

Introduction

1 Thessalonians 4:1-12.

I was out of town Monday-Thursday of this week on a sort of guided spiritual retreat with a handful of other pastors, which meant Lindsay was watching the girls, and so on Friday I took them for the day so she could have some time to just do her own thing (spend time w/ the Lord, errands, go for a walk, craft, whatever).

And it was one of those mornings where Norah, our 2-year-old, was just being...well 2. She is trying to figure out where her independence starts and where our authority ends and so everything is a fight. Like walking to the table for breakfast is a fight when she's in these moods.

And so it's a difficult morning to say the least. Especially trying to hustle out the door to make swim lessons on time. And finally I load the girls in the car, we pull out of the driveway and we're off to swim lessons when from the back seat I hear Harper (our 4-year-old)'s voice:

- ***"Dad. Am I doing a good job obeying you today?"***
 - Yes baby, you're doing great.
- ***"So that means you're happy with me?"***
 - I mean, I do prefer it when you obey yes.
- ***"But Norah's disobeying right?"***
 - She's not being the best listener no.
- ***"So she's not making you happy, right?"***

Which first off – proves how much (probably bad) pride Harper takes in following rules. She her mother and I's child, right?

But second – that's actually a pretty difficult question to answer at that moment.

- Because on the one hand **Norah is my child.** Which means in some ways I am always happy with her. Because she is mine – there is nothing she could ever do to make me love her more, and there is nothing she could ever do to make me love her less. She has my full delight, and love, and affection because she is my daughter.
- **AND...**
- There are ways she can choose to behave, and things she can choose to do or not do that can be pleasing to me or not pleasing to me. Ways that she can obey me or not obey me that will either bring me joy as her Father, or make me disappointed as her Father.

And those two realities (she has my full love as my child AND how she lives day to day pleases or does not please me) are not in contradiction, they are meant to be held in tension.

And that's a difficult concept to grasp when you're 4.

But it's also a difficult concept to grasp when you're 24, or 34, or 54, or 84.

Because that tension is true in how we are viewed by our heavenly father as well. For those of us who have turned from sin and trusted in Christ Jesus for salvation...

- We have the full love and affection of God our Father. We, hear me on this – have his full delight as His children. You are a beloved image-bearer of God. And because of the work of Jesus, there is nothing you can do to make God love you less, and nothing you could do to make God love you more.
- **AND...**

- There are ways you can now live as a beloved child of God that can be pleasing to Him or not pleasing to Him. Ways you can obey Him or not obey Him that will either bring Him joy as your Father, or make Him disappointed as your Father.

And those two realities are not in contradiction, they are meant to be held in tension.

And so the question for us becomes – what does it look like to please God with our everyday lives?

What is Pleasing to God - v1-3

And that is exactly what Paul turns his attention to in our passage today – 1 Thessalonians 4.

The beginning of chapter 4 is this sort of turning point in the letter.

- Chapters 1-3 have been a lot of Paul giving thanks to God for the work He has done in this church. How he has chosen them, saved them, called them to Himself.
- And then here in 4-5 he turns to now give them some challenges and some encouragements.

He writes...

1 Finally, then, brothers (brothers + sisters – i.e. Christians. Followers of Jesus), **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.**

So Paul is referencing some early instruction he had already given this church, most likely when they were together, that he says had to do with how they **“walked”**. That’s the ancient Jewish language for **live**.

Remember, Paul says – what we taught you about **living in such a way that pleases God**.

So even though Paul and Silas and Timothy were only in this city with these believers for 3 months, and these were all new Christians, they had already begun teaching them – not just what they were supposed to *know*, but also how they were *supposed to live*.

Here is what your life ought to look like now if you are going to live in a way that is pleasing to your heavenly Father. Here’s what he delights in and loves...

3 For this is the will of God, your sanctification:

A question I get so often as a pastor is – “How can I know God’s will for my life?” And I understand what people mean by that – they mean His specific will – what job should I choose? Who should I marry? Where should I live? And those are great questions to ask. It’s good to want to know God’s will in the big details of our lives.

But in our search for God’s will in the specifics, let’s not miss God’s will when it’s explicit.

The Scriptures tell us several times what God’s will is for us. Just to name a few:

- **It is God’s will that you be saved (1 Tim 2:4)**
- **It is God’s will that you have a good witness to those outside the church (1 Pet 2:13-15)**
- **It is God’s will that you be filled with the Holy Spirit (Eph 5:18)**
- **It is God’s will that you be thankful in all circumstances (1 Thess 5:18)**

And here the text says – it is God’s will that you be sanctified.

What is **sanctification**? It's the Bible's word for the process of becoming more and more like Jesus over the course of your life.

Jerry Bridges – Sanctification is the work of the Holy Spirit in us whereby our inner being is progressively changed, freeing us more and more from sinful traits and developing within us over time the virtues of Christlike character.

To be sanctified means my life is more and more in step with what God has commanded, and less and less in step with my own sinful desires or the streams of the world.

And that, according to the text – is what is God's will... *aka what pleases God.*

A life that is pleasing to God is one that progressively looks more like Jesus.

As pastor Luke Humphrey writes – **“When we say no to sin, and yes to righteousness, we do so as two-year-olds bringing their Father pleasure. God is not apathetic to our obedience; he has committed his own joy to it.”**

Our obedience, our Christlikeness, our living for Him in the day in and day out of our lives is pleasing to our heavenly Father.

But then – Paul's going to get really specific on what this looks like.

1. Sexual Purity (v3-8)

3 For this is the will of God, your sanctification: that you abstain from sexual immorality;

A first piece of a life that is pleasing to God is one which more and more abstains (stays far away from, flees) from sexual immorality.

Sexual immorality in the Greek is the word *porneia*. It's where we get our english word “pornography”.

Porneia (Sexual Immorality) – Any sexual activity (Thought, Desire, or Deed) outside of the design of God for a covenant relationship (marriage) between one man and one woman.

This is God's design. Sex according to God finds its right fulfillment and place only in the marriage relationship between a man and a woman.

We see this all the way back at the beginning of the Scriptures, Genesis 1 and 2...

- God creates marriage and he creates sex.
- And he gives both to the first man and the first woman – the gift of marriage and the gift of sex within marriage for intimacy, pleasure, and procreation.
- However – part of the reality of living in a Genesis 3, sin-corrupted world – is that design can be and is distorted and corrupted.

*And that corruption/distortion of sex is what Paul and other NT writers call **porneia or sexual immorality**. Sexual activity outside of God's creation design – one man and one woman – in an actual marriage. (we're married in our hearts...)*

This includes – Adultery, Premarital sexual activity, homosexuality, lust (Matt 5:28 – But I say to you that everyone who looks at a woman with lustful intent has already committed adultery with her in his heart), masturbation, self-sex, fantasy.

All of that would come up under – sexual immorality. Not God's design for sex and therefore when we live into those things we are not living in a way that pleases God.

Which, just for the record, would be very difficult for the Thessalonian Church to hear...

Sexual immorality was rampant in the city of Thessalonica. Things they accepted in this city at the time of Paul's writing even in 2024 would make us blush and shudder. Grossly unbiblical sexuality everywhere.

For example – It was expected for married women to remain sexually faithful to their husbands, but that expectation was not placed onto the husband.

- Folks in Thessalonica considered it foolish to think married men could control their sexual desires.
- And so it was not only accepted, but applauded and celebrated for men to have multiple extra partners or mistresses outside the home.
 - To have relationships with other married women or single women...
 - To go to pagan temples and sleep with “temple prostitutes” – men or women available for you to pay to have sex with.
- You were frowned upon as “not a real man” if you didn't actively engage in these sorts of things.

So it's almost like Paul's anticipating that the Thessalonians, because of their cultural moment, will have some pushback, not at all unlike how we might wrestle with these commands of God...

- Yeah but what about _____ ?
- Or, isn't that sort of outdated thinking? You don't understand this cultural moment we're in...
- Why does God really care who I sleep with?
- Come on, everyone is doing it...
- Isn't that like 1990s purity culture? Okay, they didn't ask that one, but we do...

So Paul builds on his argument...here's why abstaining, running, fleeing from sexual immorality is pleasing to God...

4 that each one of you know how to control his own body in holiness (set apart for God - Rom 12 – “offer your body to God as a living sacrifice) **and honor** (something with value and worth), **5 not in the passion of lust like the Gentiles who do not know God;**

Being dominated by the passions of lust is what “gentiles” – that is non-Christians do. People who don't know God are controlled by their whims and passions. But you belong to God, Church. You don't serve the passions of lust, you serve the living God. Who has purchased you, ransomed you – called you his own.

Take for example how Paul spells it out clearly in **1 Cor 6:18-20 – 18 Flee from sexual immorality. Every other sin a person commits is outside the body, but the sexually immoral person sins against his own body. 19 Or do you not know that your body is a temple of the Holy Spirit within you, whom you have from God? You are not your own, 20 for you were bought with a price. So glorify God in your body.**

It is not pleasing to God when those he has redeemed offer their bodies to what is outside his design. You, your whole self – not just your soul, but also your body was bought with a price, the blood of Jesus, so glorify God in your body.

6 that no one transgress and wrong his brother in this matter, because the Lord is an avenger in all these things, as we told you beforehand and solemnly warned you.

So notice – sexual immorality is a sin against God, therefore it is displeasing to Him.

But it is also displeasing to Him, because it is a sin against other beloved image bearers of God as well.

Sexual immorality is always a sin against others...

- When you watch porn, you are degrading that person in the video or in the image into an object for your pleasure, not a human with a soul loved and cherished by God. You are looking for, as one pastor put it, digital concubines. Images of men and women that you seek out for your pleasure and their objectification.
- When you engage in sexual activity with someone you're not married to – you sin against them, enabling or leading them to rebel against God (and Jesus has STRONG words for those of us who cause others to sin).
- Married folks in the room, when you let those thoughts linger about your coworker, or the man or woman at the coffee shop or the gym – you sin both against them and against your spouse – defiling the marriage covenant you made with them.

7 For God has not called us (saved us) for impurity, but in holiness. 8 Therefore whoever disregards this, disregards not man but God, who gives his Holy Spirit to you.

To live into sexual immorality, to give into the passions of lust as a Christian – Is to functionally say “no thanks” to God.

- It's to functionally live as if the gospel is not true.
- As if Christ has not died and risen again to save you.

Mark Howell – “To be sexually impure therefore is basically to tell God that we don't care what He says and to tell others that we don't care who they are.”

So Paul tells them – don't you want to walk/live pleasing to God? Here's the first thing – sexual purity.

He gives them 2 more, we'll hit them quickly, because he hits them much more quickly...

2. Brotherly Love (v9-10)

9 Now concerning brotherly love you have no need for anyone to write to you, for you yourselves have been taught by God to love one another, 10 for that indeed is what you are doing to all the brothers throughout Macedonia. But we urge you, brothers, to do this more and more,

We talked about what Paul calls “brotherly love” a ton last week.

How godly love looks within the church:

- *Longs to see each other*
- *Sacrifices for one another*
- *Agonizes over one another's discipleship*

Paul says – this is actually going pretty well. Your love is spreading – not just to where you're loving one another and caring for one another – but it's spreading to the surrounding region of Macedonia. And this is pleasing to God.

God loves His church so much. He loves His people so much. One of the more prominent names given to the people of God in the Scriptures is that we are the **bride of Christ**. We, collectively, the church is the bride of Christ – Christ is our

groom. That he is sanctifying us, growing up, maturing us – that one day He is going to return to come get us that we may always be with Him.

It's hard to really overstate how much Jesus loves His people. And so of course – a life pleasing to God would include deep, sacrificial, over the longhaul love for God's people as well. So keep it up – more and more. Don't grow complacent. Don't live off yesterday's love. Keep pressing in. This is pleasing to God.

3. A Quiet Life of Hard Work (v11-12)

11 and to aspire to live quietly, and to mind your own affairs, and to work with your hands, as we instructed you, 12 so that you may walk properly before outsiders and be dependent on no one.

Here's how you could summarize v11-12... what is pleasing to God? **Be busy, not be a busybody.**

Apparently there are some in the church at Thessalonica, and Paul gets into this more in his 2nd letter, that are so convinced Jesus is going to return at any moment, they quit their jobs. We can't work, Jesus is going to return. But what has happened is that those people, because they aren't busy working, have now become a burden to the church.

They are meddling in everyone's business, they're becoming gossips, spreading rumors, creating division and dissension, and then relying on everyone else to take care of them.

Here's how Paul addresses the issue in a group of widows in Ephesus in 1 Timothy 5:13 – 13 Besides that, they learn to be idlers, going about from house to house, and not only idlers, but also gossips and busybodies, saying what they should not.

Have you ever heard the saying "idle hands are the devil's playthings?" Yeah well apparently so are bored mouths. When you don't have work to give yourself to, the default temptation is to be to busy yourself with what's going on in everyone else's lives.

Paul says this is not right. This is not pleasing to God. What is pleasing to God is when you go – work hard. Provide for yourself. Work in such a way that you get a good reputation with outsiders.

God is pleased when his people live quiet lives and mind their own affairs.

- Don't waste your energy gossiping.
- Don't waste your energy looking for drama.
- Don't spend your time figuring out how to create problems in your friend groups, in your community group, in this church.

Ain't nobody got time for that. How do you have time for that? If someone calls you or texts you to gossip about someone else in your friend circle, your response should be "how do you literally have time for this? I have much too much hard work to focus on."

A life pleasing to God is one where you go looking for responsibility, and you step into that responsibility well, work hard, and look to do a good job – for the glory of God.

A quiet life of hard work.

- Maybe I don't need to always post on instagram all of my opinions.
- Maybe gossip and getting together with my friends to talk bad about that person and that person, isn't the way.
- A quiet life – a life of holding our peace.

A quiet life **of hard work.**

- Giving myself to the job that God has placed me in.
- Giving myself to the children he has put in my life to take care of.
- Giving myself to the friendships and neighborhood where I actually am, pouring myself out in love.

God is not pleased with idleness. Paul has instructed them once, reminds them again – a life pleasing to God is one where you aspire to live quietly (that is no don't get caught up in gossip), mind your own affairs (or drama), and work hard at the vocation God has laid before you.

Conclusion

Paul points the Thessalonians to 3 ways they can please God with how they live:

1. Sexual purity
2. Brotherly love
3. A quiet life of hard work

Let me wrap up this morning with 2 simple questions:

What in your life is not pleasing to God?

Paul opens this chapter reminding the Thessalonians – right away. 3 months into following Jesus we were instructing you how to live to please God. We wanted you to know the gospel is not just good news – it's the good way. That now that God has saved you, he has also called you to live a life pleasing to Him.

So church – do you know what in your life is pleasing to Him and what is not?

- **Ephesians 5:8-10 – 8 for at one time you were darkness, but now you are light in the Lord. Walk as children of light 9 (for the fruit of light is found in all that is good and right and true), 10 and try to discern what is pleasing to the Lord.**
- **Psalm 139:23-24 – Search me, O God, and know my heart! Try me and know my thoughts! And see if there be any grievous way in me, and lead me in the way everlasting!**

This is the prayer of examen.

- Before you go to bed each night, or if you're like me and nights are not your thing, when you first awake – laying your day before the Lord.
- I do this often in the morning – I go back through the previous day in prayer, with 3 simple questions:
 - (1) What am I grateful to God for? *Gratitude.*
 - (2) What thoughts, words, or deeds were not pleasing to God? *Repentance.*
 - Use this 1 Thess 4 list – sexuality, love, a quiet life of hard work. Something else?
 - (3) Lord, help me to live a pleasing life for you today. *Resolve.*

But wanting to ask the first question, is dependent on your answer to this question...

How eager are you to please God?

Is this the heartbeat of your life -- how do I please God today? Lord, I want to please you.

I don't know about you but I want to be able to say and mean the words of Jesus in John 8 when he says – John 8:29 – I always do the things that are pleasing to the Father.”

That's my heart most days. Is it yours?

That we would be so caught up in the way that God has pursued us and loved us – chased us down and called us His own – that our response would not be – “oh here comes God with some rules” – but “God is this good? He is this *for me*? He is this kind and this gracious and this tender and compassionate? Why would I not trust that His ways are not only right but good?

I'm not talking about legalism! I'm not talking about Pharisaical rule-following. I'm saying with Paul – **You've seen saved by the greatest love there ever was – the Triune God – don't you want to now live in a way that pleases your Savior?**

Why would I not want to live in a way that pleases Him?

Trusting that what pleases Him is also what is for my flourishing and my joy.

Because this is how this whole thing works – that as we learn to reorient our life more and more to be pleasing to the Father, we find in his delight, more of our delight.

I left out the end of the story that we began our time together with. And that is that after we got home, I gave the girls smoothies for lunch. Which was a terrible life decision. Because Norah's smoothie started in the cup and within 15 seconds ended up ½ on her and ½ on the floor.

And I was extremely patient (that's a lie). As I was holding back my frustration cleaning it up, Harper once again got my attention – **“Dad, Dad...am I still obeying you today? And does that make you happy?”**

Yes Harper – it makes me happy.

And I don't know that I've ever heard a louder squeal of delight.

“EEEK!!” Harper replied, **“I love obeying you because you're the greatest daddy ever!”**

(I realize it sounds now like I'm making this up, I promise with everything in me...)

Now will she disobey me again? Of course.

And will I stop loving her? No.

But does her obedience bring me delight as a Father so madly in love with His child? Yes.

Church – does your heart burn with this desire – I just want to please my God.

Pray.