

Pleasing God More and More

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Preacher: Luca Sueri

[0 : 00] Good evening, everyone. For those who don't know me, my name is Luca, and I'm one of the members here at Bransfield Evangelical Church. I wonder what the most difficult thing is that you ever did to please someone.

That sacrifice that you would have never considered making, had it not made someone who really matters to you really happy. Anyway, I'm going to tell you the most difficult thing I did to please my brother around five years ago.

He's actually here tonight, and he's given me permission to share this. It involved going to a concert. Now, to give you some context, I reckon I'm probably the least musical person in here tonight.

And not just because I'm a bad singer, which I am, and because I cannot play any instruments, which I can't, but also because, to be completely honest, I'm just not that fussed about music in general.

It is a great way to worship God, and I totally get that. But otherwise, I reckon I listen to music more by accident when I go to the supermarket than as a result of me intentionally turning on a speaker when I get home.

[1 : 09] So you can see how going to concerts would be way down at the bottom of my list of favorite things to do. However, just to make things worse, this was no standard concert I was going to go to.

We were going to see a metalcore band, a Christian metalcore band. They worship God. There's no doubt about that. But their worship style is very different from what we used to at Bransfield, or possibly any other church, because it involves a lot of jumping and screaming.

So I'll spare you the details, but let's just say I spent the longest couple of hours of my life in a dark, smelly room, pushed around by people who would not stop jumping, while the best I could do to try and blend in was to stand still, arms crossed, but I was tapping my foot to pretend I could kind of feel the rhythm, though I'm sure I didn't fool anyone.

It was difficult. I was hated every minute of it kind of difficult. But, and I fear for myself as I say this in front of my brother, I would do it again.

Because I knew how much this concert mattered to Alberto, and it did give me great pleasure to know that it made him so happy, so pleased. If we wanted to summarize in just a few words the key point from the verses that Esther just read for us, I think we can safely say that these verses are all about pleasing God.

[2 : 39] And not just as a one-off effort, like I did to please my brother, or you probably did to please people in your life, but as a constant commitment to please God.

So they're about pleasing God more and more. We're going to split the passage in three short sections, starting by introducing the main theme of pleasing God more and more in verses 1 and 2, and then we will move on to talk about purity in verses 3 to 8, and finally we will focus on love for one another in verses 9 to 12.

So I recommend, if possible at all, that you keep your Bible open in front of you, as we will be jumping from one verse to another as we examine the passage together. Before we dive in, though, I'd like to draw your attention to something I realized as I prepared for this sermon.

I think Paul here is communicating on two levels. He's sending a personal message addressed to individuals, but also a more general message addressed to a community.

I appreciate this is probably true of most letters in the Bible, as they're written to churches, of course, but my impression is that it is somehow even more true of these verses here.

[3 : 53] For instance, I think each of us could easily add their name to verse 3. It is God's will that you should be sanctified, Luca. But there are going to be verses where Paul will be putting the emphasis more on the fact that we are members of our church community.

So we could easily read verse 10 as, yet we urge you, brothers and sisters of Brunsfield, to do so more and more. So I want to encourage you as we go through these beautifully direct and practical verses to think of yourselves as the actual recipients of these words, and not just as individuals, but also as Brunsfield people, or more generally as church members who are part of the body of Christ. And if any of us tonight do not identify themselves as Christians, then these are verses that really go to the heart of what being a Christian should look like.

So my hope is that as we work our way through the passage, you'll be intrigued by Paul's words, and that you will want to find out why it is that he exhorts us, exhorts Christians to live as he says we should live.

And hopefully think that, yes, you can see why someone would want to identify as a Christian, that it does make sense after all. So let's dive in.

[5 : 14] Pleasing God more and more. Paul is speaking to a church that he is the founder of, the Church of Thessalonica. He didn't spend much time with them, but he knows their faith is authentic.

And we saw last week with Tim how much he loves them, and how they are his brothers and sisters. So when Paul says, we instructed you in verse 1, and then what instructions we gave you in verse 2, he's referring to the time that they spent together when the church was formed, and during the few weeks which followed, until he was forced to leave Thessalonica, as we can read in the book of Acts in chapter 17.

In the first two verses of this chapter, Paul declares again the Thessalonians' identity as Christians. He calls them again brothers and sisters, and says they already live in a way that pleases God. I'm sure these must have been really encouraging words for them, and maybe words that we might want to repeat to ourselves every now and then, just to remind ourselves of our identity, that we are Christians, and as such, we are already pleasing God, because of who we are in him.

And we'll see more about this later, about our identity as Christians. Paul, however, he doesn't stop here. Yes, you are Christians. You have been transformed by God, who has already changed your identity, and this was all his doing.

[6 : 46] Now you have to grow in your new identity. God has taken care of the first radical transformation. Now he wants you to take part in a more synergetic and gradual effort, the process of sanctification, by which we become more and more similar to God.

So the Thessalonians are not expected to just persevere. They should grow, improve. We ask you and urge you, says Paul.

These are strong words of exhortation. There is no room for the idea that this growth process is optional in any way. So what should this sanctification look like?

Purity. Sexual purity. Verse 3 reads, It is God's will that you should be sanctified, that you should avoid sexual immorality.

The same Greek word has been translated into English as sanctified in verse 3, and then as holy in verses 4 and 7. And what Paul means by using this word in these verses is that the Thessalonians are to be set apart, as we were just singing.

[8 : 02] Set apart, they have to differentiate themselves as Christians from the non-Christians. And how are they going to do this? By how they live. And the word live in verse 1 is literally walk in the original.

So the Thessalonians are to walk day after day in a way that looks different, in a way that looks holy. Although Paul begins by saying that the Thessalonians are already walking in a way that pleases God, he still seems to have much to say about how he expects his church to do it. He seems to be between two feelings. On the one hand, he's satisfied and happy about where the Thessalonians already are. On the other hand, he's either aware of some individuals who are struggling with sexual purity, or at the very least, he's concerned about the risks that this church is exposed to.

And who could blame him? These are young believers who just turned from worshipping the visible idols mentioned in chapter 1 to worshipping an invisible God in a city where sexual purity is basically unheard of.

I think sometimes we have this idea that as time goes by, each new generation compromises on ethical and moral principles more than the previous one. And as we grow older, we tend to think that if we keep going at this rate, there won't be any ethical standards whatsoever to rely on in the future.

[9 : 30] And when it comes to sexual purity, I think this might make somewhat sense if we compare ourselves to Victorian Brits, but certainly not if we compare ourselves to first century Thessalonians.

As Graham mentioned during the first sermon on this letter, Thessalonica is a big, diverse and religious city. And Paul is writing to people who live in a place where sexual promiscuity is considered not just normal, but even good by the local religious institutions.

So it is absolutely expected for men to have a very free lifestyle and to take part in sexual rituals at the local temples of all places. And I dare say most people in Edinburgh today, whether they're Christians or not, wouldn't think twice before labelling this sort of practice as immoral.

So as we consider these verses on sexual purity, let's not make the mistake of thinking they are outdated, because Paul had no idea how difficult it would be to strive for sexual purity in our age.

Yes, it is true that we live in a society where marriage is often ridiculed, where sex is seen more often than not as having very little to do with love, let alone with being a gift from God to be enjoyed within the context that God meant it for.

[10 : 50] But Paul is writing to people who are faced with the exact same temptations as we are. They took different shapes, these temptations, back then than they do today.

We're probably not tempted to enter promiscuous temples and are more concerned with the challenges of online porn these days. Nevertheless, it is the same desires of the flesh that the Thessalonians and us are fighting against.

Can we imagine how difficult resisting these temptations must have been for the Thessalonian believers? One day they're worshipping sexually promiscuous gods, and the day after this Paul appears, and the power of God's word is so amazing that it convinces them of their sinful condition. They believe in Jesus, they accept his forgiveness, and form a church. And then after just a matter of weeks, the church planter, and possibly the only mature Christian of their congregation, is driven out of the city.

No wonder Paul is concerned and sends Timothy to Thessalonica as soon as he can. How easy would it be for this congregation to fall back into old habits, especially now that he's not there anymore?

[12 : 05] 2,000 years later, I think we too can find ourselves in a similar situation as the Thessalonians when it comes to sexual sins and temptation. We too are at risk of looking around us and beginning to wonder whether sexual sin is that bad after all.

Maybe we think, it won't hurt anyone, and it's just the way things are done in our society. We too might have people who like to ridicule us for what they might see as a prudish sexual conduct. So I'm sure Paul would be just as concerned also about us falling back into old habits, just as he was for the Thessalonians. So why is Paul asking the Thessalonians and us to avoid sexual immorality?

Why do we achieve sanctification by learning to control our body? Is this maybe just a restriction imposed on Christians by a God who's perhaps a bit too demanding?

By a God who has unrealistic expectations when it comes to the behavior of his own creatures, after all? Certainly not. I think if we look carefully, these verses hide some wonderful truths which can turn an objection like this right on its head.

[13 : 20] The first truth is that being Christians defines our identity. It's our starting point. Verse 5 reads, Unlike the pagans who do not know God.

But we do know God. We do believe in Christ and in his sacrifice for our sins on the cross. And this makes us Christians. And one of the direct consequences of me being a Christian is, and in fact it has to be, it is God's will that it is avoiding sexual immorality.

Learning to control my body. My pure sexual conduct should flow from my identity as a Christian. If I am struggling with sexual immorality, this does not mean I am not a Christian.

Our human nature means we remain sinners, even as Christians. But maybe I should pause and I should question where my allegiance is. So how does God expect sinners like us to avoid sexual immorality?

This takes us to the second truth. God has equipped us with the Holy Spirit to resist temptation. He is not asking us the impossible.

[14 : 39] It might feel like it. Everyone around us might want us to think that we can't do it. But it is simply not true. I remember when I was in high school, the Italian MP in charge of education at the time and her team, they published some material that our teachers used during sex ed classes.

There were the explanatory booklets that one would expect with information about STDs and, of course, about contraception. And one thing this little book stressed more than once is that no contraceptive method had a 100% success rate.

Whether you were trying to avoid a pregnancy or trying to avoid contracting a disease, the only 100% safe system was abstinence, they said. And however scientifically accurate, this still sparked the rage of some journalists who were criticizing this material on national TV.

Their point was, why would you say something like that to a teenager? Teenagers couldn't possibly choose to go for sexual abstinence. So why mention it at all? Just focus on the other methods.

They won't be 100% successful, but at least they are a viable option. Well, just as if Paul had these journalists in mind, he says in verse 8, the very God who gives us his Holy Spirit.

[15 : 57] The God whose will is for us to be sanctified, and part of this sanctification process involves avoiding sexual immorality, as we just read, he is also the very God who gives us the Holy Spirit.

The Holy Spirit who, as we read in other parts of the Bible, convinces us of sin and fights against the desires of our flesh with us.

So Paul is not asking us to learn how to control our body by ourselves. As Christians, the Spirit lives in us, and it's a lie that we cannot overcome sexual temptation.

We can't by ourselves, but we can if we let the Holy Spirit work in us. A third truth that we can see in these verses is that sexual purity is God's will.

Paul spells it out for us in verse 3 and reminds us in verse 6 that God takes his will very seriously and will punish those who do not respect it.

[17 : 03] What we mustn't forget is that God is perfect, and that means his will is perfect too. And as such, God's will will never impose on us what we see from our human perspective as restrictions just for the sake of it.

Sexual purity, says verse 4, makes us walk in a way that is holy and honourable. It's not a restriction, it's a blessing.

Let me say it again. Sexual purity is not a restriction, it is a blessing. In these verses, Paul does not go into details as to what sexual immorality consists of, but the word he uses in the original is *pornea*, which commonly referred to any sexual practices which deviate from what God intended as the only context for sex, namely a man and a woman married to each other.

Sex is God's invention, and it is one of his beautiful blessings for us, but we need to learn to control our body and to practice sex as God intended, Paul is saying.

If we want sex to bring honour and holiness instead of damaging us and those around us. And this takes us to our fourth and last point of this section.

[18 : 26] Paul reminds us that our sexual conduct does not concern just us. It isn't only ourselves that we are accountable to, and it's not even just something between us and God alone.

Verse 6 reads that in this matter, no one should wrong or take advantage of a brother or sister. And it's a very direct reminder of the seriousness of sexual sin and of the impact it has on the people around us.

Paul is warning us that the damage sexual impurity leaves in its wake is huge for couples, extended families, churches, businesses, and the list goes on. So, to sum up these four points, why should we strive for sexual purity?

It is God's holy and perfect will for us, and a natural consequence of our Christian identity. But also, as we just said, possibly less obvious, but just as true, it is out of love for our neighbour that we should learn to control our body.

And how can we do this? Through sanctification. Which is a God-dependent effort on our part, prompted by the Holy Spirit, who will encourage us to satisfy God's desires, rather than the desires of our flesh.

[19 : 49] Thinking back to the two levels I mentioned at the beginning, personal level and community level, the second section of the passage puts the emphasis more on our belonging to

the body of Christ.

So, the header here, as we move on to verse 9, would be Dear Brunnsfield Evangelical Church. I wonder if you, like me, find it easy to see the link between sanctification and sexual purity, but perhaps find that the connection between sanctification and brotherly love is somewhat less obvious.

I personally was quite surprised to see how the last verses that Tim took us through last Sunday, and which introduce our passage today, say that it is actually through love for one another that holiness is maintained.

Chapter 3, verses 12 and 13, and I'm reading from the ESV where the connection is clearer, say, 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.

We can please God more and more by living a sexual life that honors him, us, and those around us, but also by loving our brothers and sisters.

[21 : 09] In this second section, like in the first, we see that Paul begins by stating that the Thessalonians are doing well when it comes to brotherly love, to the point that Paul does not need to write any instructions, as they already show love, not just for one another within their own congregation in Thessalonica, but for all churches throughout Macedonia.

What an amazing church. And yet, just because Timothy comes back with a positive report, it doesn't mean that Paul will not remind them to keep loving each other more and more.

Here, too, we do not know if Timothy's report mentioned any specific concerns about a lack of love, but even if that weren't the case, Paul clearly thinks it is worth stressing again that God wants us to love one another.

I came to this church through Toaster almost six years ago. Fiona might remember. I certainly remember her welcome. And what I found then was a welcoming church that showed love to anyone who came in and whose members clearly loved one another.

And as I look around today, I still continually see expressions of that same loving Christ that I was amazed to find back then. And I am so grateful to God for such a loving family.

[22 : 32] When people ask what keeps us in Scotland, Simone and I often say it's because we feel at home here. And the main reason for that is this church, apart from the amazing weather we enjoy, of course.

Nevertheless, Paul was challenging the loving church of Thessalonica 2,000 years ago. And he is challenging us, the loving Brunnsfield church, tonight.

He doesn't say, I do not need to write to you about love for one another. You're good at it. Now just take a sabbatical. He says once again, we urge you, do so more and more.

He doesn't say, try to keep it going, but do it more. And not just a bit more. He says, do it more and more. Let's think about these words as we go home tonight.

Am I growing a bit tired of loving my brothers and sisters? Do I just join the Rotas to serve my church every year, just because I feel like I have to? Or do I do it out of love for my congregation?

[23 : 36] Or maybe, do I think I love my brothers and sisters, but I'm not serving the church? If so, why is that? Is there a problem in my heart? Is it time to stop being shy and go get in touch with some ministry leader who needs help with their work?

Is it maybe time I pay a visit to that someone I've had in mind for weeks and show them my love? And our love for our brothers and sisters should even go beyond the walls of our own church.

The Thessalonians have been helping other churches in Macedonia and they're being praised for it by Paul. Perhaps prayer is one of the ways that we can show love for other churches in our city or Scotland.

And I have been really enjoying hearing about and praying for other churches in Edinburgh during our Wednesday prayer meetings over the past year or so. So do we see those meetings, and as we heard, the next one is happening this coming Wednesday.

Do we see them as an opportunity to obey God's commandment, to love our brothers and sisters? And I also wonder, does our love for each other go out?

[24 : 50] Does it transpire when we interact with the people outside, whether individually or as a congregation? Paul might have heard about some members of the congregation in Thessalonica who are living off wealthier members of the church, being convinced that Jesus will return imminently and therefore assuming that there is no point in working.

There are several verses in both letters to this church about this specific issue. Paul is aware that people are looking in. Christians were a target then, like we are today, and he experienced it firsthand, having had to flee that same city.

So Paul urges them to not stir even more what is an already tense situation, but to mind their own business and be irreproachable. The title of this sermon series is Set Your Sight on Christ.

And this is what he is telling the Thessalonians to do. Set your sight on Christ. Despite the difficulties, do not be a troublemaker, but work with your hands. Those who are looking in will respect you and the church for your work ethics.

It's a strong reminder that we have the responsibility not to bring Christianity into discredit, but to preach Christ through our lives, even through our secular jobs.

[26 : 14] So as we draw to a close, these verses remind us that the moment we accepted Jesus, his sacrifice on the cross for us, our identity changed from that of a hopeless sinner into that of a redeemed child of God.

And as such, as a child of God, it is imperative for our life to express integrity and purity that are appropriate to our new identity as Christians.

So the question for us isn't if we should strive for sanctification, but how to. One of the main themes of the letter to the Thessalonians is Christ's return.

And we will hear more about it in the coming weeks. So let's take these 12 verses from Paul as an exhortation to wait for the Lord as God expects us to.

As we head into a new week, let's keep our sight on Jesus and wait for his return with the help of the Holy Spirit, practicing personal purity, loving our brothers and sisters, and behaving honestly in the world.

[27 : 26] And let's always remember that we have brothers and sisters who are eager to show us the love of Christ. Because if it is true that we can bring each other down through sexual sin, as we read, it is also true that we can and should support each other in our fight against sin.

So if we are struggling with anything that was mentioned tonight, let's talk to one another. Let's give our brothers and sisters the opportunity to please God by showing us his love.

Let's aim for growth through sanctification, not for stagnation. And let's please God more and more so that waiting for Christ's return will have a purifying effect in these areas of our life that we've looked at.

Let's pray. Let's pray. Lord and Father, we thank you for your word and for your commandments. Thank you for the love you show us through these commandments. Thank you because you care about us. You want the best for us. We ask you to help us set our side in Jesus.

[28 : 35] Help us see the world through your perfect will. Sexual purity and love for our brothers and sisters please you.

And we make the choice tonight to work hard as we go home to work hard on pleasing you in these areas of our life. Comforted by the knowledge, knowledge that you are with us through the Holy Spirit as we fight our flesh and as we wait for the return of Jesus for that day when the fight will be over and we will be in your glory.

Bless us as we leave church tonight and as we head into a new week. Amen.