

Pleasing God and Gaining Respect With Those Outside

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Date: 29 January 2023

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[0 : 00] Good morning. If you're visiting with us today, welcome. My name is Billy McKillop. I'm associate pastor here. Our senior pastor flew out last night with his dear wife to get a week's vacation up in Philadelphia, spend time with family, so we pray for him. And thank you, Oliver, for going off script this morning to pray for justice and peace. For the Nichols family, may the Lord continue to help us at New City to be agents of grace and change. Amen. In our own city. Pleasing God and gaining respect is the title of this sermon, and there's always a danger in picking a title for a sermon. You know, it should say gaining respect of outsiders, because we don't need any more respect from God, right? We're pleasing God, but because of what Christ has done for us, we have all the respect of Christ, his son. Amen. That's the gospel. So just a few words before we read the scripture about where the Lord is taking us today. In 1 Thessalonians 4, the apostle Paul gives instructions on pleasing God and walking properly before outsiders. And he's writing to new believers who've come to faith through the preaching, his preaching in Thessalonica, he and Timothy and Silvanus. Thessalonica was the capital city of the Roman province of Macedonia, a city of about a hundred thousand people. And he spends half his letter really encouraging these new converts, reminding them of who they are in Christ, their identity in Christ. And he's challenging them to live out of that identity, to live lives pleasing to God and to gain the respect of outsiders as they wait for the second coming of Christ. He mentions Jesus' return in every chapter. So that's a big theme for him in 1 Thessalonians. So let's read from chapter 3, verse 11, the closing prayer of chapter 3 and then chapter 4, 1 to 12. Now may our God and Father himself and our Lord Jesus direct our way to you and may the Lord make you increase and abound in love for one another and for all as we do for you, so that he may establish your hearts blameless in holiness before our God and Father at the coming of our Lord Jesus with all his saints. Finally then, brothers, we ask and encourage you in the Lord Jesus that as you receive from us how you ought to walk and to please God just as you are doing, that you do so more and more. For you know what instructions we gave you through the Lord Jesus.

For this is the will of God, your sanctification or your holiness, that you abstain from sexual immorality, that each one of you know how to control his own body in holiness and honor, not in the passion of lust like the Gentiles or unbelievers who do not know God, that no one transgress and wrong his brother in this matter, because the Lord is an avenger in all these things.

As we have told you beforehand and solemnly warned you, for God has not called us to impurity but in holiness. Therefore, whoever disregards this disregards not man but God who gives the Holy Spirit to you.

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. For that indeed is what you're doing to all the brothers throughout Macedonia. But we urge you, brothers and sisters are included, we urge you to do this more and more and to aspire to live quietly and to mind your own affairs and to work with your hands as we instructed you, so that you may walk properly before outsiders and be dependent on no one.

[4 : 07] Amen. This is the word of the Lord for us today. Let's ask his blessing. Father, we thank you so much for your word that will never wither or fade but stands forever. And we want to live according to your word. Seeking you with all our hearts. We want to hide your word in our hearts so that we might not sin against you. So we come to you in dependence again today to ask you to teach us from your inspired and infallible word that we might find our delight and our joy in you, our Father, as we look forward to the return of our Lord Jesus. And it's in his name we pray. Amen.

Amen. You can be seated.

Well, several years ago now, my wife, Sherry and I, along with another elder and his wife, Juan and Sylvia Ledon from our church in Miami, attended a Desiring God conference in Minneapolis. And the title of the conference was Sex and the Supremacy of Christ. And some of the hotel and convention staff mentioned that they don't usually see those two words in the same sentence, you know, sex and Christ. But they were misinformed, right? Because the biblical writers put them together. God puts everything he's created under the supremacy of Christ. All things were created through him and for him, Paul says in Colossians. In him all things hold together that in everything he might be preeminent, right? So even in our sexual lives, Christ is to be preeminent. Sadly, in our culture today, we continue to see this big shift away from the Christian sexual ethic. Author Tim Challies, he's a blogger and a writer.

He says, things that were once forbidden are now celebrated. Things that were once considered unthinkable are now deemed natural and even good. Christians are increasingly seen as backward, living out an ancient, repressive, irrelevant morality. You know, one example of this shift in our culture would be the argument that some make that the term pedophile is not really a good term, and it should be changed to minor attracted person. So encouraging the use of a euphemism like that, it downplays the great harm that's done to children, right? And the Apostle Paul, he was writing in AD 50 or 51 to newly converted Christians in this Roman city with a culture that was worse than our own. It was more Christless than our own culture. Paul's teaching on Christian sexual ethics would have been revolutionary to people living in Thessalonica. His warnings about sexual immorality may have even been seen as dangerous and destabilizing to Roman identity and culture. It's no wonder that Christians were persecuted. Roman sexuality was about dominance. It was culturally acceptable for a man to have multiple partners, female, male, children, it didn't matter, as long as he was the aggressor.

Roman sexuality openly accepted pedophilia. And there was a very low view of womanhood. Christianity came along into that context and condemned every part of the Roman sexual ethic. In his book, *Sexual Morality in a Christless World*, Matthew Ruger, he points out that a Roman woman was accustomed to being treated as a second-class human being. But in Christendom, a woman found a culture of genuine love that saw her as equally important as any man in the eyes of God.

[8 : 25] She was sexually equal with the man in the marriage union and had equal recourse under the law of God to demand marital faithfulness from her husband. And Paul is aware that sexual sin and struggles were not just outside this newly established church, but those inside the church were battling sexual immorality as well. And we should acknowledge, right, that whatever sin we see displayed by those who are outside of God's grace, we can also see those displayed by those who are saved by God's grace.

Paul encourages them, saying that they became an example to all the believers in Macedonia and Achaia, and their faith in God was going everywhere. He said they'd turn to God from idols to serve the living and true God and to wait for his Son from heaven. But Paul also acknowledges that they needed help.

They needed God's help to continue to fight against lust and sexual sin that was so prevalent in their society as it is in ours. And the good news in Paul's instruction to abstain from sexual immorality is that God gives his Holy Spirit as a powerful person whose job it is to transform us, right? We depend on him for our gospel transformation. Verse 7 and 8, he says, God has not called us for impurity, but in holiness. Therefore, whoever disregards this disregards not man, but God who gives the Holy Spirit to you. There's the good news for us in our culture that God gives the Holy Spirit to us. He doesn't just command difficult things in the gospel. God provides what he requires in the law through Christ, through his death on the cross, through the gospel that we cling to, and through the powerful presence of the Holy Spirit that lives within us. He goes everywhere we go. That person, God's Holy Spirit, raised Jesus from the dead. I mean, how much more power do we need than the power of the Holy Spirit who raised Christ from the dead and who applies the scripture to individual hearts and minds? In fact, he's at work right now. He's at work this morning as we were singing these songs of praise to honor God, and as we listen to the preaching of the word, and as we fellowship with one another, even if you serve in the nursery, right? God's Holy Spirit is there sanctifying us in an ongoing way to make us more and more like Christ. So because we've been given this powerful Holy Spirit, we have the ability to live lives that are pleasing to God and

that are a blessing to others and that gain respect from outsiders. It's God's Holy Spirit who empowers us to live holy and self-controlled lives. So just as the first century church needed to rely on the Holy Spirit for sexual holiness, the evangelical church today needs this same power as well. Elder Jerry Moore, he shared an article with the Sunday morning class on biblical sexual ethics that he and elders Freeman and Broderick are teaching and Barney Swihart, who is a counselor with Harvest USA. He writes in this article that recent church surveys report some alarming statistics. The Fuller Institute of Church Growth did a survey on how common is pastoral indiscretion, and the results were pretty shocking.

37% of the pastors who responded confessed to having been involved in inappropriate sexual behavior with someone in their church. Another survey of 300 pastors by Leadership Magazine indicated that 23% admitted to having been sexually involved with someone other than their spouse. These are pastors.

[12 : 39] 70 of 300 pastors. 70 of 300 pastors agreed that they had been guilty of adultery. Some large hotel chains report that their largest revenues for adult TV channels have occurred during Christian conventions.

These are sobering statistics, right? So the world gets into the church. The sin that is so prevalent by those who don't have the grace of God in Christ are also a temptation and a struggle for those who are saved by grace. Swihart says, my worry is that if this high rate of moral failure exists with Christian leaders, what's going on in the lives of quote-unquote average, respectable-looking men and women sitting in church pews? He says, my concern is that if struggles with sexual sin are this serious in the lives of men and women in our churches, then what is to be the church's response to this? Can we say that churches are safe places for the sexual struggler to open up about their sin so as to seek spiritual help and restoration? So we all need Paul's reminder in this passage that this is the will of God. This is the will of God for your sanctification, for your holiness, that we abstain from sexual immorality. And our churches need to be safe or safer places, right? To be able to talk about sexual temptation and struggles. And Harvest USA is a wonderful biblically faithful resource for us. We've had biblical support groups in the past at New City, and we need to pray that the Lord will raise them up again, that God will call some to lead these groups, to look through these great resources that are available to us through Harvest USA and other organizations. We need less judgmentalism in our churches towards sexual sin and more mercy, right? Recognizing that sexual holiness, like any other area, it's a work of God's grace. We have to depend upon the grace of God and the Holy Spirit in us. In this area, Paul Tripp says, sanctification is not human effort.

Sanctification is God's grace working through everyday means to do what I would be unable to do for myself. That's transforming me from what I now am into His likeness. Amen?

Amen? That's the good news, that holiness is a work of God's grace in us. As we've been shown mercy, so we as Christians need to show mercy. If any of us experiences freedom from sexual struggles or any other idol, it's only because of God's grace and His Holy Spirit that's helped us to live pleasing to God in this area. This is one of the reasons for this current class on biblical sexuality, that we would learn together to keep watch over ourselves at the same time to help those among us that are struggling, as Paul was encouraging these new believers who were struggling with temptation.

You know, have we addressed this need perfectly as leaders of New City? Well, no. We need to pray for more of God's grace and power, for more equipping and support and care and teaching. Shame is not a good motivator for change, right? We can write that down. Shame is not a good motivator for long-term change.

Believing the gospel is a much greater motivator and living out our grace-given identity in the power of God's Holy Spirit, that's a much better strategy. That's a gospel-centered strategy.

[16 : 44] Paul makes a connection between living holy lives and loving one another well. He emphasizes that to live a sexually immoral life is not just a sin unto oneself, but it's always a sin against another person. You know, in verse 6 of chapter 4, he says, see that no one transgress and wrong his brother or his sister in this matter, because the Lord is an avenger in all these things. As we told you beforehand and solemnly warns you, you know, we know from David's, you know, awful sin with Bathsheba and his confession from Psalm 51, that his sexual sin was not just against her and her husband Uriah, but it was against all of Israel. He sinned against the people of Israel, but more importantly, he sinned against God. And in Psalm 51, he acknowledges against you and you only have I sinned and done what is evil in your sight. You know, to be sexually immoral is to bring

harm to another person.

And Paul's warning is that God will avenge the wrong done to others who are created in God's image. You know, what if the elders of our church called a confession of sin meeting on a Sunday evening, and the theme was going to be ways in which we as leaders have failed at living self-controlled and holy lives in regard to sexual expression, right? All the elders lined up testifying about ways that we have failed. That would probably be the most well-attended Sunday evening service ever in the church.

But if everyone was required to testify, if you all had to come and testify, you know, we probably all have a story to tell, right? We all have some story to tell in that area.

You know, has anyone among us perfectly kept God's commandment to not commit adultery? The seventh commandment, right? If we look at the larger catechism of our Westminster Confession, it's a wonderful document that really could be devotional. You can read through it because part of it, you know, discusses what is the seventh commandment, what is required in the seventh commandment, and what is prohibited in the seventh commandment. And it expands the list of behaviors, thoughts, and attitudes that are associated with adultery to include examples like all unnatural lusts, all any unclean imagination, any unclean thought, purpose, or affection, all corrupt or filthy communications, or listening thereunto.

Think of movies or songs or other forms of entertainment that are pretty common, right? It mentions songs, books, pictures, and all other provocations to uncleanness. So, okay.

[20 : 06] The catechism helps us to see that we're all guilty. We're all guilty of breaking the seventh commandment. And God wants us to take seriously his call to holiness in every area of our lives, in our thought life, our affections, as well as our behavior. He wants us to understand more and more the power that he has sent into our hearts to enable us to live holy lives. He wants us to know that there's ongoing forgiveness and there's renewal available to us as we turn away from sin and trust him day by day. Now, wherever God has you at this point in your life, whether you're single, if you're single again, if you're married, or you're widowed, or you're divorced, there's grace.

And there's power. Because if you have trusted in Christ, you have his Holy Spirit in your place of work or school or in your social life, in your forms of entertainment.

He gives the Holy Spirit to help us. When we're looking at that list of movies that we might want to download or we want to pull up on TV, that the Holy Spirit is right there. We should be asking him. You know, we should check out. We should know before we go. All right? Because oftentimes, we're disappointed. It may not be because the movie has some sexual immorality, but it's just a bad movie. You know, it's a bad plot. But, you know, in your forms of entertainment, he gives his Holy Spirit to help you in what we watch, what we listen to, what we read. His Holy Spirit is always there. Always there to help us think differently than how we would think and behave if we didn't have the Holy Spirit, if we didn't have Christ. You know, why should Christians take seriously what Paul has to say in this area of sexual holiness? Because we've been rescued from the bondage of sin and its consequences, and we have this wonderful declaration of Christ's righteousness applied to us, right?

[22 : 18] We're not yet perfect, but we don't give up, right? As Paul says in Philippians 3.12, not that I have obtained all this or am already perfect, but I press on to make it my own because, why? Because Christ has made me his own. You belong to someone else, so your motivation is gratitude for this new identity that we have this supernatural help that is continually transforming us.

So because God gives you his Holy Spirit, you have the power to live holy and self-controlled lives. That's good news. That's one point that Paul is making in this passage. A second point that he's making is that God's Spirit gives us the power to grow in wisdom and love for one another. See, he makes this connection between sexual holiness and love for other people.

And Paul concludes the first part of his letter with this pastoral prayer. Maybe we can put the scripture back up there at the end of chapter three. He says, may the Lord make you increase and abound in love for one another and for all as we do for you, so that he may establish your hearts blameless in holiness before our God and Father at the coming of our Lord Jesus with all his saints. So he prays for their love for one another to overflow, so that when Jesus comes with all the angels and the saints from heaven, that they will be blameless in holiness. How about that? That we would be blameless in holiness. It's not that their love for one another will make them blameless in holiness, right? God is the one who will make us blameless in holiness.

God's work in our sanctification is what Paul emphasizes later in the closing benediction in chapter five, when he writes, Now may the God of peace himself sanctify you completely and your whole spirit and soul and body be kept blameless at the coming of our Lord Jesus. And he emphasizes, He who calls you is faithful. He will surely do it.

So who does he put the emphasis on there? The emphasis is on God. God who calls you is faithful, right? It's not dependent on your perfect faithfulness, because you can't until Christ comes back and makes everything right. But still, he's going to declare you blameless in holiness as he sanctifies you. That's the motivation for us to live lives that are pleasing to God. God's Spirit is at work right now, sanctifying you this morning. He's sanctifying you every day, sanctifying you from his word. When you pick up the scripture or that devotional that you want to spend a little time with him in the morning, he's there making you more holy, seeking to sanctify you as you attend Sunday school class or a discipleship group. Whatever you do, however your service in the church, his spirit is working in you as you love one another. Amen? That's good news. God is at work. He is faithful.

[25 : 44] Paul says to the Thessalonian believers in verse 9, you yourselves have been taught by God to love one another, for indeed that is what you are doing to all the brothers through Macedonia. But he says, we urge you brothers to do this more and more. Paul was so encouraged by their love for one another.

He wasn't sure he even needed to write to them about this, but he just wanted to urge them to do this more and more, to be a loving body, loving one another. He tells them they should aspire to live quietly and to mind their own affairs and to work with their hands as he and Timothy and Silvanus had instructed them to do. Verse 12, so they would walk properly before outsiders and be dependent on no one.

He wants them to live peaceably with others rather than meddling in others' affairs. Live quietly and with honor, doing what they could to provide for themselves rather than being a burden on others. He wrote earlier about some Christians who were shamelessly exploiting the charity of others, wealthier Christians. When they were able to work themselves and provide help for others in need, they were overly dependent on others.

And this would not have been seen as proper by outsiders in their Roman cultural context. Paul says, if you can work and help provide for others who cannot work because of disability or illness, then that's what you should do.

[27 : 15] So that you can experience the dignity of work and so that you can be a help to others. As a church at New City, you know, we have a lot of opportunities to love one another well with our lives and our resources and our ministries to help those outside the faith.

We should bend over backwards as a church to be generous to those who are in need. But we should also be wise, right, so that we don't create harmful dependence.

So we have the Holy Spirit to help us to grow in wisdom and in love for one another and for those God brings into our lives. But if you have a heart for mercy, you've likely been taken advantage of at one time or another, right?

But that doesn't mean you still, you shouldn't continue to show mercy, right? So neighbors in our community, our New City deacons have learned some things over the years and have developed some wise policies.

For example, the deacons don't give cash. They don't give cash to folks. They want to help folks. They listen and pray with them. They trust people.

[28 : 28] But they seek to verify as much as possible to make sure that they are really helping and not harming. In Miami, we had an active deaconal care in our church at Pinelands.

And we were blessed to be able to rent a home when we were there from a missionary family who was away for a couple of years. Large home that had really a whole section, like a mother-in-law section of the home.

And we had a mom and her four children move into that house with us for what we agreed would be a two-week period just to help her make a transition. Turned into six months with her and her kids. But it was all good. But we learned a lot about generosity and how to be wise in helping someone in need. Anna was someone who was working hard with her hands to provide for her children.

She just needed some temporary mercy and love and care. And a group in our church surrounded her and helped her. Paul wants his new converts to set an example of love for one another in such a way that no one would think to remind them of that.

[29 : 44] That, you know, people would... He wants outsiders to point to Christians at New City as an example of what it means to love one another and meet the needs of those who God puts in our path.

And we see it happening all the time at New City. There's groups of people that... Small groups that get together and learn of a need and they just meet the need.

Just help. That's God's Holy Spirit sanctifying us. Making us more and more holy. To care more. To love for others as Paul is saying.

He wants us to live quietly. To mind our own business. You know, in other words, he doesn't want us to have a reputation for being large and in charge of every situation.

He doesn't want us to make it our ambition to be well known and famous. In social... You know, if social media had been a thing in Thessalonica, Paul would probably have mentioned Facebook in this paragraph.

[30 : 44] You know, he may have said, Why do you think you need to live so loudly on social media? Live quietly. You know, is there really a need to argue theology and politics on social media?

To share every opinion you have with the world? No. Pay attention to more important affairs. Live quietly and peaceably. Paul's instruction here would certainly apply in the church as well.

Right? Christians, we should live quietly and mind our own affairs in the church. We shouldn't think that we have to know every tidbit of gossip in the church. You know.

The Baptist preacher Charles Spurgeon, he wrote about this to his ministerial students. And he said to them, Don't allow certain busybodies in your church to bring you all the gossip of the place.

Abhor those mischief-making, tattling handmaidens to strife. If there were no listening ears, there would be no tail-bearing tongues. So, we know we're supposed to guard our tongues.

[31 : 48] But we're not so good at guarding our ears sometimes. The ultimate goal in living quiet lives and minding our own affairs is not simply for the sake of keeping the peace at any cost.

Right? No. At times, there may be need for some loving confrontation in the church. If members or leaders are not walking in line with the gospel. You remember Paul's public confrontation of Peter when he was showing partiality, showing prejudice toward Gentile believers.

We're not called to be peacekeepers or peacefakers. We're called to be peacemakers. To make the peace. Right? To seek to use those four G's that Peacemaker Ministries has written about.

You know, glorify God. Gently restore. Go and be reconciled. Get the log out of your own eye.

Those are important principles for us to remember as we seek to be peacemakers.

Paul emphasizes in verse 12 that one reason for our walking properly in sexual holiness and in brotherly and sisterly love for one another is for gaining respect from outsiders.

[33 : 06] If those outside the body of Christ can see that we actually are living out what we believe about sexual ethics and that we live out the sacrificial love for one another that Jesus displayed for us on the cross that we say we believe, if they can see that we are not busy bodies but minding our own affairs and working with our hands, then they'll be forced to ask, you know, what is it about these people?

You know, where do they get their joy and their love for one another and their contentment and their peace? And we can show them that the power is not in us. The power is in who God has given us to help us to live lives.

It's not in our own strength, but the power comes from God and his Holy Spirit to continually shape and mold us more and more into his image. Amen.

Tim Challies, he notes that as our society continues to reject the Christian sexual ethic and even Christian churches cave in to the pressure to accept and affirm sexual immorality, and as people in our culture display less and less love and respect for one another.

Do you see that happening? Less and less tolerance and love for one another. As God's people will become, he says, we as God's people will become more and more the outsiders.

[34 : 30] Even the traitors who threaten to destabilize the whole system. You know, as we insist that sex is to be limited to the marriage of one man to one woman, Tim Challies says, we threaten the stability of a society that is hell-bent on permitting and celebrating nearly everything except sex within marriage.

Isn't that what we see happening in our culture? In a very fast way, we see this deterioration of the Christian sexual ethic.

But we must commit ourselves to live our moral lives according to God's sexual ethic, not according to the sexual ethic of any group or any person in our culture.

At the same time, we're to commit ourselves to loving one another as Christ would have us do, and loving those outside the faith. We're to be able to love people who are different from us, who don't like us, who would say we're their enemies.

We're still supposed to love those outside the faith. And all this should make us long even more for the return of our Lord Jesus, our Savior, the one who establishes our hearts blameless in holiness.

[35 : 53] Amen. That's what we look forward to. That's what we depend on. We depend on His Holy Spirit because He is coming back. Right? He is coming back. Paul, he emphasizes that every chapter.

Jesus is coming back for us. And that's good news. Amen. Let's pray. Father, we acknowledge again that we need Your grace every day to turn away from sin, to trust in You and in what You have said about holiness and what Paul says about sexual faithfulness and about love for one another.

We need Your grace to help us in this area to be loving people more and more to demonstrate the love that You have demonstrated for us, to love those who are in need of saving grace.

Help us to show mercy, to be merciful people, not to be judgmental people, but to be merciful and caring and longing to help to rescue those as You have rescued us out of the consequences of sin.

Thank You, Holy Spirit, for Your powerful presence that motivates us, that enables us, empowers us to live our lives, to please our Heavenly Father.

[37 : 13] And we trust in You and pray these things in Jesus' name. Amen.