

TJW, HT, 30.11.08, 9.15am & 11am, 1 Thessalonians 4.1-12

If you really love someone, you want to do everything you can to please them. Their pleasure is more important than yours. If it isn't, then your love for them is pretty weak.

My wife Erica has a friend - not someone who lives locally - who's stopped going out of her way to spend any time with Erica. It's making Erica ask whether this person is really a friend at all. That's true of your relationship with your closest friend. It's also true of our relationship with God.

When you become a Christian, God starts a new relationship with you - as your Lord, your friend, the one who loves you more than anyone else does.

That new relationship means that the Christian should want to please God.

This is the main message that God is speaking to us in the Bible this morning: **1. Live to please God more and more.**

It's in 1 Thessalonians chapter 4 - and I do suggest you open it up. (And, as you're finding that, let me point out that there's an outline of this sermon for you on the back of the notice-sheet - for you to take extra notes for yourself, if you like, and then to take home with you.)

Look at the beginning of chapter 4 [READ verses 1-2].

Who needs to hear this message this morning?

New Christians do. The apostle Paul was writing this letter to Christians in the city of Thessalonica, in Greece. He reminds them of the moral instructions that he himself had given them, when they became Christians.

If you're a new Christian, there is moral and ethical instruction for you in the Bible, that will tell you how to please God - and every new Christian needs to hear.

Established Christians - we need to hear this, too. Paul's already told these Thessalonian Christians that he knows that they're going on pretty well in their faith - he says that in 3.8, at the top of the page [READ].

Paul says to them, "You're doing great. So I urge you - live to please God more and more."

If you're an established Christian who's lost the drive to please God more and more - you know you need to hear this.

And if you're an established Christian whose life is growing more and more as pleasing to God - well, God urges you here - "You're going the right way. Just keep going."

And I also need to say something about what another group of people should make of this message about living to please God. This is you, if you wouldn't call yourself a committed Christian.

Please understand that no one ever became a Christian just by living morally to please God.

Quite often couples come to see me to ask about getting married.

They usually tell me how in love with each other they are. And they tell me about their relationship - how they're already doing a lot to please each other - doing things that they know the other one will enjoy.

But living like that doesn't make them married, and they know it. That's why they've come to see me - they've got to start a marriage-relationship.

Trying to live to please God doesn't make you a Christian. What does make you a Christian is coming to Jesus Christ with repentance and faith - starting a new relationship with him.

Once you've done that, then you can show that you're a Christian by living to please God.

That's who this message from the Bible is for.

So what's the message? What is this life that pleases God?

There are two words used for it here - and they both mean the same thing: be holy - that's there in verse 13, at the end of chapter 3 [READ 3.13a]. And be sanctified - in chapter 4, verse 3 [READ].

The Bible as a whole helps us to understand what holiness is.

First and foremost, 'holy' is what God is. His holiness stresses how different his character is from the world around us.

The world is changeable, but God is eternal. The world is unreliable, but you can trust what God says. He is holy.

In this world so much that we do is motivated by greed and by selfishness. But God is simply good - he sacrificed himself on the cross for us, out of selfless love. He is holy.

So the root meaning of 'holy' is 'set apart' - God's character is so different from the character of the world.

And right through the Bible, God commands his people to be holy themselves, just as he is holy. If we belong to him, we'll start living out his character in our own lives. We're not set apart from the world completely, because we've still got to live in it.

But we must be set apart from the world morally.

We'll never reach moral perfection in this life. But that must not stop the Christian striving to be holy - morally set apart from the standards of the world around us - in order to please God.

Sometimes Christians find it depressing that they'll never be perfect in this life - and they give up trying to please God more and more: Why bother keep trying to be holy, if I'm always going to fail?

But that's the wrong way to look at it.

Even the greatest footballer knows that he will never reach perfection. He'll always make some mistakes. (If he's playing in defence for Birmingham City right now, I can tell you, because I've seen it with my own eyes, that there will be loads of mistakes.) But that doesn't stop him training hard every day, to be the best player he can be, improving all the time.

It's the same with a musician. She'll never play a piece of music to her total satisfaction - but she practices hours every day - because she wants to be a better musician next year than she is this year.

If we are in Christ, we will naturally want to please him - live like him, more and more. Be holy - be sanctified - to please God.

Then, in the next few verses in 1 Thessalonians 4, Paul gives a series of motivations for living to please God more and more. I counted five of them, and they're all about God. So, if you're ready, let's go.

Motivation number one: Be holy, because God has instructed us to be holy.

Do you see, in verse 1, how Paul urges them 'in the Lord Jesus'?

In verse 2, he gave them moral instructions 'by the authority of the Lord Jesus.'

And also verse 8 [READ verse 8a]. Paul was an apostle, and what he told them came from God, through Jesus Christ.

If someone tells us what to do, we ask: "Who are you to tell me what to do? What gives you the authority?"

The instruction to the Christian to be holy comes from the highest possible authority.

If you don't want to please God more and more - your argument isn't with a preacher, or with the church, it's with God himself.

Motivation number two: be holy, because it's God's will - see verse 3 [READ].

If you truly love someone, you begin to want the same things they want.

God's will for you - his desire for your life - his great intention for your life - is that you please him more and more.

Why would we keep trying to steer our lives in another direction?

If we put our energies into directing our lives the way God says, then there's satisfaction and joy.

If we keep trying to steer our lives away from God's will for us to be holy - then we're always struggling against a tide that will eventually be too strong for us.

God's instructed us to be holy. It's his will. And motivation number three: God is judge - halfway through verse 6 [READ verse 6b].

We want justice - we want God to punish awful sin. But if we're standing there pointing out the sin of others, expecting God to punish it - then it's only just and right that he will look at our sin. Why should he not punish that?

We Christians know that, because we trust in Jesus, our sins have already been punished - Jesus took that punishment for us, when he died - so we are absolutely, 100%, permanently forgiven.

But if we won't now live to please him - if we happily wallow in doing the things that provoke his anger - doesn't that suggest that we haven't seriously asked for his forgiveness in the first place?

Motivation number four - holiness is God's call on us - verse 7 [READ].

What would you think if you called in a decorator to re-decorate your house - and you came home to find every wall stripped bare of paint and paper and rubbed down - and there's the bloke, packing up all his equipment - giving you the bill for the job. You say: "But you've only done half the job! I called you in to strip the old paper off, sure - and then you're supposed to put new paint up!"

When God calls you to put your faith in Christ, he's calling you two ways.

He's calling you to strip away your old way of life - your old attitudes, that cut God out of the picture. But he's also calling you to put on a new way of living - to put on new attitudes - new selflessness, sacrifice, trust in God.

That's his call on us - and he will not be satisfied with half a job.

God's instructed us to holiness - it's his will - he is judge - it's his call on us - and then, maybe biggest of all, for the Christian - motivation number five - God has given us his Holy Spirit.

Do you see that in verse 8? [READ].

The Holy Spirit is God himself - the spiritual presence of God.

And God makes a specific promise about the Spirit. When you put your trust in Jesus Christ, God sends his Holy Spirit onto you - and into you.

And what does the Spirit do? Well, the clue's in his name - the Holy Spirit is God's power in us to make us holy.

Look over at chapter 5, verse 23 [READ]. God will do it - and he'll do it by the presence of the Holy Spirit in us.

So do you see what happens every time a Christian chooses to do something that they know displeases God - something that isn't holy?. What they're doing is - fighting against the divine Spirit who's in them.

That's why sin never satisfies the Christian for more than a couple of minutes. Because the real you is now the you who's in-dwelt by the Spirit. You can only really be satisfied if your actions and your thoughts are holy - in line with the Holy Spirit who's in you.

A pot of paint isn't any good, is it, if the label on the outside give you a different colour from the paint that's on the inside?

It's only when the Christian's outward thoughts and actions are growing in holiness, in line with the Holy Spirit who's within - only then can the Christian hope to be content in themselves - feel secure in God.

Five motivations for living to please God more and more.

Now what's the force of this message from God for you in your life, this morning? Maybe it's only really you who knows that...

...whether it's a rebuke from God - a kick up the backside - to walk away from a habit that you know displeases God.

New Christians often tell me that they find themselves automatically asking all the time: “Would Jesus be pleased with this? How does God want me to act in this situation?”

I reckon that some of us who have been Christians much longer need a wake-up call to get back to that attitude.

The Spirit hasn't left you - he's still there. Your sin still grieves - you're still fighting against him. That is not what God has called you to.

And there will be others of us who are striving to please God - and you need to hear his encouraging and urging - do it all the more!

If you're climbing a mountain, don't turn back half way, just because the going is tough, and the top still seems a long way off.

Live to please God - and when that's in place in your life... do it more and more.

There isn't time this morning to open up all of this passage. But let me say a couple more things about it, to give you some more spiritual food for thought this week.

Paul here speaks about two key areas of life, in which Christians must grow in pleasing God.

The first is: sexuality - avoid sexual immorality - see verse 3 [READ verses 3-5a].

Sexual immorality is any sexual activity with someone you're not married to.

And the way to avoid it, he says, is self-control.

We all know how hard self-control is. Sometimes you've just got to walk away from a tempting situation and go and put your energy into something else - because you know that if you hang around, the temptation will overcome you.

And the second area of life is: love - love each other - see verse 9 [READ verses 9-10].

That's how you measure whether a church is pleasing to God. Is there a profound, selfless, forgiving love among them? I think there often is here. I've seen one great instance of it this week, done very practically. Let's do it more and more.

In fact, I said a lot more about each of these two areas of sexuality and love in a sermon a few weeks ago on “Biblical Sexuality” - and you can listen to that online or order a copy of the tape.

But I want to show you one verse which sums this teaching up so well. Turn on a few pages to 2 Timothy 1.7 [READ].

In the Holy Spirit we have the power to be self-disciplined - to love each other more and more, and to please God more and more.

That, says God, is what I am asking you, and urging you, to do.