

Pleasing God (part 1)

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[0:00] Please turn to Galatians 6.8. Most of you have already heard how through my early school years I was your typical D student! As a result, I was incessantly the brunt of jokes and ridicule.

With the natural consequence, I was seeking approval from someone, anyone, at least in the school setting, which led to a rather unlikely, albeit brief, stint change of image that I had in seventh grade in one class.

It was a history class. Somehow the teacher caught my imagination and my desire to learn, and I began participating in class, which was very uncharacteristic for me.

And that led to him showing greater interest in me and being delighted in me. And that led to me seeing grades that I didn't know existed before.

And that happened for the whole semester. His delight drove me to work harder. I remember still on a trip to Florida, sitting in the back of our pickup truck, well, there was a cap over it, studying away on history for a test.

[1:15] You would have never seen me ever do that before, and I don't know that I ever did it after. Why was that? What was the thing that happened to me that drove me to all of a sudden enjoy?

I actually enjoyed that class, and I enjoyed studying for that class. Well, it's simply that I wanted more than anything to please that teacher.

And this experience has had a profound lesson on me in my adulthood, because as I've studied Scripture through the years, and as I've observed its truth in action for both myself and others, I've come to observe a universal principle.

God has made us with an insatiable desire to want to seek the delight of someone outside of ourselves. And in the next two weeks, we're going to be looking at the subject of pleasing God. And to begin with, I want to start with a very familiar passage, Galatians 6.8. Unfortunately, with everything else, as within everything else, sin has perverted this good design that God created in us to want to please someone outside of ourselves.

[2:38] And it's created it into an idolatrous, selfish, sometimes fear of man it takes on that form. And look at what Galatians 6.8 says in summarizing this idea.

The one who sows to please his sinful nature, from that nature will reap destruction. When all our motives are boiled down, all that is left is a sin-sick desire to please, ultimately, ourselves, our own sinful nature.

But to every one of his dear children, to those whom he has transformed into new creations, this desire to please begins finding its ultimate purpose in the source of the one outside of ourselves. And that we see in the end of Galatians 6.8. The one who sows to please the Spirit, from the Spirit, will reap eternal life. Now this begs a question.

The question is this. Is it possible to please God? A number of years ago, as I was speaking with a man, and we were sharing about the Lord, I brought up this idea that I was seeking to please God.

[3:56] And he just kind of looked at me queerly, and, you can't please God. I mean, how can sinful, depraved creatures please God? Well, prior to that time, I had never, I guess, gone through Scripture trying to prove out this concept and principle that we can, in fact, please God.

And so I didn't have a very good or strong answer for him, other than, you're wrong. But what it did do was drive me back to Scripture.

And this Sunday school is really the fruit of a number of years of just kind of jotting down on the back of napkins as I've gone along, looking at the places, as I've read through Scripture, as we've heard it preached, that God speaks about pleasing him.

But first, I'd like to address this question that he raised. Is it even possible to please God? And to try to bring this closer to home, while I would suspect that, among us, everybody would give a

resounding, yes, it's possible to please God, I still wonder if there isn't a nagging doubt, almost in our subconsciousness, that sucks most of the power of this precious reality out of it for us. It's kind of like struggle with many Reformed Christians with prayer. We all know that God commands us to pray, and every one of us will consciously declare, yes, we are to pray.

[5:30] And we know that we will please God if we pray, therefore, we pray. But I wonder again, how much our prayer is lacking in power because there's this nagging doubt in the back of our mind, if God has sovereignly done all things, how is my prayer really making a difference anyway?

And so this doubt sucks the power out of a precious truth of God's Word. And we're not going to be able to go into addressing the subject of prayer this morning, but I would like to address this subject of pleasing God.

Does God really look upon me with a smile of pleasure? Are there things I can actually do to solicit a positive reaction, a pleasing reaction from Him?

Listen to Romans 8, 7 and 8. The sinful mind is hostile to God. It does not submit to God's law, nor can it do so.

Those controlled by the sinful nature cannot please God. Well, first of all, right at its foundation, we can say that the unbeliever cannot please God. As much as the believer we believe in Scripture says that we can please Him, and we're going to look at that, equally, though, the unbeliever cannot.

[6:53] But then the question comes again, can the yet sinful child of God do anything that the omnipotent thrice holy God could possibly take any pleasure in? Since every one of my acts is tainted with my own sin, how delighted is He really in what I do?

Well, I'd like to answer it in two ways. And I won't embarrass him, but one of my brothers helped me greatly on this in a discussion not too long ago with this first way.

God already delights in His people. God already delights in His people. If I am one of God's chosen people, He's already delighted in me.

And this delight is not based on who I am or what I've done, but rather on His sovereign choice and purpose. If the Greens are listening to this, I apologize for I did not gain your permission, but I think Chris and Bonnie give a good illustration of this.

Even though they're hundreds of miles away, it didn't take long for all of us here to realize that they had a newborn in their family. And for anyone interested, they could go out to the website that they put up and we can look at movies of their newborn and view pictures until our hearts delight.

[8:19] So I ask you, why does a father and mother delight in their newborn baby? They haven't yet done anything profitable. They must be waited on hand and foot and diaper.

They keep their parents up all night, scream when they don't get exactly what they want, when they want it. What is there to delight in? Is part of it not that that child is their procreation, their offspring? The child is a product of their person? Or perhaps an even more powerful driver of delight. I can't speak of it through my own personal experience. But it's the case of adoption, where the parent has chosen to set their love on that child.

And in fact, this is one of the images God uses to describe what he has done for us who are his spiritual offspring. Now consider, every child of God already has this standing, one with their father. Listen to Zephaniah 3.17. The Lord your God is with you. He is mighty to save. He will take delight, great delight in you.

[9:34] He will quiet you with his love. He will rejoice over you with singing. This doesn't sound like a God who's just kind of, okay, I guess I'm a little bit pleased with him because so much of what he does is tainted with sin, but yeah, I have a little delight in him.

That isn't the picture we have of our Heavenly Father here. He will take great delight in you. He will rejoice over you with singing. How is this so? Why is God delighted with his children?

Because that believer is God's offspring. They are his child. Both in the sense of procreation, he has made them new creatures in Christ, but also in the sense of adoption.

He has chosen for his own purposes to take delight in them. If you are a child of God, he takes pleasure, special pleasure over you in the same way that you delight in your own child over all the other kids that might be in the neighborhood.

Let us just let that sink in and think about how we delight in our own children. It doesn't have anything to do with what is in them. It's because they are our children.

[10 : 49] But then secondly, there's more. And it's at this point that our human illustration breaks down because by definition, God is pleased with his works.

Now my child is not who they are because of any work I have done in them. But it is different with God. Listen to Isaiah 43.1. But now this is what the Lord says, He who created you, O Jacob, he who formed you, O Israel, fear not, for I have redeemed you, I have summoned you by name, you are mine.

What is it that turns a self-seeking sinner into a God-honoring saint? Well, it's nothing less than the supernatural work of God. Again, listen to Ezekiel 36.

I will give you a new heart and put a new spirit in you. I will remove from you your heart of stone and give you a heart of flesh, and I will put my spirit in you and move you to follow my decrees and be careful to keep my laws.

So it's not too difficult to understand why God would be delighted in his elect, for they are the product of his special working. He has transformed them into new creations.

[12 : 08] Ephesians 2.4 and 5, But because of his great love for us, God, who is rich in mercy, made us alive with Christ, even when we were dead in transgressions. It is by grace you have been saved.

Since it's all God's work that is producing righteousness within us, how could he be anything less than delighted, pleased by his own work?

Two more verses. 1 Corinthians 1.30 and 31. It is because of him that you are in Christ Jesus, who has become for us wisdom from God, that is, our righteousness, holiness, and redemption.

Again, notice whose it is. Though it's our righteousness, holiness, and redemption, it's from him. It's all come from him. Therefore, as it is written, let him who boasts, boast in the Lord.

And again, Hebrews 12.2, Let us fix our eyes on Jesus, the author and perfecter of our faith. When I do some work, or exhibit some attitude, with which scripture says God is delighted, I must remember that it is ultimately his working in me that produced it.

[13 : 23] Thus, he's delighted in me. Because it's his work flowing out through me. And he's glorified through it, because again, he's the author of that work. So, given that the believer can please God, that he can delight his God, let's next consider the place that pleasing God should have in the life of the believer.

Okay? We've established we can please God. We've established how, why we can please God, and that it is a real pleasure that he has for us, because it's his work.

But how big of a deal is this, really? How important is this subject for the believer? Well, as with any subject, we can't go wrong if we go to our Savior and look at him as our example.

So, I'd like you to listen to John 5.30, with Jesus speaking, where he said, By myself, I can do nothing. I judge only as I hear, and my judgment is just.

For I seek not to please myself, but him who sent me. I think we need to just let that verse settle in for a minute. How much of what we do, or don't do, is to please ourselves?

[14 : 39] At every one of these points, Christ's example beckons us to substitute that self-pleasing with an effort to please him who saved us and sent us into this world to complete his missions, which he gave us to do.

Again, Jesus speaking in a John 8. So, Jesus said, When you have lifted up the Son of Man, then you will know that I am the one I claim to be, and that I do nothing on my own, but speak just what the Father has taught me.

The one who sent me is with me. He has not left me alone, for I always do what pleases him. How prevalent was this concept of pleasing God in the life of Christ?

Well, he did or said nothing on his own. He always did what pleased God. I don't know about you, but we were taught in school to always, never, say always or never.

But here in Scripture, he never, ever did anything on his own. He always did everything to please his Father. I think it's helping us to start to grasp the pervasiveness that this mindset needs to be in our lives.

[15 : 58] Please turn to Colossians 1.10. Not only do we see the example in Christ, but Scripture exhorts and commands us to please him in every way.

As you're turning to Colossians 1.10, listen to two other short passages. Ephesians 5.10, find out what pleases the Lord. Find out what pleases the Lord.

And then 2 Corinthians 5.9, so we make it our goal to please him, whether we are at home, in the body, or away from it. And that's interesting. When we're away from the body, when we're in glory, it's still going to be our goal to please him.

Nothing's going to change. So whether we're still in this life or in the life to come, it is to be our goal to please him. Here we're given two different commands. Find out what pleases him.

Make it our goal to please him. In other words, pleasing God is not passive. These two commands demand action on our part.

[17:01] Finding out speaks of satisfying desire and curiosity. Consider how this desire is expressed in others as you listen to these couple of verses.

Matthew 5.6, Blessed are those who hunger and thirst for righteousness, for they will be filled. 1 Peter 2.2, Like newborn babes, crave pure spiritual milk, so that by it you may grow up in your salvation.

A sign of a child of God is that he's craving knowledge for how he may better please the Savior. Paul put it in terms of a prayer with the Colossians.

You should be turned there, Colossians 1.10. And we pray this in order that you may live a life worthy of the Lord and may please him in every way. So Paul prayed something for the Colossians with the goal being that they'd live a life worthy of the Lord with the end result of that, that they would please him in every way.

Well, what is it that Paul prayed? Look at verse 9. For this reason, since the day we heard about you, we have not stopped praying for you and asking God to fill you with the knowledge of his will through all spiritual wisdom and understanding.

[18:18] We can't please him until we understand what he wants. In other words, we have the knowledge of his will. Once we do know his will in a matter, it is only then that we may live a life worthy of the Lord and may please him in every way.

And what will such a life look at? I'm sorry, what will such a life look like? Look at Colossians 1.10, the last half. Bearing fruit in every good work, growing in the knowledge of God.

It's going to be filled with every good work. It will bear forth the fruit of the Spirit in everything we do. It will be ever increasing in the knowledge of God, which I find very interesting.

We cannot please God until he grants us spiritual eyes to see or spiritual wisdom to understand, as he puts it in this passage. But then, a fruit of receiving such knowledge is an ever increasing knowledge of him.

A fruit of knowledge is growth in more knowledge. I want to just stop for a moment here and qualify this point. Pleasing God has as its foundation hunger for God.

[19:29] We must be very careful to understand that Scripture is not speaking here of an abstract knowledge about God, but rather an increasing love for and intimacy with God.

The subject of knowing God, I found, is very closely linked in Scripture with this idea of pleasing God. The two are just hand in glove with one another. Again, listen to a few passages that express people who desired greater knowledge of God.

And you answer, is this knowledge about God that they want? More academia? Or is this a deeper intimacy with God? As the deer pants for streams of water, so my soul pants for you, O God.

My soul thirsts for God, for the living God. When can I go and meet with God? O God, O God, you are my God. Earnestly I seek you. My soul thirsts for you.

My body longs for you. In a dry and weary land where there is no water, I stay close to you. Your right hand upholds me. My soul yearns, even faints for the courts of the Lord.

[20:48] My heart and my flesh cry out for the living God. I think you'll agree this isn't increased academia that these people wanted, but they wanted to know their God intimately more closely.

And so then we ask, how intensely must we sink after God for such knowledge, for such intimacy? Listen to Proverbs. My son, if you accept my words and store up my commands within you, turning your ear to wisdom and applying your heart to understanding, and if you call out for insight and cry aloud for understanding, and if you look for it as for silver and search for it as for hidden treasure, then you will understand the fear of the Lord and find the knowledge of God, for the Lord gives wisdom and from His mouth come knowledge and understanding.

Listen to Jeremiah 29, 13. You will seek me and find me when you seek me with all your heart. So to this point, we've gone through the introduction.

Thus far we've explored the question, is it possible to please God? And the answer is a resounding yes. We've looked at the preeminence of pleasing God for the believer, and then we've looked at pleasing God having its foundation in an intimate relationship with God.

Using this foundation, I want to explore how do we please God. And the rest of today and next week we will be spending just going through many points on how we can please God.

[22:27] And obviously, you could take this subject forever. And you can almost go to any passage in Scripture, and you see just through His commands how we can please God. But I've attempted to focus it in on passages that explicitly or closely link it to the idea that this is something that's going to delight God.

So I'm breaking it down into two areas. First, how do I please God? The vertical focus. Vertical. And then secondly, how do I please God? The horizontal focus.

First, with God, thinking of my focus toward God. And then secondly, in my focus toward man. We are only going to get through a few today on the vertical focus.

So how do I please God? First, by being crushed and broken in spirit. By being crushed and broken in spirit. Listen to Psalm 34, 18.

The Lord is close to the brokenhearted and saves those who are crushed in spirit. Isaiah 57, 15. For this is what the high and lofty one says, He who lives forever, whose name is holy.

[23:39] I live in a high and holy place, but also with him who is contrite and lowly in spirit to revive the spirit of the lowly and to revive the heart of the contrite.

The Lord draws close to. He chooses to live with the brokenhearted, the crushed in spirit, the contrite and lowly in spirit.

Has God left my presence? Has He grieved over my life? Has He grieved over my sin? How do I draw Him back to me?

What will cause Him to again have delight in me? Psalm 51, 16 and 17. You do not delight in sacrifice or I will bring it.

You do not take pleasure in burnt offerings. The sacrifices of God are a broken spirit, a broken and contrite heart, O God. You will not despise. Sin drives us from God.

[24:41] No amount of penance, good deeds, or sacrifice will bring Him pleasure and draw Him back to us. Only a sincere spirit of contrite brokenness over our sin will return me to His bosom.

So if I'm living in a spirit of lowliness, the next way in which we can see in Scripture we will experience God's smile should come naturally from the first.

How do I know, I'm sorry, how do I please God? By doing nothing on my own. By doing nothing on my own.

Turn to John 8, 28. John 8, 28. John 8, 28. I previously read these two verses.

I'm going to re-read John 5, 30 as you're turning to John 8, 28. John 5, 30. By myself I can do nothing. I judge only as I hear and my judgment is just.

[25:51] For I seek not to please myself but Him who sent me. Now look at John 8, 28. The last half in verse 29. I do nothing on my own but speak just what the Father has taught me.

The one who sent me is with me. He has not left me alone for I always do what pleases Him. We focused previously on how for our Lord His focus was to please His Father but I want us to also notice that He says He can't do anything on His own.

Do you find this perplexing? That the omnipotent Son of God says He can't do anything on His own? Notice He doesn't use the word may He uses the word of ability.

How can this be? Well maybe I propose that Jesus could no more do something on His own a single act of independence any more than He could sin.

He's incapable of sinning and He is therefore incapable of acting apart from His Father for to do so would be sin. And therefore it is a correct word to say He cannot do anything on His own.

[27:16] How much do we do on our own? Do we realize that anything done apart from conscience dependence on our Father is an act of sin?

God recognizes the weakness of our human constitution. He knows we can't concentrate on one thing and be praying to Him simultaneously.

But at the same time He does expect us to be aware of His presence at all times. Just as maybe we're aware of someone else in the room when we're working with them. But more than this He expects our deliberate frequent calls to Him for guidance wisdom and help.

Turn to Joshua 7. Joshua 7 verse 6. I think this is a good illustration. Before every battle we read of Israel's inquiry of the Lord but before this first battle with Ai the name of the Lord is strangely absent.

Joshua and the people of Israel are indeed following God's general command to take the land. I think that's important to understand. They're not just going off on some rabbit trail doing their own thing. He's told them I want you to go in.

[28:31] Take the land. They're going in. They're taking the land. They've come to their next city here. I believe Jericho was the first city. And okay we're going to take this one. We're following God's command.

We're living in His will. But they never specifically came and inquired of Him and sought His guidance and blessing before going out to Ai. Ai.

And so now we come in Joshua 7 6. This is after Ai has routed them. The whole camp of Israel is completely perplexed.

And it says of Joshua, Then Joshua tore his clothes and fell face down to the ground before the ark of the Lord, remaining there till evening. The elders of Israel did the same and sprinkled dust on their heads.

And Joshua said, Ah, sovereign Lord, why did you ever bring this people across the Jordan to deliver us into the hands of the Amorites to destroy us? If only we had been content to stay on the other side of the Jordan.

[29:32] Oh, Lord, what can I say now that Israel has been routed by its enemies? The Canaanites and the other people of the country will hear about this and they will surround us and wipe out our name from the earth.

What then will you do for your great name? Notice in Joshua's prayer, it's a good prayer. He's appealing to God's name. This is for your name's sake, Lord.

He's completely perplexed. He doesn't have a clue what happened and what went wrong. And the only thing that went wrong was he didn't inquire of the Lord.

He didn't consciously come before his God and submit this duty, this act, seek God's guidance and his wisdom as they had done in other cases.

The Lord is not easy on Joshua. The Lord said to Joshua, stand up. What are you doing on your face? Israel has sinned. They have violated my covenant which I commanded them to keep.

[30:34] They have taken some of the devoted things and have stolen. They have lied. They have put them with their own possessions. That is why the Israelites cannot stand against their enemies. They turn their backs and run because they have been made liable destruction.

I will not be with you anymore unless you destroy whatever among you is devoted to destruction. Wouldn't it have been helpful had Joshua learned this word of the Lord before they went into the first battle with Ai?

But I wonder how often we are like Joshua. We think we're doing the Lord's business. but in reality we're doing it all through the arm of the flesh.

Then when unexpected results come we mourn we moan we're surprised before God wondering what went wrong thinking God's abandoned us when the whole issue is we haven't been living in this intimacy with God.

Remember I said knowing God and pleasing God are linked together. if we are living in an intimate knowing God relationship then everything we're doing is desiring his pleasure every act before we go into that act.

[31:59] We're looking up to his face. We're seeking his wisdom his strength his power wanting to do only what pleases him wanting to do only his business.

And so how could I engage in anything no matter how small without seeking to make sure is this your business Lord? I only want to do what pleases you and then to see that smiling face back down upon us.

Yes that's my business go and have the encouragement he will be with us. Well if I'm doing nothing on my own then I must be doing everything through his power and strength and that is the third way in which we can please God by resting fully in his power and strength.

Colossians 1.11 Being strengthened with all power according to his glorious might. Please turn to 2 Corinthians 12.9 2 Corinthians 12.9 The nice part about having two weeks is you don't have to rush to get through.

You just stop wherever you're at. When I stop living through my own strength an incredible door is open to me and energy flows from on high.

[33:31] I am strengthened according to his glorious might. What's the key that unlocks that door? 2 Corinthians 12.9 But he said to me my grace is sufficient for you for my power is made perfect in weakness.

Therefore I will boast all the more gladly about my weakness so that Christ's power may rest on me. Ultimately the key that unlocks the door occurs when this all power takes pleasure in me.

When he chooses to draw near to me because I am now weak and I am now emptied. As we've already considered he draws near to me as I become broken and contrite in spirit as I abandon self effort.

As I become weak as I do nothing through my own inept power that he is drawn to me and chooses to rest Christ's power upon me. Hudson Taylor observed, all of God's giants have been weak men who did great things for God because they reckoned on God for his strength.

Let's take another personal test. When I'm laid low, what's my response? When you're laid low, when you feel weak, what is your response?

[34:53] when I'm made to feel my weakness both spiritually or physically, does it lead to depression or boasting in the Lord?

Does the feeling of my weakness result in something like runner's rush? Forgive me for the illustration. You know, the feeling that runners get after they've really done a hard workout, the adrenaline that comes, it drives you to work even harder to the place where you're ready to collapse because the feeling you get at the end is worth it all.

Well, the illustration is lacking in many ways, but my point is to try to capture the fact that the runner constantly drives himself back to the state of complete exhaustion because of the resulting good that comes from it.

And as the weeds of pride and self-sufficiency start growing up all around me, do I find myself longing to be driven back to this state of brokenness and weakness so as to again experience the power of Christ resting upon me?

As I feel that power and I realize it comes because I am weak, I can do nothing of myself. And as I bask in that state of weakness and I see his smile and the presence of his power upon me, every time that power starts leaving, which inevitably is because I start becoming self-sufficient, I start becoming proud, I get that rush of wanting it back, of wanting to go back to the place that will bring me back his power and it's the place of weakness.

[36:40] The way up is always down. Psalm 84 presents another view of this path that leads to divine strength. Listen to Psalm 84, 5 and 7, blessed are those whose strength is in you who have set their hearts on pilgrimage.

They go from strength to strength till each appears before God in Zion. In this Hebrew poetry, we see parallel thoughts of those whose strength is in you and who have set their hearts on pilgrimage. pilgrimage. How is it that we have strength in him? We set our hearts on pilgrimage. And when we do so, we go from strength to strength until we reach the goal of our pilgrimage, to appear before Zion.

Here's the lesson. While weakness and brokenness is a requisite path to experiencing God's power, so is having a heart set on pilgrimage. The one focuses on a recognition of inward deficiency and need and one's dependency on God to meet that need, while the other, a heart set on pilgrimage, speaks of one who is longing to be in the presence of his beloved, of his God. Again, the tying together of intimate knowing God with seeking to please God. I think we're going to break here, but I would just exhort you all as you go through this week, to think on this subject of pleasing God and remember number one, we can please him and I would exhort you to begin, if you haven't already, a habit of closing your eyes, be it physically or in your mind and picturing your God, picturing Jesus Christ, who he says he longs to have us with him, that we might see him as he is, picture him as he is in scripture, and picture the fact that as you seek these various avenues by which we can please him, picture that smile coming over his face, picture the fact that he in fact is delighting in us, we can count on it as much as any other promise in his word, and allow that delight of him for us to drive you in the same way that a seventh grader is driven to study in a way that he didn't know was possible, simply because somebody else was pleased with him.

[39:21] There is a powerful motive here that God has given us, and it's involved with an intimate relationship with him.