11/08/26 Walking to Please God
1 Thessalonians 4:1–2

Welcome…

As we come to 1 Thessalonians 4, we move into the instructional portion of Paul's letter. For three chapters, Paul has thanked God for this young church's faith, love, and hope. He has reminded them of his ministry, his affection for them, and his joy upon hearing Timothy's encouraging report.

At the end of chapter 3, Paul prays that the Lord would cause them to abound in love and establish their hearts blameless in holiness at Christ's coming.

Now, in chapter 4, his prayer becomes an exhortation. What Paul has asked God to accomplish, he now urges the Thessalonians to pursue.

These opening verses introduce the practical instructions that follow concerning sexual purity, brotherly love, having the right work ethic, responsible living, and readiness for Christ’s return.

Read 1 Thessalonians 4:1–2…

Most of us learned to drive somewhere between fifteen and eighteen. Remember those first weeks behind the wheel? Your hands gripped the steering wheel at ten and two. Your eyes darted between mirrors. Every turn required concentration.

But eventually, driving became familiar—almost automatic. You could drive while talking, listening to music, or thinking about something else.

And here's something interesting. Once we become reasonably competent at a skill, we often stop deliberately trying to improve.

Many of us have been driving for decades, but that doesn't necessarily mean we're significantly better drivers than we were years ago.

I was reminded of this a couple of weeks ago while driving down San Gabriel Road at night. A car approaching from the opposite direction began repeatedly flashing its high beams at me.

And I remember thinking, "What is wrong with that guy? I don’t have my high beams on! Why does he keep flashing his lights? I've been driving for decades!"

And then, suddenly—BAM!

A deer darted in front of my car, and before I could react, I hit it. The impact broke my right headlight and knocked my front fender loose. And suddenly I realized that the other driver wasn't trying to annoy me. He was trying to warn me!

But I was so confident in my driving experience that I failed to recognize the warning. I had accumulated mileage, but that didn't necessarily mean I had grown in maturity. And something similar can happen in our Christian lives.

When we first come to Christ, everything is new. We eagerly study Scripture, pray with urgency, fight sin with fresh determination, and hunger to grow.

But as the years pass, the Christian life becomes familiar. We know the songs, the biblical vocabulary, and how to participate in a Community Group. We even know how to look attentive during a sermon.

Yet without consciously deciding to do so, we can become spiritually complacent. We stop examining our hearts carefully. We become less sensitive to certain sins. We grow comfortable with attitudes and behaviors we once recognized as needing to change. And before long, we settle for "good enough."

We may accumulate years of Christian experience without experiencing corresponding growth in spiritual maturity. But Paul will not allow the Thessalonians to settle for spiritual complacency. Even though they were already walking in a manner pleasing to God, he exhorts them to "excel still more."

And that is God's calling for every believer—to continually grow in holiness, obedience, and Christlikeness.

Main Point: In 1 Thessalonians 4:1–2, we find four gospel commitments for progressive sanctification that enable believers to walk in a manner pleasing to God and grow in Christlikeness.

I. The Conviction of Grace: We Are Spiritually Alive in Christ (v. 1a)
II. The Conviction of Purpose: We Walk to Please God (v. 1b)
III. The Conviction of Progress: We Grow More and More (v. 1c)
IV. The Conviction of Authority: We Submit to Christ's Commands (v. 2)

Let's begin with the first conviction.

I. The Conviction of Grace: We Are Spiritually Alive in Christ

Paul begins in verse 1, “Finally then, brethren, we request and exhort you in the Lord Jesus...”

“Finally then” signals a transition to practical instruction. Paul addresses the Thessalonians as “brethren,” reminding us that they belong to God’s family.

The words “request and exhort” communicate both pastoral affection and earnest instruction. Paul is not merely offering advice. He is calling believers to obey God. But notice that he does so “in the Lord Jesus.” The Christian’s obedience flows from belonging to Christ, not from an attempt to earn acceptance with God.

Ephesians 2:8–10 teaches that we are saved by grace through faith, not by works, yet created in Christ Jesus for good works. Grace is the foundation of our obedience, not an excuse to neglect it.

But Romans 8:8 teaches that those who are in the flesh (those without faith) cannot please God. Hebrews 11:6 declares, “Without faith it is impossible to please God.”

Only those who belong to Christ and are indwelt by the Holy Spirit can genuinely live in a manner pleasing to God.

So let me ask you an important question this morning: Are you in Christ?

Because before you could ever hope to please God, there was One who pleased Him perfectly—Jesus Christ. At His baptism, the Father declared in Matthew 3:17, “This is My beloved Son, in whom I am well-pleased.”

Jesus lived in perfect obedience to His Father. He never sinned, compromised, or failed to do what pleased God. Yet this perfectly righteous Son of God willingly went to the cross, where He bore God’s wrath against our sins. He suffered the punishment we deserved so that everyone who repents and trusts in Him might be forgiven and clothed in His righteousness.

And this is the wonder of God’s grace. What we could never earn through obedience, God freely gives through faith in His Son. We could never live righteously enough to earn God’s acceptance or obey enough to overcome our guilt.

But God sent His Son to accomplish what we could never accomplish. When we repent and trust in Christ, God forgives our sins, credits Christ's righteousness to us, and receives us as His beloved children.

That means, if you are in Christ, you do not obey God to earn His acceptance. You obey Him because, by His grace, you have already been accepted in Christ. You pursue holiness because God has declared you righteous in Christ and is now transforming you into His likeness.

And here is what I want you to understand: The same grace that saves us is the grace that sanctifies us.

Titus 2:11–12 teaches that God's grace brings salvation and instructs us to deny ungodliness and worldly desires and live righteously in this present age.

God's grace doesn't merely forgive disobedience; it teaches and empowers us to obey. And perhaps the apostle Paul provides the clearest illustration.

Before his conversion, Paul persecuted the church and opposed Christ. Yet Jesus graciously saved him. And what did that grace produce? Not complacency, but extraordinary devotion and labor for the gospel.

Listen to to what Paul writes in 1 Corinthians 15:10, "But by the grace of God I am what I am, and His grace toward me did not prove vain; but I labored even more than all of them, yet not I, but the grace of God with me."

Notice how Paul holds together two truths we sometimes separate. He says, "I labored even more than all of them." Paul worked hard, sacrificed, persevered, and pursued obedience. But then he adds, "Yet not I, but the grace of God with me."

Paul's labor was the result of God's grace working in him. Grace did not eliminate Paul's effort; grace empowered his effort. And that is why Paul can exhort us to pursue greater holiness.

We don't grow in holiness to obtain God's grace. We grow because we have received it. But if you have never repented and trusted in Christ, understand that the Christian walk doesn't begin with trying harder or making yourself acceptable to God.

It begins with God's grace. So, turn from your sin and trust in Jesus Christ, who lived the perfect life you could never live and died the death you deserved.

Receive by faith what you could never earn—forgiveness, eternal life, and reconciliation with God. And having been saved by grace, walk by grace, grow in grace, and seek to please the God who saved you.

God's grace gives us a new purpose for living. And Paul identifies that purpose in the point two.

II. The Conviction of Purpose: We Walk to Please God

Paul continues in verse 1, "That as you received from us instruction as to how you ought to walk and please God..."

Paul describes the Christian life using one of his favorite pictures: walking. Throughout Paul's letters, walking refers to the whole pattern of a person's life. We are commanded to walk in love, walk in the Spirit, walk in the light, and walk worthy of our calling.

The Christian life is a daily walk—one step after another, year after year. And notice its purpose. Paul says we "ought to walk and please God."

The word "ought" communicates moral obligation. Pleasing God isn't merely an admirable goal for especially devoted Christians. It is the responsibility of every believer. And it encompasses every area of life.

How we speak, work, spend our money, treat our families, and respond to difficulties should all be governed by the desire to please God.

Colossians 1:10 expresses the same idea, "So that you will walk in a manner worthy of the Lord, to please Him in all respects, bearing fruit in every good work and increasing in the knowledge of God."

But understand something important. Pleasing God begins with faith, not performance. We must remember that our obedience doesn't earn God's acceptance. It flows from the acceptance we already possess in Christ.

Think about the relationship between a loving father and his child. A child doesn't become a member of the family by obeying his father. He obeys because he already belongs. And when that child obeys out of love and trust, his obedience brings pleasure to his father.

Similarly, our imperfect but sincere obedience can genuinely please our heavenly Father because we belong to Him through Christ.

But how do we know what pleases God? We discover His will through His Word. Paul immediately provides an example in verse 3, "For this is the will of God, your sanctification."

He then addresses sexual purity, brotherly love, a proper work ethic and responsible living. God hasn't left us to guess what pleases Him. He has revealed His will in Scripture.

And this brings us to an important question: Who are you living to please? Every one of us is living to please someone. Some live for their employer's approval. Others seek the approval of friends, family, or people on social media. Still others live primarily to please themselves. But the gospel gives us a greater purpose.

Paul writes in 2 Corinthians 5:9, "Therefore we also have as our ambition, whether at home or absent, to be pleasing to Him."

And in 1 Thessalonians 2:4, he explains that his ministry was conducted "not as pleasing men, but God who examines our hearts."

When pleasing God becomes our highest ambition, the opinions of others lose their controlling influence. We can be criticized without being crushed, overlooked without becoming bitter, and praised without becoming proud. Because our greatest concern is whether our lives honor the Lord.

And this purpose of walking to please God transforms ordinary decisions into opportunities for worship. When you're tempted to respond harshly to your spouse, ask, "Will this please my heavenly Father?"
When deciding how to spend your money, ask, "Will this please God?"
When tempted to compromise your integrity at work, ask, "Will this honor Christ?"
When deciding whether to forgive someone, ask, "What response would please my Lord?"
When you're alone at night with your phone or computer, ask, "Would this please God?"
It's a simple but powerful question.

A life that pleases God is increasingly governed by the desire to honor Him in everything. It shows up in ordinary goodness. Hebrews 13:16 says that doing good and sharing what you have are sacrifices "pleasing to God." Pleasing God is often unspectacular: generosity, kindness, faithfulness in small things, endurance under pressure.

Walking to please God is a lifelong trajectory, empowered by God Himself. When we are told in verse 1 to excel still "more and more" that means no believer outgrows the call. Yet the effort isn't self-generated. Hebrews 13:21 prays that God would equip us, "working in us that which is pleasing in his sight." In 2 Corinthians 5:9 Paul made it his "aim to please God", knowing God supplies the power to do so.

So, walking to please God is rooted in faith, secured in Christ, empowered by the Holy Spirit, directed by Scripture, focused on God, and is an ever-growing obedience in the ordinary details of life.

Paul acknowledges the Thessalonians' present obedience, but he doesn't want them to become complacent. And that brings us to our third conviction.

III. The Conviction of Progress: We Grow More and More

Verse 1c continues, "Just as you actually do walk—that you excel still more." Notice those encouraging words, "just as you actually do walk."

Paul isn't writing to believers who have abandoned their faith. He's writing to Christians already walking in a manner pleasing to God.

Timothy has returned with an encouraging report of their faith and love. They're standing firm under persecution and persevering in the faith. And Paul acknowledges their obedience.

But then he adds, "That you excel still more." In other words, "I'm thankful for how you're walking with Christ, but don't stop growing. Keep pursuing holiness and becoming more like Jesus."

Because spiritual maturity is never a reason for spiritual complacency.

The Greek word translated "excel" means to abound or increase. Paul used the same word in chapter 3, verse 12, when he prayed that their love would increase and abound. Now he urges them to continue growing. And notice the balance in Paul's exhortation. He avoids two errors.

First, he avoids discouragement. He doesn't ignore the evidence of God's grace in the lives of the Thessalonian believers. He recognizes their spiritual progress.

But second, he also avoids complacency. He doesn't say, "You're doing well enough." Instead, he says, "You're walking in obedience. Now excel still more." This is progressive sanctification.

God has saved us, set us apart for Himself, and is continually transforming us into His Son's image. That work won't be completed until we're glorified in His presence. Until then, there's always room for further growth. There's always more sin to put to death, greater love and humility to cultivate, and a deeper knowledge of Christ to pursue.

Consider Paul's testimony in Philippians 3:12–14. After years of faithful ministry and extraordinary suffering, Paul writes, "Not that I have already obtained it or have already become perfect, but I press on toward the goal for the prize of the upward call of God in Christ Jesus."

If anyone might have believed he'd reached an acceptable level of spiritual maturity, surely it was the apostle Paul. Yet he acknowledged that he hadn't arrived. He was still pursuing greater Christlikeness.

John Newton, the former slave-ship captain who became a Christian pastor and wrote the song "Amazing Grace," expressed a similar perspective. Reflecting on his Christian life, Newton acknowledged that he wasn't what he ought to be or hoped to become, but by God's grace, he was no longer what he once had been.

That's the perspective of a spiritually mature believer. We look back with gratitude for what God has accomplished while looking forward with longing for greater holiness.

So let me speak to two kinds of people this morning.

First, to those who are discouraged.

Some of you may feel defeated in your Christian walk. You're painfully aware of your remaining sin, and you recognize how far you still have to go in becoming like Christ. Perhaps you've struggled with the same sins for years, and you're beginning to wonder whether you'll ever change.

But if you belong to Christ, take heart. God is at work in you!

You may not yet be what you ought to be, but by God's grace, you're not what you once were.

Look back and recognize the evidence of His transforming grace. Remember the sins He's helped you overcome, the desires He's changed, and the ways He's taught you to trust and obey Him.

And remember this: Philippians 1:6 promises that the God who began His good work in you has not abandoned it, and He will bring it to completion.

So don't grow weary or give up. Keep looking to Christ. Keep trusting His promises. Keep taking steps of obedience. And don't try to fight your spiritual battles alone. Ask a trusted friend in your Community Group to pray with you, encourage you, and hold you accountable.

If you're struggling, seek biblical counseling for the encouragement and help you need to continue walking in a manner pleasing to God.

Second, to those who have become comfortable.

Some of you have been Christians for many years. You know your theology. You've established spiritual disciplines. You faithfully attend church, participate in a Community Group, and serve in ministry.

And those are all good things. But here's the question: Are you still growing in Christlikeness, or have you become satisfied with where you are spiritually?

When was the last time you experienced meaningful spiritual growth—not simply learning something new about the Bible, but actually changing because of what you learned?

When was the last time God's Word exposed a sinful attitude you had grown comfortable with?

When was the last time you demonstrated sacrificial love toward someone who was difficult to love?

When was the last time you recognized an area of pride, selfishness, or impatience and responded with genuine repentance?

You see, spiritual maturity isn't measured merely by how much Scripture we know, how many years we've been Christians, or how faithfully we've served in ministry.

Spiritual maturity is demonstrated by an increasing conformity to the character of Jesus Christ.

And that's why Paul's exhortation is so important. No matter how long we've been Christians or how much we've already grown, none of us has arrived.

There is always more sin to put off, more righteousness to put on, and more of Christ's character to cultivate.

So let me encourage you to ask the Lord to reveal one specific area of your life where you need to "excel still more." And then, by His grace and through the power of His Spirit, take deliberate steps to grow in obedience to Him.

Perhaps it's patience with your children, humility in marriage, generosity, purity, prayer, or courage in sharing the gospel. Identify that area. Pray about it. Search Scripture. Share it with

a trusted believer who can encourage and hold you accountable. Then, by the Spirit's power, take practical steps of obedience.

Remember Philippians 2:12–13. Paul commands us to work out our salvation with fear and trembling because God is at work in us, both to will and to work for His good pleasure.

Our responsibility to pursue holiness doesn't contradict God's sovereign work in sanctification. It depends upon it. God's grace doesn't make spiritual effort unnecessary. It makes spiritual growth possible.

But how do we know which direction spiritual growth should take? Who determines what holiness looks like? Paul reminds us that the path of sanctification has already been revealed.

And that brings us to our fourth conviction.

IV. The Conviction of Authority: We Submit to Christ's Commands

Verse 2 continues, "For you know what commandments we gave you by the authority of the Lord Jesus." Notice the phrase, "You know."

Paul isn't introducing something entirely new. He's reminding the Thessalonians of instructions they'd already received. Much of Christian maturity involves faithfully applying truths we already know.

The word translated "commandments" refers to authoritative instructions or orders. It was sometimes used in military settings to describe commands passed down from a commanding officer. A soldier didn't receive those orders as suggestions or recommendations. They were clear commands that carried the authority of the officer who issued them.

And whose authority stands behind Paul's instructions? Verse 2 says they were given "by the authority of the Lord Jesus." Paul wasn't merely expressing personal opinions about Christian morality. As an apostle, he was communicating authoritative instruction from Christ. In verse 1, Paul exhorts them "in the Lord Jesus." In verse 2, he reminds them that his commandments carry Christ's authority.

The appeal is affectionate, but the authority is real. This is especially important because Paul is about to address sexual purity, personal holiness, and a strong work ethic—matters that challenged Thessalonian culture.

These were not human preferences. They were the commands of the risen and reigning Lord Jesus Christ. And the same is true today.

We don’t grow in holiness by deciding for ourselves what kind of Christians we want to become. We grow by submitting to what Jesus Christ commands us to be in His Word.

Let me illustrate. Some time ago, Paula and I were hiking a trail on the north side of Lake Tahoe. At first, the path was obvious. But as we climbed higher, the trail became difficult to follow. There were places where the route seemed to disappear. And then I noticed a trail marker on a tree. We could have followed whatever direction seemed best, but we recognized that whoever marked the trail knew the route better than we did. Those markers weren’t intended to spoil our enjoyment of the hike. They were there to keep us from getting lost.

And something similar is true of God's Word. Christ’s commands aren’t arbitrary restrictions designed to rob us of joy. They reveal the path of holiness God established for our good and His glory. Psalm 119:105 says, “Your word is a lamp to my feet and a light to my path.”

And Jesus prayed in John 17:17, “Sanctify them in the truth; Your word is truth.”

God uses His Word to expose sin, renew our thinking, correct our conduct, and transform our character. But we must submit to its authority.

Jesus said in John 14:15, “If you love Me, you will keep My commandments.” Genuine love for Christ expresses itself through obedience. That means we must be people of Scripture.

We cannot obey instructions we don’t know. So we need to read God's Word. Study it. Meditate upon it. But don’t merely read for information. Read for transformation.

I have a daily Bible reading plan that takes me through the Bible in one year. Each day there is a reading from an Old Testament book, a Psalm, a Proverb, and a New Testament book. Each day, before I read, I use a simple acronym to help in applying what I am reading.

I call it the SPACE Method for Applying God’s Word

When reading Scripture, pray and ask the Lord to show you:

SPACE Method for Applying God’s Word

S — Sin: Is there a sin I need to confess or forsake?
P — Promise: Is there a promise I need to believe or trust?
A — Attitude or Action: Is there an attitude I need to change or an action I need to take?
C — Command: Is there a command I need to obey?

E — Example: Is there an example I should follow or avoid?

These simple questions can help us move from merely knowing God's Word to actually obeying it. Not every passage will contain all five elements in the SPACE acronym.

But remember, the goal of Bible reading is to know God more deeply and become more like Jesus Christ. So don't just read God's Word. By His grace and through the power of His Spirit, put it into practice.

God has placed us in the church to encourage, exhort, and help one another grow in holiness. That's one reason Community Groups are so important. Share with each other how the Lord is helping us through His Word to walk in a manner pleasing to God.

As we conclude, let's return to where we began. Many of us have been driving for decades, but years of experience don't necessarily mean we've continued improving. And the same can be true spiritually. We can accumulate years of Christian experience without corresponding growth in Christlikeness. But God hasn't called us to spiritual complacency. He's called us to excel still more.

And in these two verses, we've considered four essential convictions for progressive sanctification.

First, the Conviction of Grace: We are spiritually alive in Christ. We pursue holiness because God has graciously saved us.

Second, the Conviction of Purpose: We walk to please God. Our highest ambition is to bring glory and pleasure to our heavenly Father.

Third, the Conviction of Progress: We continue growing in Christlikeness. No matter how long we've been Christians, there's always room for greater holiness.

Fourth, the Conviction of Authority: We submit to Christ's commands. Our spiritual growth must be governed by His Word.

But our confidence doesn't ultimately rest in our own strength or determination. It rests in God's faithfulness.

Later in this letter, Paul writes in 1 Thessalonians 5:23–24, "Now may the God of peace Himself sanctify you entirely; and may your spirit and soul and body be preserved complete, without blame at the coming of our Lord Jesus Christ. Faithful is He who calls you, and He also will bring it to pass."

What a wonderful promise! The God who calls us to holiness supplies the grace and power necessary for us to grow. And the God who began His sanctifying work in us will one day bring it to completion.

So, let’s not settle. Let’s not become complacent. Let’s not confuse years of Christian experience with spiritual maturity. Let’s walk in God’s grace. Let’s walk with the purpose of pleasing God. Let’s walk with a commitment to continual growth. And let’s walk in obedience to Jesus Christ.

And by God’s grace, let’s keep walking, growing, and excelling still more until the day we stand before our Savior and see Him face to face. Let's pray…