

PLEASING GOD MORE AND MORE

Ben Janssen | 1 Thessalonians 4:1-2 | November 8, 2020

¹ 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. ² For you know what instructions we gave you through the Lord Jesus.

I love my daily routines, but the recent ice storm disrupted those routines for ten days. Having no power at home greatly altered the way I go about my life. I'm still trying to recover. It's amazing how easily life can be thrown off course, how everything can change with something as simple as a loss of electricity.

As we turn to the fourth chapter of 1 Thessalonians, we encounter the topic of how we are to go about living the Christian life. The day to day routines that compose life as a Christian. So that we are not thrown off course as we go through these chapters, I'd like to set the stage for what we will be learning. Here in these two verses we see the imperative, power, and focus of the Christian life.

THE IMPERATIVE OF CHRISTIAN LIVING

You can see that a major transition has taken place here in the letter. The word *finally* indicates this transition to the last main section of the letter. And in this last section we find many imperatives, commands for Christians to obey.

The Missional Mandate

Now most of us do not like to be told what to do, how we should live our lives. That's why Paul has spent the last two chapters of this letter strengthening the bond he had with his audience so that they would be ready to heed the instructions he is going to give them in the last two.¹ Paul moves on from reminiscing about the past to encouraging the church about the future. He does not want them to just "make it," to barely survive. He wants them to be on mission, to thrive in the grace of the gospel and its power in our daily lives.

He wants this for them because he knows that God did not create his church so that his people to sit around and do nothing. He has a mission for us to do, a calling on our lives. A church must always be about this mission or it has lost its charter.

And the mission that God has for us to do is not separate from the lives he has called us to live. They go together. Paul believed that his life, the way he lived, was meant to verify the gospel he preached.² This is why he reminded the Thessalonians of the way they had conducted themselves when they brought the gospel to them. "You are witnesses, and God also, how holy and righteous and blameless was our conduct toward you believers" (1 Thess 2:10). It was not irrelevant to how God brought them to faith in the gospel.

Thus, Paul insists that we who believe the gospel must likewise "walk in a manner worthy of God" (1 Thess 2:12). Because the mission of God depends on the people of God carrying it out, the way

we live is important to the advancement of God's mission. Do you think about that? And do you know how you ought to live in order to advance the mission?

Covenant Response

Most people think they know the basics of how Christians are supposed to live. They know the "big sins" that Christians are supposed to avoid. But we cannot start there.

Paul starts like this: "we ask and urge you in the Lord Jesus." And in verse two he says, "you know what instructions we gave you through the Lord Jesus." His appeal, twice in fact, to "the Lord Jesus" shows us where the conversation about the Christian life must begin.

Here's why. Some people hear the gospel of God's grace and conclude that we do not need moral imperatives. They assume either that the Christian life will just happen without effort, or that that the sweeping promises of God's forgiveness of sins means God isn't too concerned about our behavior. This is simply not true. Of course, much of this kind of thinking is a reaction to the harsh legalism that comes when we again isolate the Bible's moral imperatives from the missional mandate. It is an equal mistake to believe that God cares about our behavior because we have to meet his conditions in order for him to accept us.

Until we get a grasp on the Lord Jesus, we will not understand that God's grace means we are related to him not by conditions but by covenant. Our behavior is not to be motivated by an "if" but by a "therefore."³ That's how a covenant works. Our behavior does not fulfill any conditions for God to love us, otherwise God's love would be a reward rather than a gracious gift. Nevertheless, God's love for us is so gracious, gracious beyond our wildest imagination, so it carries with it massive implications for how we *therefore* must live.

The imperatives—the demands—of Christian living comes from Christ's covenant with us. He has made a promise to us. He will be faithful to his promise. *Therefore* we must be faithful to him. We *must* live Christian lives.

THE POWER OF CHRISTIAN LIVING

Ok, but what *is* the Christian life? What *is* the behavior expected of God's people? When you see what it is throughout these next two chapters, you're going to be left wondering how it can be done. You're going to need power, supernatural power, to live the Christian life. Yes, that's the whole point.

A Prayer and a Hope

At the end of the last chapter, we saw this benediction:

Now may our God and Father himself, and our Lord Jesus, direct our way to you, and may the Lord make you increase and abound in love for one another and for all, as we do for you, so that he may establish your hearts blameless in holiness before our God and Father, at the coming of our Lord Jesus with all his saints (1 Thess 3:11-13).

Do you see what Paul prayed for the believers, what his hope for them was? He wanted them to increase and abound in love for each other. But he prayed that God would make this true about them. He did not believe they could do this on their own. But if God would do this in them, then they would be established “blameless in holiness.” Now just take in that phrase for a second. Paul wanted nothing less for the believers than this, that they would be faultless in regard to their holiness. Perfectly holy. No imperfections. None whatsoever.

This is what we should ask God for, but it is also what we should strive for. As Paul says in 2 Corinthians 7:1, “Since we have these promises, beloved, let us cleanse ourselves from every defilement of body and spirit, bringing holiness to completion in the fear of God.”

It is true that nobody is perfect. Yes, we need a Savior to save us from our sins. But our imperfection is what Christ has saved us *from* not what he has saved us *for*. He saved us to establish our hearts blameless in holiness. He saved us that we might bring holiness to completion in the fear of God. That is what we should want. That is what we should pray God grants to us. And that is what we ought to pursue.

The Power for Perfection

Every single day Christians should strive for—are you ready for this?—*perfection*. Perfection in holiness. What else could it mean to live to please God, as verse 1 says? God is never pleased by anything less than perfect holiness.

Yes, of course this is not easy. That is why the Christian life is entirely dependent on God, and on his grace. But grace not only brings us the forgiveness of our imperfections. It also gives us power—real power—power for our holiness.

What is this power for perfection? What is the power of grace? My burden is to help us see that living by grace is not the same thing as living by the law. You don’t have to be a Christian to do that.

Living by grace is the same thing as following after the Christ who saved us. Christians don’t follow after a law, some cold set of impersonal rules; we follow a good and gracious Savior, the incarnate Son of God. But we do *follow* him, and so the Christian life, the life of grace, is to increasingly know Jesus, love Jesus, and obey Jesus. That same Jesus who has made a covenant with sinners like you and me. That same Jesus who has united us to himself. Don’t you know, brothers and sisters, the power of this grace for your Christian life? Yes, apart from Christ you are imperfect, sinful, defeated. But if you are in Christ you are anything but “apart from Christ.” You are united to him, and in Christ you and I “are more than conquerors” (Rom 8:37).

The Two Stanzas of Grace

You see, the gospel of grace gives us two stanzas of one powerful song by which we are to live our lives. One stanza proclaims the extravagant grace of God and calls us to believe the gospel more and more. We are accepted and loved by God just as we are. God’s gracious, extravagant grace

leads him to love prodigals like you and me who breaks all the rules, yes, *all* the rules. God is *that* good.

But there is another stanza to the song which at first sounds like a contradiction to the stanza of grace. It's the stanza of radical obedience. In this stanza we hear the words of Jesus, "If you love me, you will keep my commandments" (Jn 14:15). Grace must not be used as an excuse to not need to love Jesus and obey Jesus. Something is terribly wrong if we think ourselves to be believers in the grace of God but find ourselves resistant to truly following Jesus in our daily lives.

The power for Christian living comes only when we hold these two stanzas together. Rankin Wilbourne explains:

The problem with either "just believe the gospel ... more" or "just obey your Lord ... more" is that alone, they leave us focusing on *ourselves* as the real agent of change. There's something we need to do, even if that something is *do nothing but believe*. Either song, by itself, places us at the center.⁴

We need to displace ourselves at the center, and that's what grace does. The power for Christian living comes from our union with Christ. It is because of our union with Christ that we know we are already accepted—*we are one with him! He is committed to us!* But it is also because of our union with Christ that we see that our lives are under his control and authority and power—*we are no longer our own! We are not powerless! He is at work in us!*

THE FOCUS OF CHRISTIAN LIVING

So do you see now where our focus must be if we are going to obey the imperatives of the Christian life? Do you see where the power comes from? Our focus must be on the Lord Jesus who, by a covenant of grace has united us to himself not only so that we might be forgiven but also so that we might be empowered. The Christian must live with a focus on Christ.

Doctrine Becomes Practice

What does that mean? It means, first, that the Christian faith is a doctrine, a truth that must be believed. Like the Thessalonians, we must receive the word of God for what it really is: *the word of God* (1 Thess 2:13). The Christian faith is first and foremost an announcement of who God is and what God has done. It is a message to be believed. It is gospel, it is good news. The basic instruction in the Christian faith is doctrinal, truths that must be believed.

The Christian faith is never less than this, but there is more to it. We saw in chapter three that part of the catechesis of Christianity, that is, part of the basic instruction in the Christian faith, includes teaching on the destiny of Christians to suffer affliction (1 Thess 3:3-4). And now we see another aspect of the basic instruction of Christians, another truth that these believers had "received from us," as Paul says it here, is instruction on "how you ought to walk and to please God." (1 Thess 4:1). So basic Christianity is not only doctrinal; it is also practical. It includes "the divinely inspired moral teaching that was to be an authoritative guide for their conduct."⁵ There are ways of living that

must be implemented. The word *ought* in verse 1 is the Greek word *necessary*. There is a body of instruction that we must follow in order to please God.

Pleasing God Forever

The Christian life might be summarized, “living to please God.” This does not mean we are trying to earn God’s pleasure. But someone who does not care to please God, who does not strive for that day by day, does not understand the grace of God at all.

When Paul says in Romans 8:8, “Those who are in the flesh cannot please God,” he does not expect us to say, “Ok then, I want to be ‘in the flesh’ so I do not fall into the trap of trying to please God.” Paul goes on to say, “You, however, are not in the flesh but in the Spirit,” clearly aiming to show us that we not only can please God but also must strive to do so.

In 2 Corinthians 5:9, Paul urges us to “make it our aim to please him” not only now while we live but even when we are dead and “away from the body.” If we are going to “make it our aim to please him” even after death, then it is not sinful to aim to live to please God while we live.

Creative Christian Living

In fact, we are encouraged in this first verse of the fourth chapter of 1 Thessalonians to strive to please God “more and more.” Now what does that mean?

It means that the Christian life is also a creative life. If you think of the Christian life and its moral imperatives only as a list of sins to avoid, then you will not be able to increasingly please God. You’ll only be trying to displease him less and less.

But when your focus is on Christ, you will have the power to “abound” in the Christian life. God is not glorified when the Christian life is only about avoiding what’s displeasing to God. God is glorified when we ask a better question: what will, in fact, please God more and more? How can I love him more, treasure him more?

No one ever honors a loved one by merely trying to avoid displeasing them. Of course we naturally want to avoid displeasing the one we love.

And that’s why when the focus of the Christian life is on the person of Christ himself, then love for Christ will grow, as will the ways we live to please him day by day.

¹ Abraham J. Malherbe, *Paul and the Thessalonians: The Philosophic Tradition of Pastoral Care* (Eugene, OR: Wipf & Stock Publishers, 1987), 74.

² *Ibid.*, 54.

³ Sinclair B. Ferguson, *The Whole Christ: Legalism, Antinomianism, and Gospel Assurance—Why the Marrow Controversy Still Matters* (Wheaton, IL: Crossway, 2016), [116](#).

⁴ Rankin Wilbourne, *Union with Christ: The Way to Know and Enjoy God* (Colorado Springs, CO: David C. Cook, 2016), [71-72](#). Emphasis original.

⁵ Gene L. Green, *The Letters to the Thessalonians*, The Pillar New Testament Commentary, ed. D. A. Carson (Grand Rapids: William B. Eerdmans Publishing Co., 2002), [184](#).