HOW TO LIVE IN ORDER 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.”

Last week we thought about Apostle Paul’s goal in life, which was leading people to become Christians. People who became Christians were Paul’s glory and joy. What a beautiful life goal, to lead others to Christ! Today’s passage has a similar theme: it challenges us to ask ourselves, “What am I living for?” Paul wants us to think seriously about how to live in order to please God. But pleasing God might seem too abstract. So he gives three specific teachings (3–12), and he especially focuses on the first one, which can be so hard for so many people to accept. May God open our hearts and speak to us through his word today.

Look at verses 1,2. We see here how Paul respects the new believers. He calls them “brothers and sisters.” Even though they’re new to the faith, and most of them are Gentiles, not Jews, Paul sees them as equals, and even more, as the most dear family members. He says they’re already living the new Christian life. And he says they already know about the instructions he was about to give them. So often we can approach people with condescension, as if they know nothing. But Paul approached people with sincere respect.

Why did Paul respect these people so much? It’s because he knew they’d been changed by the gospel. What did their change look like? In 1:3 Paul writes that their work is produced by faith, their labor is prompted by love, and their endurance is inspired by hope in our Lord Jesus Christ. That’s a powerful inner change. Now that they believe in Jesus, they’re full of faith, full of love and full of hope, and their faith, love and hope are motivating them to work hard and to endure. In 1:6–9 Paul writes that they welcomed the message in the midst of severe suffering with the joy given by the Holy Spirit, they’re a model to other believers, the Lord’s message is ringing out from them, and people are moved at how they’ve turned from idols to serve the living and true God. Their change came from the Holy Spirit’s work in them, and it has made their lives an inspiration and influence to many others. In chapter 2 he writes that they accepted the apostles’ teaching not as a human word, but as it actually is, the word of God, which is indeed at work in you who believe (2:13). They had such an exemplary attitude toward God’s word. Moreover, as soon as they believed in Jesus, they joined God’s people in suffering persecution (2:14). Paul was encouraged because of their faith (3:7) and because they were standing firm in the Lord (3:8). God himself has been teaching them to love each other (4:9b). But even with all this, Paul doesn’t take their change for granted. He knows they still need to be strengthened and encouraged in faith (3:2). Night and day he’s praying earnestly to see them again and supply what is lacking in their faith (3:10). His main goal for them is that they will be blameless and holy in the presence of God when Jesus comes again (3:13).

Look at verses 1,2 again. Paul is making a major shift from encouraging to teaching. We notice how much emphasis he puts on what he’s about to say. He says, “we ask you and urge you in the Lord Jesus.” And he says, “you know what instructions we gave you by the authority of the Lord Jesus.” It means these are going to be very important teachings. They’re not grey areas; they’re non-negotiables. They’re essential teachings for anyone who believes in Jesus. To stress them even more, he says later in verse 8, “Therefore, anyone who rejects this instruction does not reject a human being but God, the very God who gives you his Holy Spirit.”

In verse 1 Paul tells us the core of his instruction: “we instructed you how to live in order to please God.” How to live in order to please God. Where does that come from? Before believing in Jesus we mainly lived to please ourselves. To some degree we might have tried to please others. But we hardly ever thought about pleasing God. It may never have even crossed our minds. But after repenting of our sins and believing in Jesus, God gives us his Holy Spirit, who radically changes our minds and hearts. Now we have a new way of thinking, a new desire, a new passion: we really want to please God. Why are we so eager to please God? It’s because now we love him. Why do we love him? It’s because of what Jesus has done for us on the cross. We’ve tasted his love and grace personally, and we can’t help but love him back. We used to be worried about what people thought of us. But now we’re most concerned with what our loving God and Father thinks of us. We want to live a life worthy of God and please him in every way (2:12a; cf. Col1:10a). What a beautiful new desire!

But our new desire to please God needs to translate into reality and into our practical living. It’s harder than we may think. Before believing in Jesus we adopted all kinds of life practices and formed all kinds of life habits. And not many of these things actually please God. Sometimes we’re not even aware that these practices and habits are still governing our lives. And so often we’re surrounded by people living according to the pattern of this world, and we so easily tend to conform (Ro12:2). So we need constantly to be evaluating our lives honestly in light of God’s word. Every day we need to be finding out what pleases the Lord (Eph5:10). It may seem vague. So Paul gives three specifics.

**First**, avoid sexual immorality. Read verses 3–8. In teaching how to live in order to please God Paul spends the most time on this topic. Sexual immorality clearly is a problem even for Christians. It was obviously a problem for these new believers, or Paul wouldn’t be writing about it. We may be surprised that such exemplary people needed this instruction, but they did. We all need to take this teaching seriously. Sanctification starts with our sexuality.

Human sexuality is a powerful thing. Some people think sex is inherently sinful, but it’s not. God created us as sexual beings and saw that it was very good. God himself created sex. But he created it to be between two people who love each other and are deeply committed to each other for life. He created sex for married couples to enjoy and to produce children. Human beings experience something of God’s glory through sex with their spouse. But sex can’t satisfy our souls—only God’s glory can. Fallen human beings make sex an idol. In the ancient world worshiping various gods including having sex in their temples. Paul says these people were full of passionate lust all the time. We don’t have those statues or temples anymore, but people today are definitely worshiping the idol of sex. It makes people kind of crazy, willing to risk everything for just a moment of pleasure. On the internet the biggest industry worldwide is pornography. Lustful images are just a mouse click away, even from children. Pornography a big problem even among Christians, even among missionaries and pastors.

Why is it such a problem? Paul says in verse 6 that when we’re ruled by passionate lust, we take advantage of and wrong others. We really hurt the people who love us. We also hurt the people we use. We hurt people we don’t even know. Most of all, we hurt God, who’s our loving heavenly Father who made us, and who calls us not to be impure but to live a holy life (7). Sadly, people try to find self-worth through being able to have sex with others. But just the opposite happens. Sexual sin fills us with more self-hatred, guilt and shame. People try to comfort themselves through sexual sin, but it turns into ever-increasing wickedness (Ro6:19). And sexual sin isn’t just about committing an outward act. Our Lord Jesus said: “But I tell you that anyone who looks at a woman lustfully has already committed adultery with her in his heart” (Mt5:28). Women can look at men lustfully, too. People can look at the same sex lustfully, too. It’s all sexual immorality. It’s all displeasing to God. We may think we’re entitled to indulging in such sin, justifying it and deceiving ourselves and others. We may want to keep enjoying it. But Paul says, “The Lord will punish all those who commit such sins, as we told you and warned you before” (6b). People may think they can get away with it, but God himself will punish them. Paul taught us elsewhere not to try to rationalize sin in the name of God’s grace, and to count ourselves dead to sin but alive to God in Christ Jesus, and to offer every part of ourselves to God as instruments of righteousness (Ro6:1,11,13). It means our hands, our hearts, our eyes—everything should be used to serve God, not sin.

So what should we do? How can we overcome sexual sin? Paul gives us some clues. In verse 4 he says, “…each of you should learn to control your own body in a way that is holy and honorable…” And he adds in verse 5a, “…not in passionate lust like the pagans, who do not know God…” Because we know God, we should want to be holy like God. Random and reckless, passionate lust is not holy. We should want to use our bodies the way God intended. We should want to honor God with our bodies. It requires controlling our bodies.

Paul says the same thing in 1 Corinthians 6:18–20: “Flee sexual immorality. All other sins a person commits are outside the body, but whoever sins sexually, sins against their own body. Do you not know that your bodies are temples of the Holy Spirit, who is in you, whom you have received from God? You are not your own; you were bought at a price. Therefore honor God with your bodies.” God bought us at the price of the blood of Jesus, the most costly price there is. And God makes our bodies temples of the Holy Spirit. So we need to learn to control our body in a way that is holy and honorable, starting from our youth. But for those who got carried away with sexual sin already, passionate lust can consume their daily lives. So Paul concedes elsewhere, “…for it is better to marry than to burn with passion” (1Co7:9b). And he teaches married couples, “But since sexual immorality is occurring, each man should have sexual relations with his own wife, and each woman with her own husband. The husband should fulfill his marital duty to his wife, and likewise the wife to her husband. The wife does not have authority over her own body but yields it to her husband. In the same way, the husband does not have authority over his own body but yields it to his wife. Do not deprive each other except perhaps by mutual consent and for a time, so that you may devote yourselves to prayer. Then come together again so that Satan will not tempt you because of your lack of self-control” (1Co7:2–5). These verses describe what it means practically to control our own body in a way that is holy and honorable—have sex regularly with our spouse.

But as we saw, sexual sin is rooted in our hearts, in lustful desires. Ideas pop into our minds without our even knowing why. But we need to “flee” from them. We need to not let sin reign in us so that we obey its evil desires. It’s not really a matter of willpower: it’s a matter of depending on Jesus, confessing our sins and accepting his blood by faith. 1 John 1:7 says, “If we walk in the light, as he is in the light, we have fellowship with one another, and the blood of Jesus his Son purifies us from every sin.” And 1 John 1:9 says, “If we confess our sins, he is faithful and just and will forgive us our sins and purify us from all unrighteousness.” Again and again we need to come into the light of Jesus, confess our sins honestly and put our trust in his blood to purify and forgive us.

**Second**, love one another. Read verses 9,10. To live in order to please God, instead of living in lust, we need to be living in love. Paul encouraged these new believers by praising their love for each other. He said they loved God’s family throughout Macedonia. It means many believers whom they didn’t know came to their capital city of Thessalonica, and they welcomed and served them in their homes. He praises them for this, but he adds, “Yet we urge you, brothers and sisters, to do so more and more.” It tells us our positive struggle is to grow more and more in love for our brothers and sisters in Christ.

**Third**, work with your hands. Read verses 11,12. This is the final way Paul says how to live in order to please God. We need to work with our own hands. It means to earn our own living and not try to depend on fellow Christians’ generosity. When we’re busy working with our hands, we tend to live a quiet life, minding our own business. But when we’re not working with our hands, we tend to talk too much and get involved in other people’s business unnecessarily. It doesn’t win the respect of outsiders. But a quiet, hardworking, giving life wins respect.

Read verse 1 again. May God fill us with the desire to please him. May he help us do so practically by avoiding sexual immorality, loving one another more and more, and living quiet, hardworking lives.