday worship service,

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giving a few dollars in the offering, reading the Bible and writing devotions and testimonies, memorizing Bible verses, observing Easter and Christmas traditions, and doing good works. These are all great things to do. But Christian life cannot be summed up by these activities. Christian life is union with Jesus through faith in him. Out of this union arises the desire in our hearts to love and please God. This inner motive and purpose to please God is the guiding principle for our Christian lives. In 2:4, Paul had already mentioned that he lived not to please people, but to please God who tests our hearts. In Galatians 1:10 Paul said, **“Am I trying to please people? If I were still trying to please people, I would not be a servant of Christ.”** The best example of pleasing God is Jesus. He said, **“The one who sent me is with me; he has not left me alone, for I always do what pleases him”** (Jn 8:29). The first question in the Westminster Shorter Catechism is “What is the chief end of man?” The answer is, “Man’s chief end is to glorify God, and enjoy him forever.” 1 Corinthians 10:31 says, **“So whether you eat or drink or whatever you do, do it all for the glory of God.”**

In truth, everyone lives to please someone. The question is: “Who am I trying to please?” Myself, my spouse, my parents, my children, my boss, my friends, someone else? Whether we live to please God or someone else makes a huge difference. On a TV show, one heavysset young woman made a great effort to lose weight. She said, “I wanted my mom’s respect.” When her mother saw her slender figure and smiled at her, she broke down and cried. It was beautiful for the moment. But living to please people, whoever they may be, results in bondage to their expectations. This makes people very sensitive to what others are thinking about them or saying about them. I know one person who always worries about what several people are thinking about him. This consumes so much of his time and energy that he doesn’t develop his own thoughts. He only developed *“Noonchi boda,”* a people-pleasing disease. This robs people of the joy and beauty of life. Many very talented people are paralyzed by people-pleasing disease, PPD. God has created each of us with a unique personality and gifts and talents to do something for him that no one else can do. God wants each of us to develop this uniqueness as we seek to please him. As we do, he begins to use us to bless his church and the world. We can understand this through the Biblical analogy of the church and the human body. Our physical bodies have many parts, but they all make up one body. When each part functions well, doing its share, the body as a whole is healthy and powerful to do its work. In the same way, we are all members of the body of Christ. When we each live to please God and develop our unique gifts and talents to the fullest

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for his glory, our church can be healthy and strong. When we please God, God gives us true freedom, joy and peace. We are free from people's expectations. More than that, God gives us the power to live a fruitful and meaningful life. This is why Augustine said, "Love God and do as you please."

Some people say, "Okay, that sounds good. But why do I have to please God, not myself? What about me?" If you live to please yourself, you will become your own idol. Whatever we live to please becomes our idol. Idol worship is the most detestable thing to God. The Ten Commandments begins with God saying, **"I am the LORD your God, who brought you out of Egypt, out of the land of slavery. You shall have no other gods before me"** (Ex 20:2-3). Anything that we seek to please more than God is an idol. It can be money, fame, power, achievements, people—such as athletes or movie stars—or pets. The Thessalonians had been idol worshipers. They were surrounded by numerous Greek and Roman gods. They were pressured to engage in emperor worship in order to have a good job, a successful career, and to marry well. Pleasing their idols was most important to them. They could not escape their bondage and were fearful all the time. But when they heard the gospel message, they turned from idols to serve the living and true God. The power of the gospel enabled them to break the chains of bondage and to overcome their fear. It gave them strength and power to love God. They were full of joy in the midst of trials. They were able to live a pure life and to love one another.

Our question may be, "How can we have a desire to please God?" Before knowing Jesus, we were hostile toward God. Before conversion, Martin Luther thought of God as a righteous Judge who was seeking to expose his sins and punish him. So, he hated God. But when he studied Romans deeply, he realized how much God loves people—so much so that he poured out his wrath on his own Son to spare us from eternal punishment. This inspired Luther to open his spiritual eyes; he was born again. After this, he tried to live to please God joyfully throughout his lifetime. God loves each one of us with the same unconditional, unfailing love. Apostle John expressed this love well: **"For God so loved the world that he gave his one and only Son, that whoever believes in him shall not perish but have eternal life"** (Jn 3:16). When we remember how much God loves us, it kindles a desire in us to love God and to please God.

In verse 1b, Paul said, **"As in fact you are living."** Paul acknowledged that they were already living to please God. They began to please God the moment they accepted the gospel; it didn't start after many years of training. As

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soon as they heard the gospel message, they were changed and began to imitate gospel workers and the Lord Jesus. They became a model to all believers in Macedonia and Achaia. Pleasing God is not just a one-time event, but an ongoing struggle. It is a lifetime pursuit. Paul urges them in the Lord Jesus to do this more and more. How can we please God? Paul says in Ephesians 5:10, **“find out what pleases the Lord.”** In verse 2, we learn that Paul’s teaching was not of human origin, but divine origin. The Lord Jesus himself, through Paul, teaches us what pleases him. To anyone who calls Jesus “Lord” this teaching is not optional but a moral necessity and obligation. With this in mind, let’s consider some specific instructions.

Second, a sanctified life is God’s will (3-8). In this section, Paul shares another general principle with a very specific application regarding sexual immorality. The general principle is stated in verse 3a: **“It is God’s will that you should be sanctified.”** Here, “sanctified” means “made holy.” It is to be dedicated to God with loyalty and to become like him. It is expressed by separation from a sinful life and conforming to a godly life. After delivering the Israelites from slavery in Egypt, God said to them, **“Be holy because I, the LORD your God, am holy”** (Lev 19:2). **“You are to be holy to me because I, the LORD, am holy, and I have set you apart from the nations to be my own”** (Lev 20:26). Apostle Peter exhorted the scattered Christians, **“As obedient children, do not conform to the evil desires you had when you lived in ignorance. But just as he who called you is holy, so be holy in all you do; for it is written: ‘Be holy, because I am holy’”** (1Pe 1:14-16). When we hear the words “be holy,” we can feel burdened. We can feel that we must live a monastic life: wearing simple, unstylish garments, renouncing technology, and eating very plain food. But that is not the essence of a holy life. Rather, we Christians are called by God to have fellowship with him. Even though we are in the world, we do not belong to the world, but to God. So, we love God and live to please him. We cannot love both God and the world. 1 John 2:15-16 say, **“Do not love the world or anything in the world. If anyone loves the world, love for the Father is not in them. For everything in the world—the lust of the flesh, the lust of the eyes, and the pride of life—comes not from the Father but from the world.”** This is why we must live a sanctified life.

In verse 3b Paul gives a specific instruction: **“avoid sexual immorality.”** Paul wrote this letter from Corinth. Both Corinth and Thessalonica were infamous for sexual immorality. They worshiped Aphrodite, the Greek goddess of beauty and sexuality, whom the Romans referred to as “Venus.” In Corinth,

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more than 1,000 women dedicated their lives to the goddess as temple prostitutes. Thessalonica was particularly associated with the worship of the Cabiri, which promoted gross immorality in the name of religion.¹ In that context, Paul exhorted them to avoid sexual immorality. He urged each of them to learn to control their own body in a way that is holy and honorable, not in passionate lust like the pagans who do not know God (4-5). Then and now, when people do not know God, they tend to live immoral lives. God is the source of a healthy moral compass. As godlessness has increased in our land, so has sexual immorality. Sexual obsession and perversion are now rampant. For example, according to an American Academy of Matrimonial Lawyers survey, Internet-related sexual immorality is behind 62% of all divorce cases. The problem of sexual immorality in America is much worse than even this indicates. It is more important now than ever that Christians avoid sexual immorality and show an honorable, godly example. Sexuality is a gift from God. It should be enjoyed honorably within the bounds of godly marriage. Marriage partners should not take advantage of each other, but respect and honor each other (6a). Hebrews 13:4a says, **“Marriage should be honored by all and the marriage bed kept pure....”** This is the way to enjoy a blessed and happy life. When marriage is honored as God intended, it is most blessed. God helps husbands love their wives, and wives respect their husbands. They enjoy a robust relationship and bear godly children. This reveals God’s love, wisdom and life-giving power to the world in darkness. This pleases God and blesses the world.

In verses 6b-8 Apostle Paul gives a strong warning to those who indulge in sexual immorality. He says, **“The Lord will punish all those who commit such sins...For God did not call us to be impure but to live a holy life. Therefore, anyone who rejects these instructions does not reject a human being but God, the very God who gives you his Holy Spirit.”** Our bodies are temples of his Holy Spirit. We are not our own, we were bought at a price. Therefore, we must honor God with our bodies (1Co 6:19-20).

Third, love one another more and more (9-12). Another important principle of Christian life is to love one another. Paul said, **“Now about your love for one another we do not need to write to you, for you yourselves have been taught by God to love each other. And in fact, you do love all of God’s family throughout Macedonia”** (9-10a). This is an amazing testimony of the

¹ John Stott, *The Message of 1 & 2 Thessalonians* (Downers Grove, IL: InterVarsity Press, 1991), 81.

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change of the Thessalonians. Before knowing Christ, we human beings do not know what God's love is. Our concept of love is largely emotional. Some noble people try to practice brotherly love. But we have no idea about God's love—agape love. When we accept the gospel, we can know God's love and love others with God's love. 1 John 3:16 says, **“This is how we know what love is: Jesus Christ laid down his life for us. And we ought to lay down our lives for our brothers and sisters.”** God's love is sacrificial, unconditional, unchanging, unfailing, and everlasting. God's love is so deep and wide and high that we can grow in it without end. Paul urges the Thessalonians, who had begun to practice God's love, to do so more and more (10b). Our 2017 key verse is John 13:34-35, **“A new command I give you: Love one another. As I have loved you, so you must love one another. By this everyone will know that you are my disciples, if you love one another.”** Generally, we are doing well. But it is not enough. As Paul urges us, let's do so more and more.

In verses 11-12 Paul gives instructions regarding things that hinder God's people from loving one another. Some people confuse loving one another with meddling in their business. Paul says, **“...make it your ambition to lead a quiet life: You should mind your own business and work with your hands”** (11). Another hindrance to loving others is being lazy and idle. This makes people dependent on others and a burden. Paul says, **“...your daily life may win the respect of outsiders and so that you will not be dependent on anybody”** (12). To love others, we should respect them and be very mindful. We should work hard to be a blessing to others. Let's live to please God by living a sanctified life and loving one another. Amen.