

Pastor Steven J. Cole
Flagstaff Christian Fellowship
123 S. Beaver Street
Flagstaff, Arizona 86001
www.fcfonline.org

PLEASING GOD

Hebrews 11:5-6

By

Steven J. Cole

September 12, 2004

© Steven J. Cole, 2004

Unless otherwise noted, all Scripture
Quotations are from the New American
Standard Bible, Updated Edition
© The Lockman Foundation

September 12, 2004
Hebrews Lesson 34

Pleasing God
Hebrews 11:5-6, Genesis 5:21-24

Unrelated to the upcoming election, I was searching my files for an illustration of trying to please everyone. I came across this story about Senator John Kerry, from 1991, during the first Gulf War. A man named Walter Carter wrote to Mr. Kerry urging him to support the ejection of Iraq from Kuwait. He received two separate replies. The first letter agreed, stating the Senator's strong support for [then] President Bush's response to the crisis. The second letter, mailed by mistake, thanked Mr. Carter for opposing the war and pointed out that Senator Kerry had voted against the war resolution! ("Traditional Values Report," June/July, 1991.)

Newsweek (5/19/94) opened with an article recounting President Bill Clinton's legendary ability to lead people "to believe that he agrees with them entirely... without ever quite committing himself to their position... a gift given only to the best politicians." To be fair, many examples could be found of Republican politicians being people-pleasers!

But unfortunately, many pastors try to ride the fence in an attempt to please everyone. There is a proper sense, of course, in which we should seek to please people, not being needlessly offensive (1 Cor. 10:32-33). We should be gracious, kind, and not quarrelsome, even when we must correct those in error (2 Tim. 2:24-26). We should seek to please others in order to build them up in Christ (Rom. 15:2). But having said all of that, there is a much more important aim than pleasing people, namely, to please God, who examines our hearts (1 Thess. 2:4). Sometimes pleasing God inevitably means *displeasing* people that are opposed to God.

If we please everyone else, but God is ultimately displeased with our lives, woe to us! On the other hand, if we offend others, but God is finally pleased, we will enter into His eternal joy. The author of Hebrews directs us to the life of Enoch, a man who pleased God. He lived in the seventh generation from Adam. It was an evil time on earth, just before the judgment of the flood. Jude 14-15 reports that Enoch prophesied to his evil generation,

“Behold, the Lord came with many thousands of His holy ones, to execute judgment upon all, and to convict all the ungodly of all their ungodly deeds which they have done in an ungodly way, and of all the harsh things which ungodly sinners have spoken against Him.” That could *not* have been a popular message! And yet Enoch pleased God so much that God took him straight to heaven so that he did not see death. His story teaches a vital lesson, that...

A life of faith pleases God.

We should learn three things from these verses:

1. Our number one aim in life should be to please God.

If you love someone, you aim to please him or her. The foremost commandment is that we should love God with all of our heart, soul, mind, and strength (Mark 12:30). It is impossible to obey that commandment without seeking to please God. Note two things in this regard:

- A. Pleasing God begins on the heart (or thought) level.

We can fake out people by being nice on the surface, while in our hearts we don't care about them. But God knows our every thought, and so we can't fake Him out! Even if we fulfill a list of religious duties or live outwardly moral lives, God judges the thoughts and intentions of our hearts (Heb. 4:12-13). So if you want to please God, you must judge all sin on the thought level and take every thought captive to the obedience of Christ (Mark 7:20-23; 2 Cor. 10:5). God condemns those who honor Him with their lips, while their hearts are far from Him (Mark 7:6). This is essential: *Aim to please God with your thought life and your emotional life!*

- B. Pleasing God requires consistently drawing near to Him and seeking Him.

Verse 6 mentions the one “who comes to God.” *Comes to* translates the same word that is translated *draw near* in 4:16, where we are exhorted to “*draw near* to the throne of grace.” In 7:25, the author says that Jesus “is able to save forever those who *draw near* to God through Him.” In 10:1, he states that the Old Testament sacrifices could never “make perfect those who *draw near*.” In 10:22, he exhorts us to “*draw near* with a sincere heart in full assurance of faith, having our hearts sprinkled clean from an evil con-

science." So in 11:6, it should be translated, "he who *draws near* to God." It means drawing near to God in worship and prayer.

Verse 6 also mentions "those who seek Him." The KJV translates it, "diligently seek," but scholars are divided about whether it has this intensive sense. It is parallel here to *drawing near* to God. The Hebrew word that is often translated *seek* originally meant to beat a path under foot. The idea was that if you sought your neighbor often, you would beat a path through the grass to his door. We should seek God so often that we beat a path to Him!

Drawing near to God and seeking Him are deliberate, intentional activities. You do not accidentally draw near to the Holy One. No one ever seeks God apart from God's first choosing and calling that person (Rom. 3:11; 1 Cor. 1:26-31). But once God has called you to salvation and you have responded in faith to His call, you must exert deliberate effort and intention to seek the Lord. Make it your priority and aim in life!

Note also that we are to *seek God Himself*, not just the rewards that He can give us. Knowing the living God *is* our reward. The Lord promised Abraham, "Do not fear, Abram, I am a shield to you; your very great reward" (Gen. 15:1, NASB, margin). In the context of explaining that the priests would not have any inheritance in the land, God promised Aaron, "I am your portion and your inheritance among the sons of Israel" (Num. 18:20). The psalmist proclaimed (Ps. 73:25-26), "Whom have I in heaven, *but You?* And besides You, I desire nothing on earth. My flesh and my heart may fail, but God is the strength of my heart and my portion forever."

F. B. Meyer wrote, "To have God is to have all, though bereft of everything. To be destitute of God is to be bereft of everything, though having all" (*Abraham* [Christian Literature Crusade], p. 63). Donald Barnhouse observed, "God's method of supplying our need is to give us fresh knowledge of Himself, for every need can be met by seeing Him" (*Genesis* [Zondervan], 1:105).

So our number one aim in life should be to please God from the heart. To do so, we must consistently draw near to Him and seek Him. But our text mentions an essential for pleasing God:

2. Faith is essential to please God.

Two words underscore this in verse 6: *impossible* and *must*. Faith is not just something nice, if you care to practice it. It is *impossible* to please God without faith. You *must* believe that God is and the He is a rewarder of those who seek Him.

We know this on a human level. If someone does not believe you or questions your integrity, you are not pleased with that person. In effect, they're calling you a liar. If you have spoken the truth, to have someone call you a liar is not pleasing.

How much more does it displease the God of truth, who cannot lie, when we call Him a liar by doubting His word! What could be more insulting? What could be more arrogant than to imply that we know more than God does? When we do not trust Him, we are in effect saying, "God, You're wrong and I'm right!" How impudent! So, if we want to please God, we must learn what faith means, and live by faith on a daily basis. The author mentions two aspects of God-pleasing faith:

A. Faith must believe that God is.

Why does the author start with believing in God's existence with Jews, who obviously believed that? In fact, even the pagan poet, Cicero, observed, "There is... no nation so barbarous, no people so savage, that they have not a deep-seated conviction that there is a God" (cited by John Calvin, *The Institutes of the Christian Religion* [Westminster Press], 1:44). So why does the author start with this basic matter?

For one thing, his readers were under the imminent threat of persecution. When you have done what is right and get persecuted for it, the devil comes to you with doubts about God. He whispers in your ear, "You repented of your sins and trusted in God, but look what has happened to you now! If there were a God in heaven, would He let you be treated in this way?"

Although Jesus did not yield to the temptation, Satan threw this at Him while He hung upon the cross. The chief priests, scribes, and elders mocked Him, saying, "He trusts in God; let God rescue Him now, if He delights in Him" (Matt. 27:43). The enemy was trying to get Jesus to doubt God's love, His power, or even His very existence, because a God who is unloving and weak is not really God at all!

When the author says that we must believe that “God is,” he means, “We must believe that God is exactly who His Word reveals Him to be.” Sinful people cannot know the living and true God apart from His revealing Himself to them. To believe in God “as you conceive Him to be” is to believe in an idol, a god of your own making and imagination. We must believe in the God who is not only the God of love, but also of judgment, because that is how He has revealed Himself. He is not only a God of mercy and kindness, but also of holiness and wrath. So when the author says that we must believe that God is, he is saying, “Believe in the God who reveals Himself in His Word.”

Why would he say that? Because when we are under persecution or severe trials, it is easy to invent a friendlier “god” who treats us more nicely! It is not so easy to bow before the God of the Bible, who is sovereign over every trial. When God permits your ten children to be killed in a common accident and strips you of your wealth and health, it is not easy to join Job in proclaiming, “The Lord gave and the Lord has taken away. Blessed be the name of the Lord” (Job 1:21). Yet at just such times, we must believe, *God is!*

Perhaps you’re wondering, “How do you hang on to faith in God at such difficult times?” I always ask, “What’s the alternative?” In John 6, Jesus taught some difficult doctrines that caused many of His disciples to turn away from following Him. Rather than softening the teaching, He turned to the twelve and asked, “You do not want to go away also, do you?” Peter gave a classic answer, “Lord, to whom shall we go? You have words of eternal life. We have believed and have come to know that You are the Holy One of God” (John 6:67-68). You may not like the trials or the teaching, but where else are you going to go? The world certainly offers no satisfying answers! If you turn your back on God in times of trials, you have just robbed yourself of the only source of hope and comfort! Faith holds on, believing that *God is!*

B. Faith must believe that God is a rewarder of those who seek Him.

This has to do with God’s goodness or justice, as well as His power. In times of trial, if Satan can’t get you to doubt God’s existence, he will try to get you to doubt God’s goodness, His fairness, or His power. “If God loves you and cares about you, why is this

terrible trial happening to you? Maybe God cares, but He can't do anything about it." Faith takes a stand against this temptation, believing, "God *will* reward me because I have sought Him. God *does* love me and care for me, even though I'm suffering. God *is* able to deliver me, if that is His purpose."

How do we do this? Do we just say it over and over until we convince ourselves, against all of our circumstances, that it is true? Rehearsing it in your mind may help. But, there is more to be said:

(1) Make sure that you're trusting in Christ for salvation.

Saving faith is not just mentally assenting to the promise that if you believe in Jesus Christ, you have eternal life. You must agree with God's promise, but faith is more than agreeing. It is also relying personally on Christ as your only hope of heaven. You turn from relying on your own good works as the basis of your standing with God. You do not trust in any religious rituals, ceremonies, vows, or disciplines to gain acceptance with God. You do not believe that God will grade on the curve, and since you're better than average, you will pass the course. You trust solely on the shed blood of Christ as the only satisfaction for your sins. You believe God's promise that the one who trusts in Jesus will have eternal life. If you do not have this foundation, you will not be able to believe God in times of severe trials.

(2) Understand that faith is not in any way meritorious; rather, it is God's ordained means of obtaining His blessings.

In other words, your faith does not earn or merit eternal life or any other blessing. That would be to turn faith into a work that makes God your debtor! Rather, Christ Himself merits our salvation and all spiritual blessings. We deserve nothing from God but judgment, but in His grace, He offers mercy and full pardon to the one who trusts in the merits of Christ. John Owen explains, "Faith alone is the gracious power which takes us off from all confidence in ourselves, and directs us to look for all in another; that is, in God himself" (*An Exposition of Hebrews* [The National Foundation for Christian Education], 7:41).

Salvation and everything that we have is from God as a gift by His grace. The Reformer, Martin Bucer, explains, "when God re-

wards our good works he is rewarding his works and gifts in us, rather than our own works." Since God works in us, "both to will and to work for His good pleasure" (Phil. 2:13), Bucer says, "all the good that God does to us and the eternal life that he gives us still remain the results of his grace alone, so that no one should boast of himself, but only of the Lord" (cited by Philip Hughes, *A Commentary on the Epistle to the Hebrews* [Eerdmans], p. 461).

So, make sure that you're trusting in Christ alone for salvation. Understand that you do not in any way merit salvation by your faith, but that faith is simply the channel through which God's blessings flow.

- (3) Remember that the rewards of faith are in eternity, not necessarily in this life.

We saw this last week with Abel, who didn't live a long and happy life on earth. But his life was blessed and Cain's life was cursed, even though Cain lived many years and had many earthly successes. The same thing is true of Moses. He chose to give up his comfortable situation as the son of Pharaoh's daughter and to endure ill-treatment with God's people, "for he was looking to the reward" (11:24-26).

This is also illustrated in the case of Enoch (11:5). Even though he lived 365 years, which is very long by today's standards, in the context of Genesis 5, he has by far the shortest life of all of the pre-flood patriarchs. His father, Jared, lived 962 years. His son, Methuselah, set the record at 969 years. Yet Enoch, who is noted for his godliness, only lived about a third as long as they did! This shows us that faith's reward is not necessarily a long life on earth, but eternal life with God in heaven.

Enoch's translation into heaven is also an illustration of what God will do for those who are alive when Jesus returns. We will be caught up in the clouds "to meet the Lord in the air, and so we shall always be with the Lord" (1 Thess. 4:17). Even for believers who die physically, there is a sense in which they will not see death. As Jesus told Martha at Lazarus' tomb, "I am the resurrection and the life; he who believes in Me will live even if he dies, and everyone who lives and believes in Me will never die." Then He pointedly asked her, "Do you believe this?" (John 11:25-26). Faith looks

to God for the reward of eternal life in heaven, not for the good life here and now.

We've seen that our number one aim in life should be to please God, and that faith is essential to please Him. Finally,

3. Faith is a daily walk that extends over a lifetime.

Enoch's life also illustrates this point. Genesis 5 does not mention faith in connection with Enoch, but it does say twice that he walked with God. The LXX translators, seeking to make the language less anthropomorphic (F. F. Bruce, *Commentary on the Epistle to the Hebrews* [Eerdmans], p. 287), render that phrase, "Enoch was well-pleasing to God." Since it is impossible to please God without faith, it follows that Enoch walked by faith. His 300-year walk of faith obtained God's testimony that he was pleasing to Him. We must walk by faith with God on earth if we expect to dwell with Him forever in heaven.

Let's briefly explore the word picture of a walk with God. First, consider that a *walk is not spectacular or impressive*. If we were writing the biography of a man who was taken up into heaven bodily without dying, I'm sure that we would *not* title it, "The Man Who Walked With God." We'd call it, "The Man Who *Flew* With God." We're attracted to the sensational, but God calls our attention to a man who *walked* with Him. To *fly* with God sounds impossible, but to *walk* with God is doable. Walking is not the flashiest or quickest way to get someplace, but it's a frequent description of the Christian life. John Bunyan's *Pilgrim's Progress* is a wonderful expanded description of the Christian walk.

To walk with God means that our lives are *in step with God*, yielded in obedience to Him, headed in the direction He chooses. Walking also implies *intimacy* and *fellowship*. Walking with a friend is a time to talk, to get to know one another, and to share the things that are happening in your lives. Walking with God is a daily process of growing more intimate with Him as you share everything in your life with Him and learn more of His ways.

Of course, *you have to do your own walking*. Someone else can't do it for you. Just as a physical exercise program requires *discipline*, so spiritual walking requires discipline (1 Tim. 4:7). You have to take the initiative, the time, and the effort that is required to walk

with God. If you don't make frequent appointments to get alone with Him, it won't happen. If you don't make an effort to *read His Word* and apply it to your life, you're not walking with Him. If you are not *memorizing His promises* and applying them to the various situations you face, you're not walking by faith. If you have trusted in Christ as Savior, but you have grown lazy and aren't walking with Him, then get up and get back on the path. Faith is a daily dependence on God, step by step, that continues over a lifetime.

Conclusion

There is a familiar story about a little girl who went to Sunday School and heard the story of Enoch. She went home and told her mother, "You know, Mother, he used to go for walks with God." The mother replied, "That's wonderful, dear. How did it end?" "Well, Mother, one day they walked on and on, and got so far that God said to Enoch, 'You're a long ways from home. You had better come in and stay with Me!'"

If you walk with God by faith, your life is pleasing to Him. Even if you go through horrible trials, you can trust that He is with you. One day, He will say to you, "You're a long ways from home. You had better come in and stay with Me!"

Discussion Questions

1. Why is it essential to recognize that pleasing God begins on the heart (or, thought) level? What errors does this avoid?
2. How would you deal with a person who is struggling to believe in the existence of God? Are "proofs" of His existence useful or should we take a different approach?
3. Why is it crucial to affirm that faith is not meritorious? What are some errors that the meritorious view of faith leads to?
4. Should the believer be motivated by rewards in heaven? Why/why not? Is God Himself the totality of our reward?

Copyright, Steven J. Cole, 2004, All Rights Reserved.