

Bangalore Conference, 1 Thess Exposition

Study 4 – 1 Thess 4:1-12

Introduction

We will continue our studies in 1 Thess today. So far we have learnt that this letter is from one of the founding pastors of this church to the members of the church. And we have seen that this is not merely a formal letter but is shot through with loving concern for these Christian brothers and sisters. We talked about how Paul could commend them and how faithful they had been as a church to the gospel. Then we saw how as part of that concern for them, Paul had spoken about his ministry, in order that no-one might discredit the message of the gospel by rubbishing the messengers (Paul and co). We saw that here is a pattern for OUR ministry to each other, genuine, blameless, effective ministry. Then last time, we talked about fellowship. We were challenged to exercise heartfelt, sacrificial fellowship, even in trials, that benefits all of us, that brings rejoicing and that results in prayer.

Chapter 4 begins with a “finally” which always reminds me of listening to dad’s preaching in Coventry, when he would say “finally” about 10 mins into his 40 min sermon! This doesn’t mean that Paul expected to finish at this point, but that this marks the beginning of a different section of the letter. He leaves the discussion of his own ministry and his own relationship to these Christians and now turns to deal with some of the issues that Timothy no doubt told him about on his return from Thess. What was still lacking in their faith (3:10)? What areas did they need to be encouraged to continue in, or even to change their ways in? What were some of the problems or potential problems in the church? What ideas in the society around them might start to infiltrate the church and their thinking?

We don’t know all the answers to those questions (have to read between lines again!), but we do know what Paul’s big point is and it will be ours this morning. The title the NIV gives this section is hard to beat – living to please God. So as we look at this passage this morning, I want us to learn 4 things that Paul tells his Christian friends are part of what it means to please God. This was something that Paul taught the church when he was there (v1), and something they were doing already. It is an astonishing truth that it is even possible for any human being to “please God”. Are we talking here about something that WE can do to earn points with God? Are we talking about something that is to do with meriting God’s favour on us? If we are, then it sounds like it might contradict the grace of God we love to speak about, God’s undeserved favour upon us.

Might be helpful just to sneak ahead to 2 Thess 1:11 for a moment. Paul says here that all we can do to please him is a result of the empowering of God in his people by faith. This is all to God’s glory and “according to the grace of our God and the Lord Jesus Christ.” So there is NO pleasing God apart from his grace received by faith in Christ. Listen to this verse:

Heb 11:5-6 *“By faith Enoch was taken from this life, so that he did not experience death; he could not be found, because God had taken him away. For before he was taken, he was commended as one who pleased God. And without faith it is impossible to please God, because anyone who comes to him must believe that he exists and that he rewards those who earnestly seek him.”*

It is not that we can in any way earn favour with God or give something to God. But pleasing him starts with faith because that is the foundation for everything else. All that we will say this morning applies to those who have first taken hold of Christ by faith and received his grace offered freely to all. Until you do, there is no pleasing God. If you try by your own attempts to please God while all the time rejecting the Saviour God has given, his own dear son, you are a rebel and it is impossible for a rebel to please him. So you must come to him. And having done that, he will give you the power and the desire to please him. Four things then that Paul highlights here:

Progress is pleasing to God

Paul seems to be reminding these Christians mostly of what they already know. This is not entirely new teaching, but he is urging them to press on in what they already know and to do it MORE AND MORE. That’s a good phrase to write across anything that we are urged to be and to do as Christians – more and more. It points to the sobering and humbling truth that in this life, we are never done with living to please God.

Illust – it is like travelling east or west rather than north and south. If you travel north, you will eventually hit the top (pole). But if you travel east or west, you can keep going forever. Until we meet the Lord when our lives are over or he comes for us, we never finish living to please him.

We are always on the journey, and never arrive at the end. So we need encouraging along the way. First point – **progress is pleasing to God**. You see this in v1, v6, v9, v10 (twice), v11 (also 5:1-2, 11).

Paul knew human nature and sinful human nature. Considering all he has said about this church already, it is clear that they were a great example to others and were doing things right. But when that is the case, you know how easy it is to get complacent, to relax, to lack diligence and watchfulness. And so the exhortation and urge is to “do this more and more”. The Christian life is not a journey that ends in this life. It is a constant move forward:

Php 3:12-14 *“Not that I have already obtained all this, or have already been made perfect, but I press on to take hold of that for which Christ Jesus took hold of me. Brothers, I do not consider myself yet to have taken hold of it. But one thing I do: Forgetting what is behind and straining towards what is ahead, I press on towards the goal to win the prize for which God has called me heavenwards in Christ Jesus.”*

2 Pet 1:5-8 *"For this very reason, make every effort to add to your faith goodness; and to goodness, knowledge; and to knowledge, self-control; and to self-control, perseverance; and to perseverance, godliness; and to godliness, brotherly kindness; and to brotherly kindness, love. For if you possess these qualities in increasing measure, they will keep you from being ineffective and unproductive in your knowledge of our Lord Jesus Christ."*

APP: It pleases God when his people make progress in their life of faith. It is pleasing to God when we are closer to him, know more of him, know him more deeply, know his word better, understand more of his Spirit's empowering.

Ro 11:33 *"Oh, the depth of the riches of the wisdom and knowledge of God! How unsearchable his judgments, and his paths beyond tracing out!"*

Our God is a deep that we will never get to the bottom of. He is a source of eternal wonder, joy, wisdom, holiness and we can never exhaust knowing him. Are you making progress? Is it "more and more" with you or exactly the same, or even less and less? This is your responsibility, to make use of the means God has given (word, prayer, church, fellowship with others etc.).

Holiness is pleasing to God

Paul then zooms in and targets a few areas. He doesn't list everything they should avoid or everything they should do, but instead goes for a few big areas that are obviously of issue for them. They are three general areas that are universal in their application. First is a biggie! **Holiness is pleasing to God.**

Sanctified means set apart for God, set apart from sin. It describes not only the way that a sinner is given new life when they are saved and sanctified (or set apart) to God, but also the life-long process of the transforming work of God's holy Spirit to make a person holy. A couple of verses will help here:

Past tense, completed action of God.

1 Co 6:11 *"But you were washed, you were sanctified, you were justified in the name of the Lord Jesus Christ and by the Spirit of our God."*

Constant, continuous effort of the Christian

Php 3:13-14 *"Brothers, I do not consider myself yet to have taken hold of it. But one thing I do: Forgetting what is behind and straining towards what is ahead, I press on towards the goal to win the prize for which God has called me heavenwards in Christ Jesus."*

Both together, reckon yourself dead to sin (initial sanctification), do not let sin reign (progressive sanctification)

Ro 6:11-13 *"In the same way, count yourselves dead to sin but alive to God in Christ Jesus. Therefore do not let sin reign in your mortal body so that you obey its evil desires. Do not offer the parts of your body to sin, as instruments of wickedness, but rather offer yourselves to God, as those who have been brought from death to life; and offer the parts of your body to him as instruments of righteousness."*

Illust – In your physical body, you don't jump from toddler directly to adult. You have to grow and mature over time.

You are not zapped to holiness of life when saved. It is a process and God works in us over time by his Spirit, as we grow and understand more. Maturity never comes in a lump-sum, but takes time just as in our physical lives.

It is God's will that you should be sanctified. Don't need to ask God if he wants this for you! He does! Paul highlights one particular area of concern for the Thessalonian church and it is one which is no less relevant today, sexual immorality.

We could have taken a whole study on this issue alone so only going to deal with briefly. The society that Paul was speaking into was no better or worse than ours today. Depending on where you are in the world, society might be more or less permissive. What is sexual immorality? Don't need to be specific. There is only ONE legitimate domain for sexual activity and that is the biblical view of marriage as the joining of one man with one woman for life. ANY sexual activity outside of those borders is immoral in God's sight. That might grate on the world today, but the bible is uncompromising in its stand on this.

The Thessalonika of Paul's day had all kinds of accepted sexual activity. Even the religious life of people was not free from this. Shrine prostitutes brought sexual activity into the realms of worship! So it would be a great temptation to this church and a matter that needed the strong exhortation of the apostle to counter the prevailing world view.

Even sexual activity within marriage is not completely free from danger. So Paul argued against "passionate lust" and for "self-control." The command to love neighbour is behind v6, that brother is not to be taken advantage of or wronged.

What is the incentive to obey? It all comes back the Lord's own holiness. Judgement to come is a fearful prospect and the NT writers have no qualms about reminding Christians of their accountability before God. These are God's commands and you disregard them and rebel against them at your own peril.

APP: Holiness is pleasing to God, cooperating with God in this work of sanctification. It is God's will that you live in a holy way, because God himself is holy. This whole area of sexual immorality is one that Christians need to be careful in. It is one of strongest human urges and we should take seriously the dangers here from the emphasis the bible puts on it. What's the answer?

1 Co 6:18 *"Flee from sexual immorality. All other sins a man commits are outside his body, but he who sins sexually sins against his own body."*

2 Ti 2:22 *"Flee the evil desires of youth, and pursue righteousness, faith, love and peace, along with those who call on the Lord out of a pure heart."*

Ro 12:1 *"Therefore, I urge you, brothers, in view of God's mercy, to offer your bodies as living sacrifices, holy and pleasing to God—this is your spiritual act of worship."*

Flee from the one, and pursue the other. Run away from the desires and the temptations before they lead you astray and pursue instead that which is pleasing to God.

Illust – story of man with two fighting dogs. The one you feed will always win. Spiritual nature or sinful nature?

And let us be as clear as God's word – the Lord will punish for such sins. If you reject this, you rebel against God. But God gives his Spirit to enable us to be holy.

Brotherly love is pleasing to God

Paul has already commended this church for their love and does so again here in v9. It was a love not just for each other locally, but also spread out to the brothers in the surrounding area. It was great and Paul only writes to encourage them to excel in this character of love. This is something that they didn't need detailed instruction about. In fact they were taught by God. As John says in his first letter:

1 Jn 2:9-10 *"Anyone who claims to be in the light but hates his brother is still in the darkness. Whoever loves his brother lives in the light, and there is nothing in him to make him stumble."*

1 Jn 3:14 *"We know that we have passed from death to life, because we love our brothers. Anyone who does not love remains in death."*

In other words, it is a defining characteristic of the Christian that they love their brothers. But none of us do that perfectly, so Paul can command increase and growth here as in holiness. You can never say you have loved enough.

APP: Brotherly love is pleasing to God. Your love for God and for his people are connected! It's just not possible to claim that you love God and then have no love for people. We could spend hours talking about all that the scripture tells us of God's love for us. That verse in Romans comes to mind as a very powerful incentive to remember love to others:

Ro 5:8 *"But God demonstrates his own love for us in this: While we were still sinners, Christ died for us."*

When you struggle to show love to another Christian, when it will cost you to love them, when you think that you will be unable to do so, remember God's demonstrated love for rebel sinners like you and me. Remember that you owe him everything and then ask for his help to show Christian love to others. The gospel is the backdrop for all our relationships. If you want to please God, then you must love his people.

Living responsibly is pleasing to God

The last point will be quite brief, but may be quite profound in the effect it has on us. Think about your ambition. What do you really want? It's never too late to have ambitions and while some avenues might be closed to you now because of age, there are still things you aim for. To change the world? To be famous? To get rich? To have power? We might get those kind of answers if we were to ask around. And in comparison, what Paul sets for us here might seem to be not so appealing. What does he say?

Ambition to lead a quiet life, mind your own business, work with your hands. There were some who felt that certain work was beneath them, some that perhaps because of the teaching of Christ's return didn't feel the need to supply their own needs, but took advantage of the brotherly love of others. It seems there was a view that manual work was what you paid others to do if you could. But Paul brings even this area of life into the realm of something that is pleasing to God. So last point (struggled to capture thought with one word!), living responsibly is pleasing to God. I mean, having this ambition is something that brings God delight in his children.

We often, even without thinking, make distinction between sacred and secular. I used to talk about my secular job and then church stuff. That is a false distinction. It's not one thing here in this building and another once you hit the pavement beyond the gate! That kind of idea is behind so much nominal Christianity that is a husk of what the bible teaches. Found this quote that thought was very helpful:

Piper, Pleasures of God, p254, quoting Abraham Kuyper:

"There is not an inch of any sphere of life over which Jesus Christ does not say, 'Mine'"

APP: Christian, whatever your ambitions are, don't get carried away with what the world values. Living responsibly, minding your own business, knuckling down to pay your way is pleasing to God. And in fact it has other benefits too. It means you can be a blessing to others, winning respect and an opportunity to commend Christ.

You might feel that your quiet life is very ordinary and unspiritual a thing in God's sight, but if it is lived in that atmosphere of holiness and of service to your God, even the ordinary can be raised to the level of service. And who knows that God may use your hard work and your daily life to speak to others of your faith in him.

It is only because of God's love for us that we can in any way please him. If he hadn't first saved you and washed you, everything you try to do, no matter how good it might seem, would be tainted with the stain of rebellion and sin. But because of the work of the Lord Jesus Christ, we have been cleaned, pronounced not guilty any more and can please God by the way we live.

You have a responsibility to follow him, this is what you are called to do and God has given to you his HS to help you.

Progress is pleasing to God so go forward, not back. Know him more and more.

Holiness is pleasing to God so be holy. Repent of sin, turn from it, don't let it reign over you but pursue righteousness.

Brotherly love is pleasing to God so love your brothers and keep loving them.

Living responsibly is pleasing to God so remember that everything you do, every part of every day belongs to him. Commit it all to him and live it for his glory.

Do you want to please him? All Christians will answer yes. Then live like this. And do it more and more, to his glory, Amen.