

2Corinthians 5.1-11

To Be Well Pleasing

Sermon #1 in a Series on Biblical Change and the Fruit of the Spirit

Preached by Pastor Glenn Durham at Dominion Covenant Church, Omaha, Nebraska, on May 1, 2005.

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Main Idea: *Those who know the grace of God in salvation must make it their aim to please the Lord.*

Introduction

Calvin and Hobbes (the comic strip characters) are playing in the snow in early January when Hobbes asks Calvin, “Did you make any resolutions for the new year?”

“Heck no” replies Calvin. “I’m fine just the way I am! Why should **I** change? In fact, I think it’s high time the world started changing to suit **me!** I don’t see why **I** should do all the changing around here! If the new year requires resolutions, I say it’s up to everyone else, not me! **I** don’t need to improve. Everyone **else** does! [Pause] How about you? Did you make any resolutions?”

Hobbes: “Well, I had resolved to be less offended by human nature, but I think I blew it already.”

Calvin describes one of the great problems in life: how do we work out a Biblical doctrine of change. The problem we have comes in both a horizontal aspect and a vertical one.

In the horizontal (in our relationships with other people), we find that we often are not really liked unless we change. We want to be accepted for who we are, but our friends and families (and even business associates and school mates) pressure us to change. At the same time, however, we are pressing them to change. Every husband and wife here has surely felt the conflict from such competing goals. Most wives want to love their husbands with grace and forgiveness and without demanding they be different. Yet, men do things destructive to themselves, their families, and their world. Many of you men want to change, yet you wonder, with Calvin, when is the world going to start changing to suit me?

This problem also appears in our vertical relationship with God. The central theme in Christianity is grace, is it not? (John 1.17: “the law was given through Moses, grace and truth came through Jesus Christ.”) We even sing: “Just as I am, without one plea, but that thy blood was shed for me....”

But when we come to God by grace, we find Him making demands for change: “Up until now you have loved your friends, but I tell you to love your enemies and do good to them that persecute you. Love your wives as Christ loved the church. Let no unwholesome word come from your mouth, but only what is good for edification, that it might impart grace to the hearer. Put off your old self, which belongs to your former manner of life and is corrupt through deceitful desires, and to be renewed in the spirit of your minds, and to put on the new self, created after the likeness of God in true righteousness and holiness.” I can quote many other commands which require change.

If God loves me as I am without one plea, why does He so on changing me?

During 2005, as I occasionally preach when Pastor Kayser is on vacation or traveling or has other pastoral responsibilities, I would like for us to consider together the “Fruit of the Spirit.” What is the necessary result of the work of God in our lives. And to properly begin that

series, I would like to use these 4 weeks that I have while Pastor Kayser is preparing for and traveling to China to lay the foundation for the fruit of the Spirit by having us think together about Biblical change.

Last summer my family and I traveled down to the Gulf to vacation with my parents at their beach home. One day as I climbed in my dad's truck, I noticed a foul smell. I had bathed recently, so I started sniffing for the direction of the stench. It seemed to come from under one of the seats. With all the motors and wires under the seat I could see nothing, so I had to reach under the seat and to find whatever was there. I grabbed a green and black, moldy, rotten, disgusting tomato.

I tell you that because when the Bible describes for us the fruit of the Spirit, God also tells us that the fruit we naturally produce (of our own passions and desires) is stinky, rotten tomatoes. In other words, to produce the fruit of the Holy Spirit, we must change. So I hope that a four week study on change and the process and why and how would well prepare us for specific sermons on the fruit.

With that introduction, please notice with me three truths about God and ourselves in relation to change.

1. The Grace of God Produces Confidence (2Corinthians 5.5-8)

Did you hear it? Twice? In verses 6 and 8: "we are confident."

Life is hard, is it not? And should we make it our aim, as our brother Paul did, to "be well pleasing to the Lord," more than ample forces will resist us, making it that much harder. As Hobbes pointed out in the cartoon strip, our own sin nature is enough to derail and discourage us. Add to our sinful (fleshly) desires, the world and the devil, with their distractions and temptations and it may seem hopeless to even talk about pleasing God, much less to actually do so.

But Paul says that those who know Christ can be full of confidence. From where shall our confidence (or courage) come?

First, we have a confidence **about our lives here**. We who are in Christ know that life is not vain, the struggle is not wasted. We have confidence to press on, confidence to resist the Devil, confidence to fight the good fight of faith. We have confidence that loving the Lord more than we love the things of this world will pay a rich reward. We even have confidence to change our rotten tomatoes for the fruit of the Spirit. Why? Because we know that we can do all things through Christ who strengthens us, and therefore, our labors in the Lord are not in vain. *Christ gives confidence to live!* Christians you can have confidence about your life here!

Second, you can have confidence about your life hereafter. Though this body be destroyed, Paul insists, we who know Christ have another body, a spiritual body, prepared for us by God Himself. And how do we know this? Because the Spirit Himself is a guarantee within us, testifying that those who belong to Christ will stand on His good works at the final judgment. Christ gives confidence to live; Christ gives confidence to die!

What does this have to do with change?

Simply this. If you are honest today, you know that not all of your life is well pleasing to the Lord, is it? But rather than despair for the many ways in which we fail, we have confidence that God's grace will work change in us. Can I ever please the Lord? No. Then why try? Because God says that He will give the grace to change, and if I am truly honest, I want that grace.

But you might say, "If I cannot change enough, how will I stand before the Lord on the day of judgment?" Not by becoming pleasing in yourself, but by the pleasure of Christ. If you

would be saved on the day of judgment, it is only by the grace of God in Jesus Christ. But that same grace which saves, also works “backward” into our lives to make us more and more pleasing to the Lord.

Are you confident this morning? Is your confidence of such quality that it covers both this life and the life to come? The grace of God produces courage to change because we are completely confident that His acceptance of us is all of grace.

2. The Grace of God Produces a Desire to Please God (2Corinthians 5.9)

In Biblical counseling, this is a key verse. Many of us get into trouble in our lives because our aim is off. Like a marksman whose telescope is not aligned with the barrel of the rifle, we are firing but not hitting the target. Have you made it your aim, in all things, to live well pleasing to God?

The Bible says that if you are a true Christian, if you have a genuine faith in Jesus Christ, then nothing pleases you more than pleasing God. Just as my kids love to hear me delight in their work and say, “Thank you for helping, you have done this so well,” the true child of God loves to please His Father in heaven! To those who know the grace of God, walking in holiness is not a burden, but our greatest joy.

So how do we do so?

2.1. How to do all things so as to please God

First, aiming to please God requires that we “walk by faith and not by sight” (verse 7). At Silver Dollar City in Branson, they have an exhibit called Grandfather’s house in which the walls and ceilings are built at crazy angles to the floor. As you walk though you invariably run into a wall because everything in that house is off kilter. Ball rolls up pool table! It is the same in this world. Everyday we see and feel much which argues against pleasing God. But the Christian woman is the lady who has resolved not to live by sight. She does not look around to see what is valuable; she does not take opinion polls to know what is right; she does not measure her faithfulness by other’s opinions. Instead, she does what God says without regard to how the crooked world in which she travels.

Second, aiming to please God necessitates that we struggle much with our sinful desires. Though not in this paragraph, in Galatians 5 (the passage which exhorts us to bear the fruit of the Spirit), God tells us that, “those who belong to Christ have crucified the flesh with its passions and desires” (Galatians 5.24). The flesh with its passions and desires are all of those feelings which argue against delighting to obey God. When we set up a mousetrap and put peanut butter in the center, the mouse’s passions and desires insist that he eat the bait. But the bait is death. Perhaps it seems harsh to some, but does not your own experience daily prove what the Bible asserts: your natural desires war against God and godliness? Shall we not study and strive to have God’s grace to overrule the demands of our sinful hearts which so desire to take the bait?

Third, aiming to please God implies a living and abiding communion and fellowship with God, in Jesus Christ, through the Holy Spirit. Jesus said: “I the vine; you are the branches. Whoever abides in me and I in him, he it is that bears much fruit, for apart from me you can do nothing.” The temptation when we discuss change is always to imagine that God will finally be pleased with me if I change. Yet the Bible says that Jesus is the only one with whom God is pleased. If your faith in Christ and His good works? Are you asking him to change you, or are you still striving to change in your own strength? Let me suggest a practical way to discern whether you are abiding in Christ. When you seek to please God, are you doing so just because it

is the right thing, or have you come to the place where you are obeying from joy—because you look to the cross and see there that God would not bring any circumstance or commandment into my life that was not the best for me?

Fourth, aiming to please God means that you will make slow, steady progress in a godly and holy life. Verse 7 notes that we “**walk** by faith.” We do not run—the process of change will be neither instantaneous nor easy. But neither do we sit—pleasing God requires growth. Walking implies change and development and advancement in our conformity to Christ and the commandments of God. Helen keeps a chart of our kids height and weight. We expect to see growth each year or we schedule a trip to the doctor. Why? Because growth is required for life! If you are not growing you are dying! Do you have a plan for growth and change this year?

Now these four steps give some structure and theology for change. I think the next logical question is: what do we do? What do we do to please God?

2.2. What Things to do to Please God

I am not really going to answer that question this morning, even though it fits here in the outline, because all of the other sermons in the series will seek to flesh this out.

What I would like to do, however, is to make a note about the role of practical application in sermons. One of the most common complaints made about sermons is that they are not practical enough. I want to receive that and I want you to keep pointing out to me when I need to do better, but I also need to remind you that practical application in the public preaching of the Word is difficult, at best.

Think about this. Today we have Pastor Kayser who has been a minister for much longer than I have. He pastored the church which hired me when I graduated from seminary! But we also have some here who are brand new Christians. So faithful preaching this morning must be broad and general enough to apply to both ends. Right?

So how do we get the general and public teaching into the personal and private application which changes lives?

God gives the answer it what has been called a 20-20 vision for pastoral ministry. Turn please to Acts 20.20 and listen to Paul’s explanation of his ministry in Ephesus.

Acts 20.20: “...How I kept back nothing that was helpful, but proclaimed it to you, and taught you publicly and from house to house....”

I could give you a sample list of things which please God. But is not what you really need from me and Pastor Kayser, our help applying what you already know into the practical everyday issues of life? Yes, we teach publicly—and that is critical. But we also counsel and disciple and email and talk on the phone and interact over meals, and thus teach from house to house, applying the Word of God in every situation.

What must you do to please God? Everything in the Word. And my aim is to please God by teaching you about that publicly and across the dining room table in your home.

3. The Grace of God Motivates Us to Please Him

We will see during the next three sermons that God has an interesting description for this process of casting off rotten tomatoes and bearing the fruit of the Holy Spirit. He calls it crucifying the flesh. The “flesh” in the Bible represents all of the sinful and selfish desires that I have apart from the grace of God and the presence of the Holy Spirit. Those sinful desires must be killed in order that Godly desire might control. But of course, putting to death the old self is painful. So why do it?

First, know that pleasing the Lord is an *honorable* calling. You bear the image of God. You are offered fellowship with the Creator of the universe. Practical holiness and pleasing God is a high and glorious privilege. If you go and look inside my car today, you will find that it is stuffed with boxes. Helen packed the fine china last week so that I could bring it over in the comfort of my car rather than entrusting it to the movers. We have had that fine china since we were married. In the same time, we have had several sets of “everyday” plates. The everyday plates are cheap and they chip and break easily. The fine china is actually stronger and more durable than the other. But when the kids need a plate for their mud pies, they only are allowed to take a chipped, everyday plate. Why? Because the fine china is reserved for an honorable calling. Do you not know, Christian, that you are the temple of the Holy Spirit? You were made for glory—let us not waste it on mud pies.

Second, know that pleasing the Lord is a *pleasurable* calling. No, it does not always feel that way, but we walk by faith and not by sight, and we know, by faith, that holiness is happiness. **Psalm 40.8**: “I delight to do your will, O my God; your law is within my heart.” When Matthew Henry was about to die, he said to a friend, “You have heard many men's dying words, and these are mine: a life spent in communion with God, is the pleasantest life in the world.” “For a day in your courts is better than a thousand elsewhere” (Psalm 84.10). “In keeping God’s commandments there is great reward” (Psalm 19). My goal is to so convince us of the pleasure of pleasing the Lord, that we would rather die to self than continue to live in selfishness.

Third, know that pleasing the Lord is an *eternal* calling. Some people are so confused about grace as to have no idea whether they are converted. Many imagine that salvation by grace means that God saves everyone who claims to believe in him. They then suppose that their lack of desire to please God does not matter. Nothing could be further from Biblical “grace.” In the Bible, the grace which saves is the same grace which makes us desire to please God. It is **not** by **pleasing** God that we **become** Christians; but when we become Christians, we desire to please God.

So know this: if you are unwilling to make it your aim to please the Lord, if you are not taking steps to make progress in the faith, if you are not in the Word and growing in obedience to it, then you can have no assurance of being His. Those who are His make it their aim to please him. For they know that there is no greater joy than to walk in obedience to his commands.