

Making God Smile

Hello and welcome back to The Little Church World.

I want to pick up a theme I began a couple of weeks ago which was all about becoming more Christ-like, a journey that begins when we first give our lives to Jesus and continues until we enter the Heavenly Kingdom. We are perfected only when we move from this life to the next, so life on Earth is a progression towards conformance to the likeness of Jesus, a process which is often called sanctification. Jesus is pleasing to God; in fact, God declares this in Matthew 3 verse 17 (NIV) in the following words: *This is my Son, whom I love; with him I am well pleased.* Therefore as we become more Christ-like, we become more pleasing to Him.

The title of this message is 'Making God Smile' and this idea may seem a little strange to some, and we have no evidence directly from the Bible that God smiles. In fact, we, as mere humans, can't make God do anything let alone make him smile. However, one thing we do know is that we have been made in His image; the Bible confirms this in Genesis 1:27 (NIV), which clearly states that *God created mankind in his own image.* When we are happy or pleased, we smile, so it seems reasonable to me that if we please Him, he smiles! I want to pick up the idea of God smiling when He is pleased with us and use this theme to look at some aspects of our Christian journey that we have not dealt with specifically in our messages up to now and other aspects that I feel are worth reinforcing. They are also all aspects which I believe will put a smile on God's face.

One way of identifying just what pleases God is to refer to our manual for life; namely, the Bible, and Paul's letters in the New Testament are an excellent source of wisdom on what pleases the Lord. So, I want to look for a moment at examples of passages and verses from Paul's letters that make reference to specific human behaviour that is pleasing to God.

In 2 Corinthians 5 verse 9 (NIV), for example, Paul, states: *So we make it our goal to please him, whether we are at home in the body or away from it.* A reasonable interpretation of this passage is that pleasing the Lord is not something we should give passing attention to; it should be our overall goal in life. Whatever we think, say and do in this life should be assessed in terms of the extent to which they are God-pleasing thoughts, words and actions.

In another example, Paul in Galatians 1 verse 10 (NIV), warns against being a people-pleaser as follows: *Am I now trying to win the approval of human beings, or of God? Or*

am I trying to please people? If I were still trying to please people, I would not be a servant of Christ. Now, the ideal situation is to be able to please people and please God but if it comes to a choice we must choose pleasing God rather than pleasing people. We should note that no-one who is concerned to please people at the expense of pleasing God can be His servant. When we live our lives trying to please people, people pleasing becomes our first priority and Christ second; this is as if we are ashamed of Jesus in comparison to man. We need to know that this behaviour has significant consequences conveyed to us by Jesus himself in Mark 8:38 (NIV). This is what He says: *If anyone is ashamed of me and my words in this adulterous and sinful generation, the Son of Man will be ashamed of them when he comes in his Father's glory with the holy angels.*

Furthermore, in Colossians 1 verses 10 to 12 (NIV) Paul states that we should *live a life worthy of the Lord and please him in every way: bearing fruit in every good work, growing in the knowledge of God, being strengthened with all power according to his glorious might so that you may have great endurance and patience, and giving joyful thanks to the Father, who has qualified you to share in the inheritance of his holy people in the kingdom of light.*

Now, there are a number of God-pleasing behaviours identified by Paul in this passage. First, there is the bearing of good fruit. We are judged by our fruit. No amount of pious sounding words replaces behaviour consistent with that endorsed by the Word of God. This is all about walking the talk. We're also charged with 'growing in the knowledge of God'. God wants us to know him intimately and the two main vehicles for this purpose are prayer and reading the Bible. I personally would add that Christians should be avid readers of Christian literature which conveys the ideas and experiences of those fellow Christians who have been gifted by God with the ability to write well. Note also that God loves overcomers; those with patience and endurance. Being a Christ follower requires patience and endurance because there are challenges during the journey. Nevertheless, we can take note of the fact that we are enabled in this endurance and patience by the power and might of the almighty God.

I now want to address the question as to why we should want to make God smile. This should be of interest to those watching who have not yet taken the leap of faith and joined the ranks of Christ-followers and should be a reinforcement and encouragement to those who are already Christ-followers. I then want to dig a little deeper into the important God-pleasing behaviours identified in Paul's letters.

Why Should We Want to Make Him Smile?

It's All About Grace

So, why should we want to please God? Well, it's all about His grace. We need to remember God gave his Son to die for us on the cross as stated in the often quoted verse from John; namely John 3:16 (NIV) which is as follows: *For God so loved the world that he gave his one and only Son, that whoever believes in him shall not perish but have eternal life.* Also, even when the dying Jesus could have called upon all the forces of heaven and earth to smite those who were crucifying him, instead, he prayed for them. If you have not yet experienced His grace first hand, I pray that you do so one day. Once you've experienced His grace, love and forgiveness, you will know that what you have experienced is beyond anything you can humanly comprehend, and I guarantee it will be a life changing experience for you. As a human race, we owe the Lord 'big time'. For those who are not yet Christ-followers, by His sacrifice, you have been given a chance to leave all your sinful habits and past actions behind, be totally forgiven and start a new life involving a total reliance on Jesus with heaven as the goal. If you're already a Christ-follower, you have been washed clean, born again and are on your journey to the ultimate prize, eternity with Jesus. For all these reasons, we should want to make God smile.

Bringing the Smile to His Face

More About Thoughts, Speech and Actions

I want to say more about thoughts, speech and actions. I noted earlier that according to 2 Corinthians 5:9, we should make it our central goal to please Him. This means developing God-pleasing thoughts, words and actions. This also means we need to test these thoughts, words and actions. The first test is to examine where our thoughts are coming from because thoughts result in words or actions or both. A relevant verse is 2 Corinthians 10 verse 5 (NIV) which states: *We demolish arguments and every pretension that sets itself up against the knowledge of God, and we take captive every thought to make it obedient to Christ.* Now given the emphasis on our internal thought life in this verse, the arguments referred to in this verse should not be thought of as external arguments. Rather, they are the internal arguments put into our minds by Satan, who is described in John 8 verse 44 (NIV) as: *...the father of lies.* Therefore, we need to be discerning and come against Satan's attempts to control our thought life. We can guarantee that any thoughts that lay guilt upon us for sins already forgiven, or which tell us we are not worthy or that tempt us in areas that we know are wrong, are most certainly from the enemy and need to be rebuked as not belonging in our minds. This clears our minds of rubbish to make room for God-pleasing thoughts and, thus, words and actions. When we have shed the enemy's thoughts from our minds, we are then in a position to conduct a more positive test of our thought life, the test being to what extent are our thoughts, speech and actions consistent with God's word. We have the Bible, prayer and the guidance of the Holy Spirit to draw upon in conducting this positive test.

In terms of speech, we need to recall Biblical warnings about the power of the tongue to lift or destroy our fellow man. Proverbs 18 verse 21 (NIV) states that: *The tongue has*

the power of life and death. Christ-followers, need to give life. Regarding action, it is wise to avoid spontaneous 'knee-jerk' responses to any situation because they are usually driven by the enemy. In this world, the default action is sinful because this world is, for the time being at least, the domain of the '*prince of this world*' as he is described by Jesus in John 14 verse 30. Thoughtful, prayerful responses to situations are likely to be God-led responses and should be the default approach of Christians. Even if caught by surprise, and an immediate response to a situation is required, the Christ-follower should be prayerful during the action taken. God understands our predicament when these situations arise.

More About God Pleasing Rather than People Pleasing

I want to look a little further into the issue of being a God-pleaser rather than a people-pleaser and refer back to my earlier argument that if we want to people please as opposed to God please, our actions are equivalent to being ashamed of God. I want to remind you, too, of the relevant verse in Mark, namely Mark 8 verse 38 (NIV) in which Mark recounts the words of Jesus as follows: *If anyone is ashamed of me and my words in this adulterous and sinful generation, the Son of Man will be ashamed of them when he comes in his Father's glory with the holy angels.* Aside from Jesus's sacrifice on the cross, which was the ultimate God-pleasing act, a powerful example of God pleasing rather than people pleasing is the story of the martyrdom of Polycarp. The story is as follows according to the website Polycarp.net:

"Polycarp was the Bishop of Smyrna. Now, I want to start from the quotation from the website. Polycarp's martyrdom stands as one of the most well documented events of antiquity. The emperors of Rome had unleashed bitter attacks against the Christians and Polycarp was arrested around 155AD on the charge of being a Christian -- a member of a politically dangerous cult whose rapid growth needed to be stopped. Amidst an angry mob, the Roman proconsul took pity on such a gentle old man and urged Polycarp to proclaim, 'Caesar is Lord'. If only Polycarp would make this declaration and offer a small pinch of incense to Caesar's statue he would escape torture and death. To this Polycarp responded, 'Eighty-six years I have served Christ, and He never did me any wrong. How can I blaspheme my King who saved me?' Steadfast in his stand for Christ, Polycarp refused to compromise his beliefs, and was killed for his faith, burned at the stake but stabbed to death on the order of the Roman proconsul to save his suffering."¹

Now, it's unlikely that we will be called upon to face the same test as Polycarp, but we can have a similar mindset. We are ashamed of God any time we choose not to speak up for what is right or speak out against what is wrong according to the Bible. We are ashamed of God anytime we shrink from admitting that we are Christians, and we are ashamed of God anytime we allow someone to make ill-informed statements concerning Him without springing to His defence. We are ashamed of God anytime we choose to please man at the expense of God!

¹ <http://www.polycarp.net/>

More About Producing Good Fruit

Earlier, when looking at the extracts from Paul's letters, I noted that pleasing God involves producing good fruit, and I'm convinced that the central 'good fruit' is concerned with what is known as the 'Great Commission'. For anybody who is unfamiliar with this term, the following passage is generally acknowledged to contain the Great Commission. This is Matthew 28 verses 18 to 20 (NIV) which reports the words of Jesus. This is what Jesus said: *All authority in heaven and on earth has been given to me. Therefore go and make disciples of all nations, baptizing them in the name of the Father and of the Son and of the Holy Spirit, and teaching them to obey everything I have commanded you. And surely I am with you always, to the very end of the age.*

This is not just about overseas missionary assignments which are important, but it is also about the need to remember that the mission field is just where we are right now. It's all about praying for and taking every opportunity to talk about our faith in whatever situation we happen to be. There's no greater fruit than to share your faith with others and be a vehicle for Christ in enabling another person to escape the gates of Hell.

Summary

Now let's just summarise. What a wonderful idea that we can actually bring a smile to God's face. As stated in Genesis 1:27, we are made in God's image and I'm convinced that laughing, crying, smiling and so on are just as much a part of God's responses to situations as they are ours. I could speculate further that the image is never quite as pure as the original, and therefore it is likely that God's emotions including smiling are far more intense than ours. Whether my speculations about smiling are correct or not, we do know from the Bible itself, exactly what behaviours actually do please God. If you are a Christian already, I trust this message has encouraged you. If you are still wondering whether to place your trust in Jesus Christ, I encourage you to take what is really a very small leap of faith that will take you into wisdom from deception and you can then take advantage of the fresh start that Jesus enabled you to enjoy through His sacrifice on the cross. Email admin@thelittlechurchworld.org if you are ready to take that step and would like to share it with someone or if you have questions you'd like answering first.

Now, once again I wish you a great and blessed week ahead. Goodbye from Hong Kong until next time.

Discussion Questions

1. This week's message contains the following verse from the NIV version of the Bible: *So we make it our goal to please him, whether we are at home in the body or away from it.* (2 Corinthians 5:9) What do you think the underlined words mean? (Note, you might find it useful to look at other translations of this verse)

2. Famous American pastor and writer, A. W. Tozer states: "I cannot believe in the spirituality of any Christian man who keeps an eye open for the approval of others, whoever they may be. The man after God's own heart must be dead to the opinion of his friends as well as his enemies. He must be as willing to cross important persons as obscure ones. He must be ready to rebuke his superior as quickly as those who may be beneath him on the ecclesiastical ladder. To reprove one man in order to gain the favor of another is no evidence of moral courage. It is done in the world all the time.

We'll never be where we should be in our spiritual lives until we are so devoted to Christ that we ask no other approbation than His smile. When we are wholly lost in Him the frantic effort to please men will come to an end. The circle of persons we struggle to please will be narrowed to One. Then we will know true freedom, but not a moment before."² Do you agree with Tozer? Why or why not?

3. In this week's message, the point is made that 'God loves overcomers'. Verses such as James 1:12 (NIV) reinforce this point as follows: *Blessed is the one who perseveres under trial because, having stood the test, that person will receive the crown of life that the Lord has promised to those who love him.* Why is it important to God that you be an overcomer?

4. What do you do to personally grow in the knowledge of God?

5. In the message the point is made that it is quite possible that God has emotions just like ours. But are they just like ours? In what ways might God's emotions be different to our emotions?

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31st January, 2014

² Tozer, A. W. (1991). *The Price of Neglect*, Christian Publications, Camp Hill, PA. pp. 141