

# Living to please others

---

## Living to please others

*A sermon preached at Poplar Baptist Church in the morning service by Henry Dixon on 21st October 2007*

We who are strong ought to bear with the failings of the weak and not to please ourselves. Each of us should please his neighbor for his good, to build him up. For even Christ did not please himself but, as it is written: "The insults of those who insult you have fallen on me."(Romans 15:1-3)

## Introduction

Recently, we have been learning what the apostle Paul says about handling differences between believers. These are differences about secondary matters which are not essential to salvation. The issue which prompted his teaching was a difference of view between believers about meat which might have previously been offered to idols. There were the "strong" who felt able to eat any kind of food, as long as they themselves had not been involved in any idolatrous sacrifices and were giving thanks in their hearts to God for good food. The other group were the "weak" who felt guilty about eating meat which might possibly have been used in idolatrous sacrifice.

We saw last time that those who are "strong" have a responsibility to "carry" the weak. We noted that the translation of the NIV is not as good as it might be at this point. It is not that "the weak" have got failings or shortcomings but weaknesses. They lack strength in particular areas. So it is not that "the strong" have to bear with "the weak" in their shortcomings! No, rather "the strong" have a duty to "bear" weaker Christians in the sense of to carry them, to support them as they are struggling with their Christian lives. We saw that this teaching applies not only to the issue of meat, but in all matters where there is a difference in the relative spiritual strength of various believers.

Today I want us to consider the end of verse 1 with verses 2 and 3 of chapter 15 where the apostle says that we should not live to please ourselves, but rather to

please our neighbours for their good. As we consider this passage, we need to look at what Paul does **not** mean, what he **does** mean, and why it is important that we follow this practice.

## 1. What this does *not* mean

The first thing is to consider what the apostle does *not* mean by saying that we should live to please others. He does not mean that we should give way to people's demands for sinful thought or behaviour. We should never compromise on what we know to be right in order to avoid being persecuted, in order to be more popular, or simply because we are afraid to say "No!" to people. Certain individuals are good-natured and amenable. They do not like to say no to anybody. But you cannot afford to be amenable or tractable with someone who wants to lead you into wrong behaviour.

The book for Proverbs warns us: "Fear of man will prove to be a snare, but whoever trusts in the LORD is kept safe." (Proverbs 29.25). Those of you who go to school can see this in everyday life. You will notice that there are certain individuals at school who are of a weak character. They always want to be part of the "in-crowd". They will always be in trouble, because the "in-crowd" is always against God. If you want to be in with people at school, you will land up doing things you know are wrong. If we conduct our lives worried about what people think of us, we will inevitably make wrong decisions.

This was the big mistake of the Pharisees, that they did everything for men's approval rather than for God's approval. When they gave money they did so "blowing a trumpet" so that everybody would notice their gift and think well of them. When they prayed, they went out into the streets so that everyone would see them and think how religious they were. Jesus said, "And when you pray, do not be like the hypocrites, for they love to pray standing in the synagogues and on the street corners to be seen by men. I tell you the truth, they have received their reward in full." (Matthew 6:5). We should not do our good deeds to be seen by people.

Jesus also warned us that if we do seek approval from other people and live for that approval, it is when we get that approval that we are most likely to be in error. Jesus said, "Woe to you when all men speak well of you, for that is how their fathers treated the false prophets." (Luke 6.26)

Paul said that in his own ministry, as far as the Gospel was concerned, his one desire was to please God and not men. He says in Galatians 1:10,

. “Am I now trying to win the approval of men, or of God? Or am I trying to please men? If I were still trying to please men, I would not be a servant of Christ.”

As he was preaching the Gospel there was no way he was trying to please people, no way he was trying to do anything for men’s approval. He knew that if he preached the Gospel in such a way as to try to win men’s praise then he would not be serving Christ. It is false teachers who are living in this sense to please men. It is the desire to please others and to avoid persecution which lies behind the denial of the Gospel of justification by faith alone. It is this which was already starting to come into the church in the apostle’s day. He said in Galatians 6:12 – 14:

Those who want to make a good impression outwardly are trying to compel you to be circumcised. The only reason they do this is to avoid being persecuted for the cross of Christ. Not even those who are circumcised obey the law, yet they want you to be circumcised so that they may boast about your flesh. May I never boast except in the cross of our Lord Jesus Christ, through which the world has been crucified to me, and I to the world.

This is the point – this is where false teaching comes from. A false teacher wants to make a good impression. That’s why, in Paul’s day, there were false teachers preaching a different “gospel”. That’s the reason it wasn’t good enough for them to preach Christ and Christ alone. That does not impress and please people. Therefore it was logical for such teachers to add onto Christ the requirement to keep the Jewish law and the need for male circumcision, so that their message might make a good impression. That’s where the desire to please men lands up – in a false message.

He spoke in his first letter to the Thessalonians chapter 2 verses 1 – 6 about how he sought to please God in his ministry, even though this resulted in persecution:

You know, brothers, that our visit to you was not a failure. We had previously suffered and been insulted in Philippi, as you know, but with the help of our God we dared to tell you his gospel in spite of strong opposition. For the appeal we

make does not spring from error or impure motives, nor are we trying to trick you. On the contrary, we speak as men approved by God to be entrusted with the gospel. We are not trying to please men but God, who tests our hearts. You know we never used flattery, nor did we put on a mask to cover up greed — God is our witness. We were not looking for praise from men, not from you or anyone else.

So we see very clearly that the truth that we should “live to please others” does *not* mean that we should adapt the Gospel or tamper with the moral teaching of Scripture so as not to offend people around us.

This is important because there is an idea which has gained very wide acceptance in our day, even amongst those who would consider themselves as Bible-believing Evangelicals, that the church should give the world what it wants. The idea runs like this. “If you want your church to grow, do a survey of people who live in your neighbourhood. Ask them questions like “What do you want church to be? What would help you to come to church? What would you like your local church to provide for you?” When you get the result of your survey, you “do church” in accordance with those results. This is the market-driven approach to church life. Of course, you will now have a church which is shaped by the world. If the world says it wants a church with lots of social clubs and activities, that is what you will provide. You will not mind that large amounts of time and energy are put into social activities. If your neighbours want loud music with flashing lights, you will let them have it. The world wants “touchy feely”, “sensual” religion that appeals to the senses, with incense, candles, holy places, prayer stations, pilgrimages, fasting, vestments, rituals, icons, statues, crosses, processions. Fine! You want to keep in with men and their good opinion so you will rush to give them exactly what they want. Your neighbours want a sense of the immediate and miraculous, with visions, dreams and healings, so let them have it! The world wants “homogeneous people units”, groups made up of just one type. So give them what they want! Give them “youth churches” and “senior citizens’ churches”, “middle class churches”, “working class churches”, “black churches” and “white churches”.

The world does not want to be “lectured” with “doctrinaire” ideas, so cut out the old fashioned sermon, delivered by one man at the front, six feet above contradiction, telling everybody what to believe. Replace that with presentations, dialogues, short and easily digestible “messages” with lots of stories, plenty of opportunity for audience interaction and copious visual input. Embellish these

chatty, non-confrontational, comfortable slots with power-points, drama and atmospheric touches – maybe some drifting smoke – to help appeal to your audience. The world wants comforting messages about how you can find personal satisfaction and fulfilment plus have lots of money and influence. So, this view says, let it have such messages at your church services. Scratch people where they itch and satisfy their desires.

The problem is, if your style and message is shaped by the world then, inevitably, you will land up in error. The world is quite happy for people to have religion, but hates the pure and simple Gospel, the message that all men are facing the wrath and judgment of God and that the answer to that wrath is only to be found in Jesus and his substitutory death on the cross. The world will do anything to avoid that message. The world hates Christ and the whole idea that salvation can only be found through him. Jesus said, "If the world hates you, keep in mind that it hated me first. If you belonged to the world, it would love you as its own. As it is, you do not belong to the world, but I have chosen you out of the world. That is why the world hates you." (John 15.18 - 19)

What should we do? Accommodate our message, our worship and our behaviour to accommodate this godless world? No. Stick to what God has revealed in the Bible.

In his second letter to Timothy, chapter 4, verses 3 – 4, Paul told Timothy just how bad things were going to get:

“For the time will come when men will not put up with sound doctrine. Instead, to suit their own desires, they will gather around them a great number of teachers to say what their itching ears want to hear. They will turn their ears away from the truth and turn aside to myths”

What does Paul tell Timothy he will need to do when this happens? Does he suggest that Timothy should adapt the message, or the style in which he conducts meetings, to suit the new age? Does Paul say “Show some imagination, reshape your doctrines and practices according to the coming age and its desires, otherwise Christianity might die out”? Certainly not! On the contrary he says,

In the presence of God and of Christ Jesus, who will judge the living and the dead, and in view of his appearing and his kingdom, I give you this charge:

Preach the Word; be prepared in season and out of season; correct, rebuke and encourage — with great patience and careful instruction....Keep your head in all situations, endure hardship, do the work of an evangelist, discharge all the duties of your ministry. (2 Timothy 4.1 – 2, 5)

No, people do not want the accurate Biblical message. But does that mean you change it? No! You preach it just as it is! Living to please our neighbour does not mean adapting the Biblical message to suit the people around us.

## 2. What it *does* mean

Thinking about the needs of others as we live our lives, we should live within the framework of the Christian Gospel and Biblical moral teaching. But, within that framework we should be willing to be flexible and adaptable, to willing to consider other people and their needs, as long as we do not by so doing break the commands of the Bible or deny the Gospel.

“Each of us should please his neighbour for his good, to build him up”.

The question we should be thinking is not what do I want , what will most fulfil me and my desires, but what how can I live to most help my neighbour? What will do my neighbour the most good? What will most enable my neighbour to be saved and to then be built up as a believer?

In the example of meat, the apostle is saying that whether or not we eat meat is irrelevant. What matters is whether or not our brother or sister is going to be built up. The Gospel is not at stake. No fundamental moral issue is at stake. So do what is going to help the other person the most. If your eating meat is going to make it difficult for the other person to have fellowship with you, or to act against their own conscience, then avoid meat altogether

This principle applies to every single area of our lives. The thought which should be paramount in our minds is not “What do **I** want to do to satisfy **my** desires” but .“What will most bring glory to God and what will be most helpful to other people?” Apply this principle, for example, to the use of your time. As you consider “What shall I do with this evening?” Rather than thinking along the lines of “I’ll watch a film because that will bring me pleasure and make me happy”, ask yourself if it is going to benefit others. Maybe that particular activity actually will help you to be better equipped in some way to be helpful to others! But you

might realise that, even though you would indeed have enjoyed that activity, there is a better option, a more loving thing for you to do which will bring more benefit to other people. That is what the apostle is saying. We should consider our neighbour for his good. Think about the area of money. You might consider making a particular purchase for yourself because it would bring you pleasure. The principle Paul describes in this passage points us to the option that it might actually be better to forgo the purchase we had first thought of in order to have extra money to benefit someone else. Are you spending to be purely selfish, or are you also spending money in such a way as to encourage others, to build up another person, to provide for someone who needs the help? When you consider the job or career you will do, are you only thinking in terms of what good the job will do to you yourself? Are you merely thinking in terms of the expensive car, plush house or exotic holidays which you will be able to buy if you work in a particular capacity? Yes, you might well be able to serve God in the job and be able to use your money wisely and to serve others, but the principle of this passage advises you that you might be able to find a different job which would be less well paid but actually would enable you to do far more good to other people. The choice of where you live is a similar example. Ask yourself "Where can I live in order to do the most good and help the most people? How will I be most useful and effective in building the kingdom of God?"

What about the clothes you wear? Are you just indulging your own desires and whims or can you bless others by the way you dress? Again, think about the way you use your tongue, especially the way you use humour. Are you only blessing yourself by the way you hold forth majestically or crack jokes about other people? Are you just trying to look good rather than to do good?,

"Do not let any unwholesome talk come out of your mouths, but only what is helpful for building others up according to their needs, that it may benefit those who listen." (Ephesians 4.29)

1 Corinthians 9.19 – 23:

Though I am free and belong to no man, I make myself a slave to everyone, to win as many as possible. To the Jews I became like a Jew, to win the Jews. To those under the law I became like one under the law (though I myself am not under the law), so as to win those under the law. To those not having the law I became like one not having the law (though I am not free from God's law but am under Christ's law), so as to win those not having the law. To the weak I became weak, to win the weak. I have become all things to all men so

that by all possible means I might save some. I do all this for the sake of the gospel, that I may share in its blessings.

If the Gospel is not at stake and if there is no moral principle at stake, then Paul acts in such a way as will put the fewest possible obstacles in people's way, so that they can hear the Gospel. He thinks about what will benefit other people more than what will benefit himself.

### **3. Why we should do this**

#### ***1) Because this is the essence of Christianity***

The whole essence of Christianity is that we die to ourselves and live for God and for others. Matthew 16.24: "If anyone would come after me, he must deny himself and take up his cross and follow me". The very heart of being a Christian is that you say no to your own personal desire where that conflicts with what God want you to do. Inevitably this will lead to some persecution and suffering. In the short term, the easier option is to go the way of self-fulfilment and follow your own personal desires, to look after Number One. God's say is to take up your cross and follow Christ.

Titus 2.12: "(The Gospel) teaches us to say "No" to ungodliness and worldly passions, and to live self-controlled, upright and godly lives in this present age,"

Galatians 2.20: "I have been crucified with Christ and I no longer live, but Christ lives in me. The life I live in the body, I live by faith in the Son of God, who loved me and gave himself for me"

What should we do instead of what "I" want? Live for the glory of God, seeking to benefit others to the maximum extent possible.

Have you got this principle of self-denial and self-sacrifice? Have you understood the need for a Christian to deny his own selfish desires for the sake of Christ and for the sake of his people?

Sometimes as one looks around the Evangelical Church in the twenty-first century, one gets the impression that this idea has not permeated at all. It seems that, for many, Christianity is a sort of "interest". People "receive Christ as their personal Saviour" and Christianity gets tagged on as another item on their



list of hobbies and interests. "I like windsurfing, hiking, cycling ...oh, and I like Christianity and go to church on a Sunday." But Christianity which truly accepts Christ as Lord also acknowledges that Christ has to be the centre of your life. Everything should revolve around his will. You have to submit to Christ as Lord in every single department of your life. Your life should no longer be a matter of living to suit your own agenda but a matter of asking what the Lord wants you to do with your time, energy, money, your mental powers. Not self-fulfilment any longer, but rather the overriding desire to fulfil the designs of Christ in our lives.

## ***2) Because this is what Christ did***

Our other reason for following the principle of preferring the needs and desires of others above our own is because even Christ did not live to please himself, but for the good of others. He, of all people, as King of kings and Lord of lords, could have done as he pleased. He had no obligations to anybody. As the Son of God, it was his right to make any demands, to fulfil his own agenda, to please himself. He owed no man anything.

Instead, Jesus fulfilled the Scripture which says, in Psalm 69.9, "Zeal for your house consumes me, and the insults of those who insult you fall on me." Romans 15.3 quotes the second half of this verse, emphasizing how Jesus put himself in the position where he would take onto himself the insults of men against the Father. There was a double substitution taking place, because God's wrath against man went onto Christ as he hung on the cross but man's hatred against God went onto him too. So there was Jesus, on the cross, bearing God's wrath against man as well as man's wrath against God. He was prepared to do that because of his desire to do his Father's will over and above his own interests. Remember his words in the Garden of Gethsemane, as he was looking forward into the horror of what he was about to go through, "Father, if you are willing, take this cup from me; yet not my will, but yours be done." Luke 22.42

He freely gave himself up for others. Philippians 2.2 – 8:

Do nothing out of selfish ambition or vain conceit, but in humility consider others better than yourselves. Each of you should look not only to your own interests, but also to the interests of others. Your attitude should be the same as that of Christ Jesus: Who, being in very nature God, did not consider equality with God something to be grasped, but made himself nothing, taking the very

nature of a servant, being made in human likeness. And being found in appearance as a man, he humbled himself and became obedient to death – even death on a cross!

We should have the same attitude. Ephesians 5.1 – 2 says “Be imitators of God, therefore, as dearly loved children and live a life of love, just as Christ loved us and gave himself up for us as a fragrant offering and sacrifice to God.”

Sacrifice means the laying down our lives for the sake of others. 1 John 3:16 says “This is how we know what love is: Jesus Christ laid down his life for us. And we ought to lay down our lives for our brothers.”

Have you learned this new way of thinking? The whole point of your life now is to be like Christ, to lay down your life for the sake of others, not to compromise like a jelly-fish on the Gospel, but in every other way to consider others as you live your life and make different choices.

If you have not understood and assimilated this principle, if you are not already striving to live in accordance with this principle of preferring others before yourself, one possible reason could be because you have

not yet been born again. Perhaps you are not a true Christian and you do not have the Holy Spirit. Are you a person who loves to use others, to score at their expense, who derives satisfaction from being perverse, awkward and obnoxious? You do not care about other people, as long as you, the Great Number One, are sailing pretty? Well, are you sure that you are saved? If you find yourself in any doubt, come to Christ at once. If you become converted, one of the first signs of your new life will be love for both God and his people. If you are not a Christian, you are heading for eternal judgment in hell. I would urge you in Christ’s name to come to God, plead with him for his salvation and that you might be born again of the Holy Spirit, that you might learn to live in such a way that you live for God and the benefit of others.

Unless otherwise stated, Scripture quotations are taken from the Holy Bible, New International Version Copyright © 1973, 1978, 1984 by International Bible Society. Used by permission, International Bible Society.

This typed up sermon is copyright © Henry Dixon 2008, Poplar Baptist Church, 2 Zetland Street, London E14 6RB, United Kingdom. It may be reproduced without

permission, provided:

- It is reproduced in full,
- The author is stated and this copyright notice is reproduced exactly
- No charge is made for copies.

All other reproduction can only be with permission of the copyright holder.