

Living to Please God...Really? By Kevin Carson

Are you ever discouraged in your walk with Christ? Do your good intentions and daily reality tend to go something like this person's?

5:00 AM

BEEP . . . BEEP . . . BEEP . . . BEEP. Get up. Start the coffee. Get ready. Quiet time – Reading. Prayer. Worship. Determination. Excitement. Anticipation. Breakfast. Hugs. Kisses. Off to work. Traffic. Anger. Curses. Discouragement. Despair. Hopelessness.

For many of us a day can follow this typical pattern: 1) Get up, get ready, enjoy some kind of spiritual disciplines; 2) get going, face the reality of the day; 3) and then to our dismay, our day is hijacked by sin, frustration, discouragement and despair.

Often the response also follows a typical pattern as well. Our thoughts sound something like this: "It is just 8:00 AM and I've blown today already. Today is a waste. Why not just wait until tomorrow and start again?"

Possibly, this pattern describes your life. You desire to do what's right. You desire to live life in God's honor as His dear child. You take Paul's desire as your own, you make it your ambition to be well-pleasing to God (2 Corinthians 5:9). You face the daily challenge of knowing you are to live your life in a way that honors God, yet you blow it often, early and consistently.

Your Effort Is Not Enough

It is impossible to please God by your own effort. Thankfully, God does not require your effort to be pleasing to God. Jesus, as the wrath-bearing sacrifice, died in order to reconcile you to God (2 Corinthians 5:18). By God's grace, your sins were placed on Christ and Christ's righteousness was imputed to you (v. 19). Paul writes, "For He [God] made Him [Christ] who knew no sin to be sin for us, that we [the believers] might become the righteousness of God in Him [Christ]."

Therefore, God's pleasure in the believer does not stem from the believer's attitudes and actions which make the believer worthy; instead, God's pleasure is in Christ's willing obedience to die on the cross and bear the wrath of God. Once a person is saved, then, the believer is made alive in Christ, raised in Christ, and placed in Christ where God's grace provides new life in Christ—as part of God's good work (Ephesians 2:4-10).

Not only did God place us in Christ and provide new life in Christ, but also the writer of Hebrews describes God's wrath as appeased, and Christ seated at God's throne making intercession for the believer (Hebrews 7:23-8:6; 9:12,15). So putting these passages together, God is pleased

with you because He is pleased with Christ and you are in Christ as a believer. This is the foundation.

God's pleasure does not stop with your position in Christ. God desires for you to grow and change into the image of Christ. God's agenda for you is change. He is equally interested at 8:00 AM in traffic when you lose it with the driver in front of you or the tailgater behind you. God's interest stems from His personal involvement in that situation to help you grow. God has made you a new creation in Christ; you are God's handiwork (2 Corinthians 5:17; Eph. 2:10). He continues to help you grow. Therefore, this pressure-filled circumstance is part of God's work in you as you live life in Christ.

This traffic, like every other situation in life, is where God has designed that you live out His good pleasure (Philippians 2:12-13; Romans 8:28-29). Again, the writer of Hebrews helps us understand this when he writes, "Now may the God of peace who brought up our Lord Jesus from the dead, that great Shepherd of the sheep, through the blood of the everlasting covenant, make you complete in every good work to do His will, working in you what is well pleasing in His sight, through Jesus Christ, to whom be glory forever and ever (Hebrews 13:20-21, italics mine).

Be encouraged, God is working in you what brings Him pleasure through Christ in order to make you complete in Christ in every good work (through the Word of God, 2 Timothy 3:17; through the church, Ephesians 4:12; through our own weakness, 2 Corinthians 3:9).

With gratitude we praise God for our position in Christ and the fact that we do please Him—not because of our effort, but simply because of Jesus and God's work in our lives. So, at 8:00 AM when life is not what we hoped, anticipated, or longed for, we still please God in Christ.

Your Effort Is Required Though

From the foundation of our position in Christ, it is necessary though to make a diligent effort to honor God or live pleasing to God in everything we do as believers. Paul proclaims that he puts his efforts toward pleasing God (2 Corinthians 5:9). Paul also challenges believers to work out their salvation (Philippians 2:12), to walk worthy of their call (Ephesians 4:1), to determine what is acceptable to God (Romans 12:2), and to live consistent with the Gospel (Philippians 1:27).⁵ So, although Paul clearly articulates the centrality of the Gospel as the foundation for living life in Christ, he also provides a call for every believer to live life honoring Christ in daily attitudes and activities. It is a both/and. Paul has a built-in tension where position-in-Christ and performance-unto-Christ serve as complementary ideas that work hand-in-hand in the life of the believer. It is important to work hard to live to please God while enjoying the fact that God is already pleased with us in Christ.

So, in the midst of 8:00 AM traffic, how is it possible each day to continue the diligent effort in light of regular failure? The reality is that traffic or countless other pressure-filled situations are

not going anywhere. Pressure we will have with us always. Then how do we move toward growth and change?

Well, in the same text alongside the challenge and declaration of the Gospel, Paul also provides for us motivation to keep trying. He explains that Christ's love for us compels us to keep putting in the effort (2 Corinthians 5:14-15). We understand that Christ demonstrated His love on the cross by dying for us; therefore, we choose to not live for ourselves but to live for Christ in gratitude of His sacrifice. In other words, an awareness of the Gospel (Christ's sacrificial death, Christ's present intercessory work, Christ's future return) provides for us the motivation to keep pursuing, pleasing, or honoring God in everything we do.

So, How Do You Respond to Discouragement?

When, at 8:00 AM, you have already blown it in your estimation, remember, Christ sits at the right hand of God making intercession for you. You sit with Christ in position. So then what do you do? At 8:01 AM, you seek forgiveness for your sin and thank God for Jesus, for your position in Christ, for His love and for grace. At 8:02 AM, you begin again in the power of the Spirit in Christ to make it your aim to please God in all that you do.

For Further Reflection...

What passages have you found particularly helpful to help you keep your mind on Christ and the Gospel as well as help you stay focused on the goal of living a God-pleasing life?