

A Holy Community

August 12th, 2012

1 Thessalonians 4:1-8

"¹Finally, 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. ²For you know what instructions we gave you through the Lord Jesus. ³For this is the will of God, your sanctification..."

Ryan Madson used to pitch for the Phillies, and a couple of years ago he had a bad outing in a game and broke his toe by kicking a chair in a temper tantrum. His childish actions affected more than his own health and reputation. It had implications for his team, because he couldn't play for two months. A whole community of people (the Phillies) suffered because of his personal, individual foolishness.

That story captures the importance of the first point of our membership covenant: I will maintain personal purity and seek spiritual growth. What does the sin I engage in on my own personal time have to do with the church body? Everything. My sin affects you and your sin affects me. To the degree that we engage in sin in our individual lives, we are impaired in our calling to be instruments in the growth and maturity of the other believers around us, and as a result, the whole church suffers.

That's why part of what it means to be a member of Joy Community Fellowship is striving to live a holy and godly life, to walk in a way that is pleasing to God. This morning I'd like us to consider from this text: that there is a way to please the Lord; what that way is; and the resources given to us to pursue that.

There is a Way to Please God

First, let's state the obvious (which maybe is not as obvious as it ought to be): there is a way -- today, this week -- that your actual life can bring pleasure to God. Would you affirm this statement as true or false: There's nothing I could ever do to make God any more pleased or

less pleased with me than He is right now. It's actually a trick question, and the answer is dependent on what I mean by the word "pleased".

But I wonder how many of you -- because of hearing a regular diet of gospel preaching -- don't wrestle with the complexity and automatically conclude that the answer is "true", to the neglect of a great deal of biblical evidence, including this passage: "¹Finally, 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."

They were living in a way that pleased God, and Paul is writing to urge and entreat them to do that more and more. Implication: your life can increase and decrease in its pleasure-producing effect on your heavenly Father. Verse 2 goes on that the way this happens is through obedience to His commands: "¹...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 (a military term, referring to authoritative commands) we gave you through the Lord Jesus."

This is not isolated to this one passage. John says whatever we ask of God we receive, because we keep His commands and do what pleases Him (1 John 3:22). Paul says we ought to walk as children of light and try to discern what is pleasing to God (Ephesians 5:10). We are to do good and to share what we have, for with such sacrifices God is pleased (Hebrews 13:16). The Philippians' financial gift to Paul was a sacrifice acceptable and pleasing to God (Philippians 4:18). Children are to obey their parents in everything, for this pleases the Lord (Colossians 3:20). We're to pray for those in authority and lead a peaceful and dignified life, which is good and pleasing in God's sight (1 Timothy 2:2-3). Paul makes it his aim always to please God (2 Corinthians 5:9).

The Gospel is Pardon *and* Power

All of these exhortations and commands -- and the motivation given for them -- are meaningless if there's nothing you could ever do in your actual life to make God more or less pleased with you than He is right now. OBEY is a four-letter word, but it's not that kind of four-letter word. It's a good word, about bringing pleasure to God.

This perplexes us because we've been taught -- and it's gloriously true - - that God's heart for you, and your standing in His presence, is not built on something as weak and shallow as your conduct in a given day or week. And we must cherish this; it is the foundation of all progress in godliness (I'll explain why later): "⁹For God has not destined us for wrath, but to obtain salvation through our Lord Jesus Christ, ¹⁰who died for us so that whether we are awake or asleep we might live with him" (cf. Ephesians 2:8-9).

Yes, how wonderful and marvelous, that God's covenant love is not dependent on my faithfulness, but on His! But in our zeal to uphold and glory in this truth, we must be careful not to deny and obscure other biblical truths. And I fear that maybe we've done that a bit, and I think I may have led you into that. To call for obedience (as Paul is doing here in 1 Thessalonians) is not contrary to the gospel of grace. So we will not be moving on from the gospel, we'll continue to lift up God's amazing love for us in Christ.

But if we conceive of the gospel in such a way that obedience is minimized -- always saying that we're wretched, worthless and that our even our acts of obedience are filthy rags -- if we ignore that our obedience is able to bring pleasure to the heart of our heavenly Father (as a child's good deeds bring pleasure to a parent), then we don't have a biblical gospel. The gospel is not only good news that there is pardon for our sin, but it is also the good news that there is power to not sin (Titus 2:11ff). Part of what Jesus bought you on the cross is the power to kill sin today. So apathy about your progressive movement towards pleasing Him with your life is a denial of the gospel.

I pray you hear this as good news! The eternally, infinitely joyful God, the One who by His word made the heavens, and by the breath of His mouth put the stars in the sky (Psalm 33:6), says that you can bring pleasure to Him! Your life, today, matters to Him. Let's not, in the name of gospel-centeredness, deny this precious reality.

The Will of God: Your Holiness

All that to convince you, in case there was any doubt, that there *is* a way to please God. And I've already been moving into this second point: if there is in fact a way to bring pleasure to God, what is that way? How do we do that? And I've already been saying it: by keeping the commands of God (v.2). Or as Paul puts it in verse 3: "²For you know what instructions we gave you through the Lord Jesus. ³For this is the will of God, your sanctification..." And in verse 7, "⁷God has not called us for impurity, but in holiness."

We all want to know, "What is God's will for my life?" Here is the surest way to answer that question biblically: He wants your holiness. He wants to form you into the image of Jesus (Romans 8:29, Colossians 3:10). Having rescued you from sin by His gracious work on the cross, He means for this to be the pursuit of your life: "¹⁴Strive for peace with everyone, and for the holiness without which no one will see the Lord." There is a real, practical holiness in your actual life without which you will not see God (Matthew 5:8). This does not nullify grace; it is the fruit of grace (Ephesians 2:8-10).

I believe that's why Paul warns the Thessalonians here that if they stop pursuing holiness and yield to sexual sin, that God is an avenger in all these things (verse 6). There's real danger to your soul if you are indifferent to God's will for you. That is why I said that apathy about your progressive movement towards pleasing Him with your life is a denial of the gospel, and may in fact indicate that you have not truly come to believe the gospel.

Does this (call to holiness) sound like good news to you or bad news? I want to make clear that this call to holiness is good news. The call to holiness is a call to your deepest joy. "God doesn't care about your happiness, but your holiness" is not true. It's a false dichotomy.

"¹¹These things I have spoken to you (abide in Me, bear fruit, keep My commands), that my joy may be in you, and that your joy may be full."

"¹The LORD reigns, let the earth rejoice!" The commands of Scripture - - which is one expression of His reign -- are about lining you up with how He designed things to be for your greatest possible joy. Where His commands don't feel joyful, the problem is not with Him. I lack the wisdom He has to know what is truly best for me. I'm like a stubborn child yelling at my mom that I don't want to go to the beach, because I'm having so much fun in my little sandbox. Your ideas about sex, money, marriage, etc. are not wiser than the One who designed those things His call to holiness is a call to profound happiness.

Three Resources to Empower the Pursuit of Holiness

There is a way to please God in your actual life; your pursuit of holiness is that way. Now, how does He intend for us actually to pursue this daily? This is where the rubber meets the road: what does it look like to actually become more and more pleasing to God in our kitchens and bedrooms and offices and backyards? What resources has God given us to make His will for us a reality? This text implicitly points to three very crucial tools that God has given us for this pursuit.

The Knowledge of God

The first resource we have for this process of change is the knowledge of God: "³For this is the will of God, your sanctification: that you abstain from sexual immorality; ⁴that each one of you know how to control his own body in holiness and honor, ⁵not in the passion of lust like the Gentiles *who do not know God.*" That's where I am getting the idea of the knowledge of God being a key weapon in this battle. Pursue

holiness/sexual purity, and don't be like the people *who don't know God*. They give themselves to impurity, not knowing God. But you do know Him, so kill that sin and walk in holiness. The implication is that the key to conquering sexual temptation is knowing God.

This is true not only of sexual temptation, but all temptation: "³His divine power has granted to us all things that pertain to life and godliness, through the knowledge of him who called us to his own glory and excellence" (2 Peter 1:3; cf. 2 Cor. 3:18, John 8:32). So you are on the computer and a provocative photo pops up; this can happen even when you're not pursuing it. What do you do? It looks alluring, it will feel good, and no one needs to know. You arm yourself with the knowledge of God, you take those thoughts captive and make them obedient to Jesus Christ (2 Corinthians 10:5).

You set His glory before you: In His presence is fullness of joy, at His right hand are pleasures forevermore. He is not a killjoy. His reign is good. He loves me. He is my Father; I'm His child. I'm not a slave, but a son. He gave His beloved Son for me; would He withhold any good thing from me? His wisdom is as higher than mine as the heavens are higher than the earth. He rejoices in doing good to us with all of His heart and soul. Do I desire to love life and see good days? Let me turn away from evil and do good. This will feel good for a moment; God is after my good 50 trillion years from now.

You call all this to mind, and you kill that temptation. You wage war on sin's lies with the knowledge of the truth: "³²You will know the truth, and the truth will set you free."

The Holy Spirit

Verse 8: "⁸Therefore whoever disregards this, disregards not man but God, who gives his Holy Spirit to you." That's a great comfort in the pursuit of holiness. This doesn't depend on me; He gives me the Holy Spirit to animate and energize my will in killing my sin. In Romans 8,

Paul makes explicit that this killing is done through the enablement of the Holy Spirit: " ¹²For if you live according to the flesh you will die (that is why I say that without sin-killing, there is not salvation), but if by the Spirit you put to death the deeds of the body, you will live." Does salvation, then, come by sin-killing?

Most of us have not even scratched the surface of the wonder and preciousness of the gift we have in the ongoing presence and the power of the Holy Spirit in us. He is the link between the gospel of Jesus' death in your place, securing God's eternal, unthwartable covenant love for you, and your sin-killing, holiness-pursuing walk that brings God pleasure today. The power for a sin-killing life comes through the sin-bearing death of Christ, because in His death He didn't just buy you pardon for sin but power from it.

As Jesus prepared for the cross He said, "This cup that is poured out for you is the new covenant in my blood." Through Jesus' shed blood He has secured for His people the blessings of the New Covenant. And the New Covenant did not only purchase forgiveness for our sins, but power to kill sin and walk in a way that pleases God: not just, "I will forgive their iniquity", but "I will put My law within them, and I will write it on their hearts" (cf. Ezekiel 36). Now, because of that, Paul can say that the Spirit of Him who raised Jesus from the dead dwells in you and gives life to your mortal bodies.

So don't tell me, "I just can't do this, I can't change. I'm weak, I'm pathetic, I'm helpless." That may sound humble, but it's not. It's a denial of what God has bought for you through the life, death and resurrection of His Son. So, "work out your own salvation with fear and trembling, for it is God who works in you, both to will and to work for his good pleasure." It's gospel-centered sin-killing. This excludes all boasting; in all your effort **God** is at work, enabling you to walk in newness of life that brings Him pleasure.

The Exhortation of Others

God changes us through the knowledge of God, and the power of the indwelling Holy Spirit. But let's not overlook the fact that Paul is exhorting them to it here in 1 Thessalonians. Progress in godliness is a gift from God (cf. 5:23). But that does not compel Paul to say, "Well, since it's God's gift, I don't need to say anything. I don't need to call them to it." No; he urges, he exhorts. They're doing well (v.1); Paul's "exhorting" is not mainly prompted by hearing that the church is failing. It is prompted (just as this message, and this series, is prompted) by the belief that successful Christians and need to be exhorted to press on and be vigilant in faithfulness and growth.

This is our calling and responsibility to one another as covenant members of Christ's church (Hebrews 3:12-13, Colossians 1:28 --> 3:16). If the church were not a covenant community in which people voluntarily make a covenant with God and others to pursue spiritual growth and holiness, then asking and exhorting like this would be intruding. But if we have made a covenant with each other to strive for a holy and godly life, then asking and urging is not intruding; it is love and faithfulness and loyalty, and it's one of the means that God uses to make us more and more holy.

There is a way to walk that pleases God. We have made a covenant to walk in that way. Let's exhort each other and hold each other accountable, and pray that in it all God Himself would continually empower us to excel more and more.