

Title: Pleasing Your Neighbor
Biblical Text: Romans 15:2-4
Teaching Series: Justified by Love
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Romans 15:2-4

Let each of us please his neighbor for his good, to build him up. For Christ did not please himself, but as it is written, "The reproaches of those who reproached you fell on me." For whatever was written in former days was written for our instruction, that through endurance and through the encouragement of the Scriptures we might have hope.

At the beginning of Romans 15, the Apostle Paul uses the same word three times, three different ways. That word is *please*. In Greek, the language of the New Testament, it's *aresko*. It can mean *to make peace with* or *to satisfy*. First, Paul says in v.1, *don't please yourself*. Then in v.2 he writes, *please your neighbor instead*. And finally in v.3 he tells us, *Christ didn't please himself*. So, he gives us the negative instruction, the positive action, and then the motivation or reason for behaving this way. And it sounds a lot like people-pleasing, *right?* Well, that's what I'd like to talk about today. I want to talk about people-pleasing. What it is. How we cure it. And what it looks like to center our lives on pleasing the Lord and not people.

Here's how we'll organize our time in God's Word ...

- The *nature* of people-pleasing.
- The *remedy* for people-pleasing.
- The *power* to please the Lord.

[Prayer]

Movement 1: The Nature of People-Pleasing

(Galatians 1:10, Ephesians 6:5-7, Colossians 3:22-24)

Let's start with a little bit of background. The Bible actually has a lot to say about people-pleasing. It comes up three times in the writings of Paul. Let's look at all three and then see how this habit manifests in society and in our lives.

The first place we'll check out is Galatians. Paul opens up his letter by defending his apostleship. Paul's spiritual credentials had come under fire in the young church and he wanted to begin by assuring them that his calling and message came directly from God. And so he draws their attention to his deepest motivations.

Look at Galatians 1:10. *Read Galatians 1:10 ... For am I now seeking the approval of man, or of God? Or am I trying to please man? If I were still trying to please man, I would not be a servant of Christ.* He's comparing motivations.

Seeking the approval of people, with seeking the approval of God. Trying to *aresko* people, with trying to *aresko* God. These are rhetorical questions. Paul is

suggesting his motivation to preach the gospel of Jesus isn't about the approval or pleasure of people. But rather, that of God. He claims that people-pleasing would undermine the very nature of his apostleship as "*a servant of Christ.*" That's noteworthy. Paul is saying pleasing people is a disordered allegiance. He's saying, people-pleasing is about serving people rather than serving God.

Secondly, let's look at Ephesians. Meet me in Ephesians 6:5. *Read Ephesians*

6:5-7 ... Bondservants, obey your earthly masters with fear and trembling, with a sincere heart, as you would Christ, not by the way of eye-service, as people-pleasers, but as bondservants of Christ, doing the will of God from the heart, rendering service with a good will as to the Lord and not to man ... Okay, so Paul

is talking to Christian slaves about their relationship with their masters. And he wants them to avoid behaving as "people-pleasers." It's a compound word in Greek, *anthrōpareskos*. It's the word for man or people (*anthro*) and pleasing (*pareskos*) mashed together. Instead of being people-pleasers Paul is inviting his readers to serve their masters, look at v.5 ... "*with a sincere heart.*" *Did you get that?* Alternatively, he describes people-pleasing as giving eye-service or being insincere. So the sin of people-pleasing is about duplicity. It's pretending. It's the fruit of a disordered heart. People-pleasing is something we do in order to be loved, rather than out of love.

Finally, let's go to Colossians. Colossians 3:22. Again, Paul is writing ... this time to a third different church. Think about that. People-pleasing was apparently an epidemic in the early church. So, Church in the Square, we should probably not be

surprised if people-pleasing rears its ugly head in our hearts and community too.

Read Colossians 3:22-24 ... Bondservants, obey in everything those who are your earthly masters, not by way of eye-service, as people-pleasers, but with sincerity of heart, fearing the Lord. Whatever you do, work heartily, as for the Lord and not for men, knowing that from the Lord you will receive the inheritance as your reward. You are serving the Lord Christ.

Okay, so this is interesting. Paul pretty much says the same thing here as he does in Ephesians, to the same kinds of people. Again, he cautions Christian slaves to be authentic in their service to their masters. And that true sincerity comes from remembering that they're serving the Lord, not people. Or, their serving is to please the Lord, not please people ... or, in this case, their master. Now, Paul builds on this logic. Notice, in v.24 he says,

knowing that from the Lord you will receive the inheritance as your reward. You are serving the Lord Christ.

This is fantastic. What Paul is saying is that people-pleasing is ultimately a cover for pleasing ourselves or making ourselves feel better about ourselves. Isn't it? Paul understands the human condition. He knows we seek to please people so that we will receive something in return: acceptance, peace, comfort, love, friendship, and more. And so to the Christians in Colossae he essentially says, *don't look for your inheritance or your reward from people.* You see, people-pleasing is faith in a disordered reward system. People-pleasing is an attempt to get something from people that only the Lord can provide.

Okay, so what's the **nature** of people-pleasing? It's a disordered allegiance. It's fruit from a disordered heart. It's faith in a disordered reward system. So, my brother and sister ... *are you a people pleaser? Do you feel more worried about*

what people think about you or what the Lord says about you? Do you serve others because you love them or because you want to be loved by them? Do you look to receive from people what only God can supply? That's people-pleasing. And the irony about people-pleasers is that they don't really care about people. Rather, their pleasing of people is a twisted way of centering themselves and garnering praise, attention, and acceptance for themselves. People-pleasing is about pleasing ourselves.

*Why is it so critical to understanding people-pleasing? Well, because I think we're all guilty of it from time to time and it really fractures our relationship with God and people. But also because the modern solution for people-pleasing often makes the problem worse. One Ph.D. candidate in psychology explained, "***To stop people pleasing, we can identify healthy boundaries that will get our needs met, put ourselves first when it truly matters, and practice proactive self-care so we are well-resourced when around others.***" While there's certainly truth here, biblically speaking it's a misdiagnosis. People-pleasing is not about making too little of ourselves. People-pleasing is about making too much of ourselves. It's not overlooking our needs for others, rather it's placing our need to be needed and loved at the center of our relationships. You see, the modern remedy reframes the problem as the solution. As author Lou Priolo explains, "***the people-pleaser struggles to do it with the right motive. Pleasing and glorifying God by serving others takes a backseat to serving others to promote and glorify self***" (*People Pleasing*). Understanding that begins to move us toward healing.*

The *nature* of people-pleasing is quite unexpected ... it's a disguised attempt to please ourselves. Paul calls us to something different. He calls us to neighbor-pleasing. So, *what ought this look like? What does it look like to take care of my neighbor in a healthy way that's not about me?* That's what Romans 15:2-4 is all about.

Movement 2: The Healing Remedy for People-Pleasing **(vv.1-2, Mark 12:31)**

Let's head back to Romans 15 now. And let's move back to v.1 to get appropriate context. *Read Romans 15:1-2 ... We who are strong have an obligation to bear with the failings of the weak, and not to please ourselves. Let each of us please his neighbor for his good, to build him up.* So, as we looked at last week, Paul is juxtaposing pleasing ourselves with pleasing our neighbor. Biblically speaking, our neighbor is anyone ... particularly anyone who is not a follower of Jesus. And throughout the Bible, we're told we have a massive obligation to our neighbor just like we're obligated to our brothers and sisters in Christ. Most famously, Jesus quotes Leviticus 19, explaining that the second greatest commandment is, *Read Mark 12:31 ... You shall love your neighbor as yourself.* We're supposed to care for others as if it were our own bodies, for our own survival and well-being. But in Romans Paul isn't just telling us *to* please our neighbors, he's also telling us a great deal about *how* to please our neighbors in the latter half of v.2. Namely, and in direct contrast to people-pleasing, pleasing my neighbor isn't about me. It's about

what's *good* for them. It's about what *builds them up*. And, that's always going to be costly ... it requires not pleasing self.

Pleasing our neighbors, like bearing with the failings of the weak, requires surrender and it requires faith. The first step in healing from people-pleasing is learning to decenter ourselves. *You see?* It's the exact opposite of the modern remedy. While in our society we're encouraged to heal from people-pleasing by taking care of ourselves, putting ourselves first ... Christianity offers healing from the sins and wounds of people-pleasing by resisting the urge to please ourselves. That's really hard, *right?* After all, *if we don't take care of our needs, who will?* But that's the only way to name the underlying issue. We're afraid. We're afraid we won't have what we need. We're worried we won't be seen, enjoyed, or loved. And so, we please people so that they'll please us.

First and foremost, this reveals an errant view of God. When we're worried that we'll be forgotten, we have forgotten who we are. We are sons and daughters of the Heavenly Father who, if you remember from our time in Jesus' *Sermon on the Mount*, **Read Matthew 6:8 ... *knows what you need before you ask him.*** When we know the Father sees us ... when we remember the Father never forgets us ... when we rest in the Father's love for us ... when we build our lives on the truth that the Father is pleased with us, we'll begin to enjoy healing from our tendency to please other people.

Healing is not about re-prioritizing ourselves.

Healing begins when we trust our Father to take care of us.

The fruit of this healing is the ability and foresight to please our neighbor. When we're released from worrying about pleasing people to please ourselves, we're also freed to please our neighbors appropriately. Paul says, *for their good or to build them up*. I think Paul is saying the same thing in two different ways here, as opposed to two different things. In other words, while people-pleasing ultimately uses people for our own good and to build ourselves up, neighbor-pleasing is about considering their good and their well-being. We're motivated by love for those around us. Once we're experiencing the healing work of the Father in our lives, and not inappropriately looking for it from others, we can extend this healing and help and care to others.

What's this look like? Well, there are a few areas in our life which we instinctively leverage for our good which may be really beneficial for the good and building up of others. Our resources. Our home. Our power. *What do you own? Where do you live? What influence do you have? Are these being used only for your good or also for the good of your neighbor? Are these being used to build up your life or also build up the life others?* When we know the Father has shared and provided generously for us, we share and leverage what we have to show love to our neighbor.

The **nature** of people-pleasing is that it's an attempt to please ourselves. The **remedy** of people-pleasing is not to re-prioritize ourselves, but to trust that the

Father sees and loves us. When we do that we're freed to share our resources, homes, and social power with our neighbor for their good. But, *how do we experience this power and transformation?* That's where Paul brings this passage to conclusion.

Movement 3: The Power to Please the Lord (vv.3-4, John 17:24, Philippians 2:5-8)

Religion tells us, *okay ... stop centering yourself so much and start serving and trusting the Lord and pleasing your neighbor*. It boils down Paul's message to a new command. But Jesus didn't come to simply update commandments.

Commandments never transform the heart. New rules just give the heart new tricks to play on itself. The gospel, however, tells us a story. That means it doesn't tell us what to do, at least not at first. Instead, the gospel begins with who God is and what God has done. Look at v.3. ***Read Romans 15:3a ... For Christ did not please himself*** *You see that?* Having given us a clear distinction between pleasing ourselves and pleasing our neighbor, Paul anchors his instruction in the person and work of Jesus Christ. Or in the language of our investigation today, Paul's told us the *nature* and *remedy* for people-pleasing, and now he's telling us about the *power* to please the Lord.

Bible translators identify the tense of the phrase "***Christ did not please himself***" as what's called a *constative aorist*. That simply means, what Paul is drawing our attention to is not a single act of Christ (like the cross) but rather to a character

quality of Christ (it's who he is). It's not just what he did but what he is constantly doing. He's one who does not please himself. Instead, he pleases us ... his cosmic neighbors ... his spiritual family ... for our good and building up, by serving his Heavenly Father. This disposition was produced in the soil of a deep trust of his Father's love for him. He prays in John's gospel, ***Read John 17:24 ... Father, I desire that they also, whom you have given me, may be with me where I am, to see my glory that you have given me because you loved me before the foundation of the world.*** He trust the Father sees and loves him, this frees him up to take care of us. This is the beautiful integrity of the Christian faith which establishes trust with the Lord. You and I are never called to live in a way Jesus has not and does not already live. We're called to trust the Father's care so we can care for others, just as Jesus trusted his Father so he could take care of us.

Are you with me?

Specifically, Paul quotes Psalm 69. ***Read Romans 15:3b ... but as it is written, "The reproaches of those who reproached you fell on me."*** King David wrote these words as a song to be sung in a worship gathering. It's to relate to a common experience in the Christian life, *receiving insults meant for God*. People are angry with God and they take it out on his people ... they take it out on his Son, Jesus. When people insulted God, hated God, Jesus endured those insults out of love and service to his Father and for the good of us, his people. And then Paul explains, ***Read Romans 15:4 ... For whatever was written in former days was written for our instruction, that through endurance and through the encouragement of the***

Scriptures we might have hope. So, he's quoting Scripture to both prove his point that Jesus did not please himself and to explain that he's doing that to encourage us ... to give us power to follow in the way of Jesus. *You see? Jesus is our example but he's also our power.*

While Paul is drawing our attention to Christ character, it's important for us to see the defining act of his care in the incarnation and the cross. Namely, Jesus considered his heavenly resources, home, and power for our good. Paul tells the church in Philippi exactly that. ***Read Philippians 2:5-8 ... Have this mind among yourselves, which is yours in Christ Jesus, who, though he was in the form of God, did not count equality with God a thing to be grasped, but emptied himself, by taking the form of a servant, being born in the likeness of men. And being found in human form, he humbled himself by becoming obedient to the point of death, even death on a cross.*** Jesus is giving us a picture of what it looks like to please our neighbor. He is our example. But he's also the power by which we follow his example. The power is found when we realize before we're called to please our neighbors, we were the neighbor in need ... the weak neighbor ... the lost, depressed, sad, angry, and broken neighbor who needed help and healing and care. Jesus emptied himself for our good ... to build us up.

As our neighbor, Jesus did not please himself. Instead, he used his resources ... left his eternal home ... and relinquished certain aspects of his power for our good. When he did this, he was beginning to undo the powerful grip that Satan, sin, and death have on our souls. He began to undo the lie that we have to take care of

ourselves. He began to wash away the shame that says I have to see myself because no one else will. He began to break the shackles that keep us bound to Mammon and stuff and money, that teach us to see people as useful tool not as beautiful image bearers. By pleasing us and serving his Heavenly Father, he empowers us to do the same.

You see, in Christ you no longer have to be a people-pleaser. Because in Christ, your Heavenly Father is already pleased with you.