
Am I Trying to Please People?

Galatians 1:1-12

A Sermon preached in Duke University Chapel on May 29, 2016 by the Rev. Dr. Luke A. Powery

We often say that we read and interpret scripture but we should also acknowledge that in many ways scripture reads us, interrogates us, exegetes us, raises questions that are latent in our own hearts, queries or concerns that we are often too busy or too afraid to ask ourselves. This is one of those weeks in the lectionary and it comes from the mouth of apostle Paul. It is the question that is my sermon title—Am I trying to please people?

In a society where consumer markets reign in the kingdom of financial currency, we often hear how businesses, large or small, national chain or local and family-run, attempt to attract the consumer through creative marketing strategies. The goal is to please the customer, please people, and woo the potential buyer with the latest Apple device or that cute little onesie for your newborn baby. Businesses, stores, aim to please. This isn't surprising because if there isn't any pleasure there probably won't be any payment from the consumer.

Even at our workplaces as employees, we strive to please our supervisors, especially if we are interested in keeping our jobs, getting a raise or that promotion for which you hope. Pleasing could lead to more pay. This isn't surprising—because pleasure pays.

But on another level, pleasing others also has associated costs. Aiming to please people all the time will have its own payday. It may take its own emotional, physical, or mental toll on the people-pleaser. Some studies suggest that people-pleasers are primary targets of bullies. Perpetually leaning toward pleasing others can make the pleaser vulnerable to controlling people and prevent one from getting his or her own needs met. Some stay in an abusive relationship because they were only taught that they should please their partner and not be worried about their own needs and life.

Perhaps every one of us tries to please someone from time to time but for some, known as perpetual people-pleasers, it can become a focus of their lives and the irony is that this behavior will cause them to lose their lives. Pleasure pays? Their life becomes secondary and self-neglect might be a natural outcome, losing touch with oneself because one is so consumed by the posture of pleasing the other. When was the last time you paid attention to the jangling echoes of need in your own life?

Some want to please people constantly out of fear because they worry about what others think but remember that some of the unhappiest people in the world are the people who care the most about what everyone else thinks. Words of poet John Lydgate, later adapted by Abraham Lincoln, ring true: "You can please some of the people all of the time, you can please all of the people some of the time, but you can't please all of the people all of the time." For some, pleasing others may foster a sense of self-worth but should our sense of worth be interwoven with the pleasure of another? Or, should our sense of worth be grounded somewhere else in Someone else who is creator, redeemer, and sustainer?

Finding worth by pleasing others isn't the gospel. There's nothing wrong with making others feel good or happy by pleasing them but pleasing others is not the aim of the Christian life. I say this because the gospel of Jesus Christ will comfort the afflicted but it can also afflict the comfortable. We may want to please people but following the gospel is not about pleasing people; it's about saving

people's lives. And people don't necessarily know that they need saving, that they need salvation—meaning, wholeness, healing, shalom. We can't assume that people know what they need. Some want a high so they'll get hooked on cocaine not knowing there are other paths to joy and satisfaction in life. Sick people may not know the right medicine for their illness. The gospel is spiritual medicine for sin-sick souls, ailing bodies, distorted minds and a devastating earth.

According to Paul, the gospel is good news revealed in Christ (Gal 3:1). It is "the power of God for salvation to everyone who has faith..." (Romans) and is based on God's promise of righteousness and its fulfillment through the death of Jesus Christ, which is why in another letter, Paul asserts that he proclaims Christ crucified (1 Cor). For Paul, "a person is justified not by the works of the law but through faith in Jesus Christ"(Gal 2:15). The death and resurrection of Jesus are the heart of the gospel and we hear hints of this in the salutation of his letter to the Galatians when he mentions that Jesus gave himself for our sins to set us free and was raised from the dead. God's gracious initiative to save and set us free is Paul's focus, not pleasing people. "Am I trying to please people?" That should be our own question.

If Paul worried about pleasing people, he wouldn't follow the call on his life but follow the pleasures of others. By doing so, he would have failed to follow the gospel. "If I were still pleasing people, I would not be a servant of Christ." Christian writer Ethel Barrett once said, "We would worry less about what others think of us if we realized how seldom they do." We can focus so much on others and their desires that we forget the gospel and forget Jesus. Paul could care less about other people's opinions of him because he recognized that it was their problem, not his. Misinterpreting or misunderstanding Paul may be the interpreter's problem, not Paul's. Paul didn't succumb to the people-pleasing syndrome and was more concerned about how God saw him and not others. He recognized that in the end it would not be humans saying, "Well done, good and faithful servant" (Matt 25:21) but it would be God.

The gospel isn't about pleasure, yours or someone else's. How can it be when its heart is cruciform and there's a death involved? Following the gospel negates self-pleasure because pleasing oneself is not the gospel message and Paul helps us stay on message. "I have been crucified with Christ; and it is no longer I who live, but it is Christ who lives in me. And the life I now live in the flesh I live by faith in the Son of God, who loved me and gave himself for me"(2:19-20).

I have been crucified and it is no longer I who live. There's a level of humility, faithful commitment, and hope when one says, "It is Christ who lives in me." How much pleasure can there really be when you say, "I have been crucified with Christ"? Paul is Christocentric because following the gospel is not about pleasing people but about serving Christ and pleasing God. "If I were still pleasing people, I would not be a servant of Christ." Basically, it's difficult to serve two masters or please two people, one human and one divine.

Paul suggests you can't serve Christ and please people. He refers to his role as "an apostle" which means a person who has been sent with a commission. He isn't from human beings nor called through a human being but "through Jesus Christ and God." The gospel, he says, is not of human origin but "through a revelation of Jesus Christ." Paul serves Christ. Johann Sebastian Bach was appointed Cantor of the St. Thomas School at the St. Thomas Church in Leipzig, Germany, in 1723, which was considered to be the leading cantorate in Protestant Germany at the time. In this role, which he held for 27 years, he provided music for four churches in the city—St. Thomas Church, St. Nicholas Church, New Church, and St. Peter's Church. At one point, Bach said to his church consistory echoing Paul's message: "I would have you know, gentlemen, that I cannot worthily offer my work to God if

I must please everybody.” The goal of the Christian life is not to please people but to please God by serving Christ. Serving Christ may actually result in displeasing others or making some uncomfortable. Serving Christ may create conflict.

Following the gospel will create conflict at times because the gospel is not a massage for our own pleasurable ways and desires; the gospel provides another way of life in the footsteps, the Way, of Jesus. Thus it’s bound to stir people up and not please them. Paul writes to the churches of Galatia because there’s some conflict and confusion about the gospel of Christ. He’s “astonished” at what is happening, at what he calls a perversion. The heart of the conflict is that there are other Christians who insist to include a demand to keep the Jewish law and be circumcised whereas Paul teaches, “If justification comes through the law, then Christ died for nothing” (Galat 2:21). The gracious act of God through Christ’s death for the purpose of salvation is the gospel for Paul. And Paul is not someone to mess with when it comes to the gospel. It’s clear he means business from the beginning.

He opens the letter in a typical way. He introduces himself—“Paul an apostle.” The recipients of the letter are named—“to the churches of Galatia.” A greeting is expressed—“Grace to you and peace from God our Father and the Lord Jesus Christ.” However, in a typical letter what should come next is a paragraph of thanksgiving like we hear in Romans—“I thank my God through Jesus Christ for all of you…” But we hear nothing like that. Instead, he says, “I am astonished” and “I repeat, if anyone proclaims to you a gospel contrary to what you received, let that one be accursed!” Paul is in a not-so-good-mood—“You foolish Galatians! Who has bewitched you?” (3:1) And he goes even further than that by declaring, “I wish those who unsettle you would castrate themselves!”(5:12) Ouch, Paul. He sounds like he would be a fun guy to hang around on a Friday night.

Conflict management gurus agree that all conflict doesn’t have to be negative but can be positive. Conflict, as it does in this case, can bring priorities into focus. It can alert you to what really matters to you. This conflict reveals that the gospel Paul preached matters to him over against the opinions of others. At the same time, this situation suggests that if there is no conflict at times, perhaps one is not serving Christ. The gospel will put you into conflict with people, places, or things. It won’t necessarily be popular or fully embraced by a broad audience. There are actions that you might be called to do or words to proclaim that no one likes. Prophets are never accepted in their hometown because not everyone will understand you or your message or your calling. Being a Christian is not admired in our day, if it ever was; following Christ may not be at the top of someone’s goals in a post-Christendom context; and, people may want to avoid conflict altogether. But for Paul, what is at stake is not his reputation but the gospel and for Paul, for us, the gospel is new life.

Near the end of his letter, Paul says, “For neither circumcision nor uncircumcision is anything; but a new creation is everything!” What we’ve seen today with our very own eyes in baptism is a new creation in Christ. Some of Paul’s words in Galatians reflect early baptismal liturgies and reveals how the gospel makes a new humanity in Christ. “As many of you as were baptized into Christ have clothed yourselves with Christ. There is no longer Jew or Greek, there is no longer slave or free, there is no longer male and female; for all of you are one in Christ Jesus.”(3:27-28)

The gospel gives birth to something new and for the newness to rise, something, someone has to die. A baptism is a kind of death—to be buried and raised with Christ. Moreover, Christ dies to set us free making Paul declare “May I never boast of anything except the cross of our Lord Jesus Christ, by which the world has been crucified to me, and I to the world.” The gospel of Christ kills us to resurrect us, to make us a new creation together. People-pleasing may seem to be a life but it’s really a death;

it will kill you without any promise of hope or resurrection because it makes another human being god and this god can't make anything new, can't set anyone free.

At the root of desiring to please people is really a deep yearning to be loved and accepted. Baptism is a visible sign of this invisible grace—that despite our shortcomings, our internal or external conflicts, our misunderstandings, our sin, God calls us beloved son, beloved daughter, and embraces us into the family of God declaring, “You are mine.” As theologian Paul Tillich preached years ago, “You are accepted.” I, not I, but Christ who lives in me. God finds such pleasure in us that God takes the initiative to reside in our lives. This is unfathomable and unmerited grace and this is why Paul is so adamant about the gospel of Christ. He knows that pleasing people is a dead-end but pleasing God has an everlasting legacy.

“If I were still pleasing people, I would not be a servant of Christ.” Some may critique that you can become so addicted to God or Christ that you neglect people in the world and only worry about what you gain. It can happen that someone is so heavenly-minded that they are no earthly good. But what Paul teaches is different. He teaches that the gospel brings freedom (5:1) and fruit (5:22) and when he says, “The fruit of the Spirit is love, joy, peace, patience, kindness, generosity, faithfulness, gentleness, and self-control,” this fruit isn't just for the self but includes others because love of God includes love of neighbor, which is a part of pleasing God. We are set free to love “for you were called to freedom, only do not use your freedom as an opportunity for self-indulgence but through love become slaves to one another. For the whole law is summed up in a single commandment, ‘You shall love your neighbor as yourself’” (5:13-14). The fruit of the Spirit is not self-absorption but *otherwise* because it is love and love binds us, connects us to one another. Ultimately, the gospel forms community and is consummated in love.

Loving people is different from pleasing people because sometimes the most loving thing you can say to someone else is “No.” Ask yourself this week, “Am I trying to please people?” If so, stop worrying about pleasing others and focus on pleasing God and serving Christ.