

No. 9

April 3, 2016

THE PROBLEM WITH THE JELLY DOUGHNUT DIET

1 Thessalonians 4:1-8

INTRODUCTION

When I was 18 in my last couple of months of high school a day came that I had never wanted. I guess I had been aware that I didn't see some things clearly, but I really didn't have anything to compare it with so I didn't think anything of it. But at that time my parents took me to an ophthalmologist. He examined me and announced his official medical diagnosis. I was as blind as a bat. I was not happy with that conclusion because it meant I was going to have to wear glasses. Understand that back then there were no designer glasses. You had your choice of black, blocky plastic frames or nothing. They did not exactly make you look dashing. These days, if you're a millennial hipster apparently those glasses are cool, the in thing. Not so much back in that day. There are now terms for how they made you look, terms that are entirely appropriate but that didn't exist back then. The terms are "nerd" and "geek." All you needed was a shirt pocket protector with some pens in it to complete the look. I wanted no part of glasses because I was much aware that this would most definitely enhance my already less than dazzling image with young ladies.

Why didn't you look into contacts? Some years later I did. But only those who have been there can truly understand the travails of wearing hard contact lenses, which were what were mostly available in those days. You can't imagine the intensity of the pain when something got caught under that lens, or the frustration of discovering that though the lens is not where it is supposed to be, it is in your eye someplace, probably caught up under your eyelid. And of course there was the joy of having a lens pop out at an inconvenient time, for instance while you're playing ice hockey. Have you ever tried to find a small, clear lens on a sheet of ice? My point here is that the whole corrective lens world was one I deeply wished to not visit, and certainly I didn't want to live in it. And it was exactly what I needed. When I finally put glasses on I was astounded at how much better the world looked and how much more I could see. I never had the physique or the ability that would have led to me being a very good athlete, but I do wonder if I might have had a much better result in high school baseball if I'd actually been able to see the ball. The thing I didn't want, the thing I resisted, was the very thing I needed, and for the many years ever since I have made sure that I never have to go through even part of a day without either my glasses or contacts lenses. Oddly, when it comes to how we live our lives there is a parallel. There is something that

we naturally shy away from that is the very thing that we most need. We'll get a glimpse of this in 1 Thessalonians 4:1-8.

SEEK TO PLEASE GOD

The beginning of chapter 4 is a major turning point in this letter. Up to this point Paul has mostly been giving thanks to God for the continued faith of the Thessalonians and recounting his history with them. Now he turns to giving them instruction. He begins this section by reminding them of how he had instructed them to live in order to please God. He says they in fact were living in accordance with those instructions but he tells them to seek even more to please God.

We saw at the end of chapter 3 that holiness is a very desirable thing that is at the heart of what God has called us to be. In fact, it is something that all of us deeply need and want, even though we usually are not aware of how crucial holiness is to us. The way we become holy in our actual practice is by doing what Paul tells us to do this verse, to seek more and more to please God. We see this command in a number of other places Bible.

In 2 Corinthians 5:9 Paul wrote, “we make it our goal to please him, whether we are at home in the body or away from it.” No matter what may be happening or where we are Paul said that goal is to please God. We are to please God in everything we are and do. Again the message shows up in Colossians 1:10 where Paul prayed, “that you may live a life worthy of the Lord and to please him in every way.”

On a human level we do this all the time. I confess that I am a particularly sad case when it comes to certain addictions. My particular addiction has to do with watching sports on television as you all know. That's especially true of football. My worst habit has to do with watching college football games. I love Saturdays in the fall because there are college football games on television beginning at nine in the morning and continuing all day without interruption almost until 11 o'clock at night. If I were left to my own devices I could probably watch them all. I know some of you can't imagine even sitting and watching one entire game, but for me that's just an appetizer. However, there are multiple occasions every season when I will have watched at least parts of three games and yet there is another really good game coming on. Laurie doesn't even have to say anything. I can just sense her impatience and frustration. She may not verbalize it but I know she's thinking, “if I have to put up with one more minute of football I'm going to scream.” I know she's thinking about the famous Erma Bombeck when she said, “I think if a man watches three football games in a row he should be declared legally dead.” What

do I do? I may really want to watch that game, but I will turn it off because I want to please my wife. Or at least I want to keep her from shooting me. In other words, I choose to do something that will make her happy rather than what I might otherwise choose to do.

This is to be a principle that drives much, or really all, of our lives. We are to live not just to make ourselves happy, not just to do what we think we want to do, but to please God. My problem with this is that is completely contrary to my natural instincts. What preoccupies my thoughts, my knee-jerk reaction to every situation is to think about what will please me. What will make me happy? What do I want to do? Obviously as I have already demonstrated in my relationship with Laurie there are times when I set that aside to please someone else. But the thought of living my entire life with the goal of pleasing someone else even if it means putting aside my desires is a difficult thing. The idea of having our whole lives ruled by someone else's desires is a difficult pill for us to swallow.

Why should we do this? Why should we seek to please God, as Paul said in Colossians 1:10, "in every way?" The first reason that we should always live to please God is one we probably won't like very much. Occasionally you'll hear someone say that we should always "do the right thing." Well, pleasing God is always the right thing at every moment of our lives. In other words we should please God because it is the right thing to do.

Romans 11:36 tells us we were created by God and for God. In other words, we don't owe our existence to ourselves. We were created by God for his purposes. We may not like to hear that but the simple truth is we exist because of his will and for his purpose. It may not make us feel all warm and fuzzy inside, but we need to come to grips with the reality that because we belong to God and were created for his purposes it is always the right thing to do what he wants us to do.

That may not be emotionally compelling at all times, but it is still true and that thought also directs us to something that may be a little more emotionally appealing for us. Assume for the moment that what the Bible says about God is true, that he is true and ultimate good. That means that what he wants for us is always good. If we choose to please ourselves instead of him, if we decide to go our own way without regard to what God desires what are we choosing? We are choosing that which is not good for us.

You don't have to read very far in the Bible to understand this. It plays out in Genesis 3. Adam and Eve are told by God what would please him. They could eat

anything in the garden except for the fruit of one tree. What did they choose? They chose not to please God. How did that work out? It has produced more pain, misery, and suffering that our minds are capable of comprehending. All of the workers and all of the suffering of humanity ultimately resulted from that one decision.

We were not told that story merely for our intellectual stimulation. God recorded that story for us as a lesson. It is a picture of what happens every single time we choose not to please God. When we go our way instead of God's way we are doing harm to ourselves and to others. We cannot help it. We do harm because we are deliberately choosing what is not good. In other words we are choosing what is evil, which by definition means that which does harm.

I remember watching a young man who had wonderful parents. They were godly people who deeply loved their children. Unfortunately this young man, their son, didn't want to do things his parents' way. He chose to go his own way and the results were not pretty to behold. He inflicted considerable damage to his own life and brought grief to others as well. Unfortunately he found out that when there are people who love you they want the best for you and when you rebel against them you're only rebelling against what is good for you.

Here's another example that you can probably relate to. I had a friend who told me about his experience trying to learn how to snowboard. His first day he had a friend who spent time with him teaching him the basics of the sport and he practiced them on the really easy beginner slopes. By the end of the day he felt like he was getting the hang of it. The next day he started off once again on the beginner slopes as his friend helped him but after just an hour or so he felt like he was pretty competent at it. He didn't want to keep his friend from being able to enjoy snowboarding and he felt like he was ready for something more. So he insisted that they try the more challenging, even expert slope. His friend fervently tried to dissuade him but he was certain that he could handle it. His friend insisted that he not attempt the difficult slope but he felt he was ready for it. So up the ski lift they went to the top of the run. When he got off at the top of the run and looked down the mountain he realized that he maybe should have listened to his friend. The slope looked awfully steep. At that point unfortunately he didn't have any graceful way out. So he headed down the slope. He said what followed was one of the more miserable experiences of his life. It was ugly crash after painful fall all the way down the hill. He got to the bottom fortunately in one piece but he was sore everywhere. He said that it was almost enough to make him swear off

snowboarding forever. It all happened because he thought he knew better than an expert who is looking out for his best interest.

That's when we seek not to please God but to please ourselves. We become like my friend putting ourselves in perilous situations and suffering the bumps and bruises that come with unwise choices. My friend was lucky that he didn't suffer serious injury as a result of his foolishness. We may not be so lucky. When we choose to please ourselves rather than please God the question is not whether we will sustain injury, it is simply how bad is the injury going to be?

We must also remember that God's goal is to restore us to fullness of life. The question we must ask ourselves is what do we want in life? Do we want a life that's leaves us with emptiness, frustration, restlessness, bitterness and despair? Or do we want a life that is full of meaning, full of joy and love and brimming with optimism and hope? The way to have that life is by seeking every moment to please God who is directing us to his will because it is the source of life.

SEEK TO PLEASE GOD WITH OUR SEXUALITY

In verse 3 Paul turns to one specific application of the principle that we should seek to please God. We should please him with our sexuality. What God wants is that we abstain from sexual immorality. Oh great, he's going to talk about sex. Just what nobody wants to hear in church. That may be the only topic that ranks lower than money when it comes to things we want to hear about in church. Paul says we should seek to please God with our sexuality, specifically by not being involved in immorality. That's a problem in our culture, because today in our society between consenting adults there is no such thing as sexual immorality. The word Paul used that is translated immorality is a Greek word that was quite broad. It referred to all sexual activity other than that between a man and a woman in marriage.

In verse 4 Paul says that this means each of us needs to learn to control our own body in a way that is holy and honorable. There is some debate about the meaning of verse 4. Paul literally says that we are to know how to possess our own vessel in holiness and honor. What vessel is he talking about? Some have suggested that the vessel actually was a reference to a wife and what it literally meant was to obtain a wife in holiness and honor.

However it seems that Paul is giving instruction to more than just single men who are looking for a wife. Furthermore the word that is translated vessel is not typically used to refer to a wife. It normally referred to one's body, or to be more specific, certain parts of one's body.

When I was young one of my favorite comedians with the now thoroughly discredited Bill Cosby. Given the subject matter it seems perhaps a bit appropriate to refer to him but I remember one routine he did that I thought was hilarious. He talked about when he played football in college. And he talked about how before a televised game they were instructed to be careful and not touch certain parts of their body on camera. So during the game at one point he got hit very hard in one very vulnerable part of his anatomy. He said immediately he started to grab and then heard in his head, “you’d better not touch certain parts of your body.” So he grabbed his head and ran off the field. Well this verse refers to certain parts of your body and says possess them and honor in holiness. In other words keep them under control. Use them as God has intended them in the context of marriage.

Obviously this instruction is totally out of step our culture today where the guiding principle when it comes to sexuality is, “anything goes.” Paul’s instruction here is considered by the overwhelming majority of people in our culture to be archaic to the point of being laughable. Laurie and I have been dismayed at how in our extended family what prevails is our culture's view and this instruction gets totally trampled on with regularity. Paul is ruling out premarital sex, adultery, extramarital sex, homosexuality and the use of pornography. Actually today he would be accused of hate speech.

Why are you religious people always so hung up on sex? Why are you so down on sex when everyone else is having a great time with it? Don't you think it's long past time to get over your repressive ideas and have a more enlightened view of things?

It does seem that many religious people freak out about anything having to do with sexuality. However, let’s be clear that God does not. God is not opposed to sex. It was his idea! God invented sex and gave it as a gift to human beings. I have written a couple of novels. Would it make sense to you if I gave one of them to you, then said, "Now, whatever you do, don't read this"? I invented it for the very purpose that you could read it, that you would use it for its intended purpose and enjoy it. God invented sex and gave it to humans. Obviously he thought it was a pretty cool thing and intended for them to use it and enjoy it. Do you really think that God was shocked when he found out what Adam and Eve had gotten up to in the garden of Eden? Perhaps you might recall that he told Adam and Eve to be fruitful and multiply. Exactly how do you think he expected them to do that?

So God is in favor of sex. In fact in 1 Corinthians 7: 3 Paul wrote, “The husband should fulfill his marital duty to his wife and likewise the wife to her husband.”

Exactly what marital duty you think he's talking about there? Doing the dishes? Remembering your anniversary date? No, he's talking about sex. In verse 5 he said "do not deprive each other except perhaps by mutual consent and for a time so you may devote yourselves to prayer. Then come together again so that Satan will not tempt you because of your lack of self-control."

Do you hear what he's saying? He is commanding husbands and wives to be having sex. He says it's all right if you want to take a break for just a little while so you can pray, but don't let it go on too long and then get back to business. In other words, this is a command for husbands and wives to be having sex. If you married couples are not doing that you're disobeying God.

Now given that, does it sound to you like God doesn't like sex? He invented it and he commands it. However, he also understands that our sexuality is a powerful thing. It is one of our strongest drives. It touches deeply on our identity as well. The problem with powerful things is that they can be really good, but also enormously dangerous and destructive. Think of the power of the atom. Nuclear energy is incredibly powerful. It can be used to produce electric power for large cities, drive huge aircraft carriers and even be used for treatment of terrible diseases. But it also has the ability to utterly destroy entire cities. Think of sex as nuclear energy of the soul. Our sexuality has great potential for both good and harm. Because of this it is crucial that we employ and channel it wisely.

Let's think back to what was said just a few minutes ago. Why does God command us the many things that he does? We saw it was because he wants to bring about fullness of life for us. It's because he loves us and wants the best for us. So when he makes a command like this in regard to our sexuality, why does he do it? Is it because he was kind of tied into an old puritanical system and didn't understand the freedom that we ought to have and enjoy today? Was it because he just wasn't as enlightened as we are? Was it because he was afraid of sex and was kind of repressed? Clearly that is ridiculous. God gave us this command to control our sexuality because he wants us to experience life. He knows the failure to control our sexuality in fact has great potential for doing great harm to our lives.

Our culture says that sexuality is a physical drive with no moral value. It says it is much like hunger. Hey when you're hungry you eat, right? That's just natural and normal. It has nothing to do with morality. So why should we be condemned for following whatever desires we may have in regard to sexuality? It's just good, natural fun, right?

There's something kind of curious about our culture. For many years in the past society had serious concerns and restrictions about how we indulge our sexuality, but had very little to say about what people ate. Now our culture has volumes to say about what people eat. These days it's getting to the place where it is almost regarded as a sin to go to McDonald's and have a big Mac and fries. I'm not all that interested in going to McDonald's, but I have noticed that the cuisine police are getting increasingly intrusive and strident about such things. In contrast, our society says when it comes to sex indulge yourself with whatever cuisine you happen to like. Isn't that odd?

Just because something is a natural drive in us does not mean it should be given free rein. The theory of our culture is that when you repress the natural sexual drive in any way you are actually hurting yourself. It is both unhealthy and unnecessary to do that. We should give sexuality unfettered expression in order to truly be fulfilled. Let's just apply that principle to that other natural drive, hunger. I should just obey its urges without restraint. Is that good for me? Absolutely not. I will eat jelly doughnuts for breakfast every day, and for dinner I will alternate between pizza, Mexican food and a good burger and fries. My arteries will be totally clogged in a month and I'll be obese in short order. In short, I will destroy myself. The jelly doughnut diet may be exactly what my natural urge pushes me to follow, but if I want to actually be healthy and have a full life I absolutely must restrain it.

Is our culture on the right track for how we can get the most out of our sexual lives? Think about this. We have been hearing a lot recently about some frightening diseases like the West Nile virus and more recently Zika virus. In 2015 in the United States of America out of more than 300 million people there were a total of 1923 cases of the West Nile virus. Those cases resulted in 106 deaths. Way more people die from the flu than from the West Nile virus. How about the Zika virus? In the United States last year there were 193 cases, all of them travel related. You know how many locally acquired cases of that virus there were? There were zero. And how many deaths there were? Once again there were zero.

Now I want you to compare those numbers with some others. In the good old USA last year there were 19 million new cases of sexually transmitted diseases. Right now about 110 million Americans have a sexually transmitted disease! More than 13,000 people died from sexually transmitted diseases last year. Why is it that when we hear much fear and much discussion of these exotic viruses that have almost zero impact on our country we hear very little about the epidemic of sexually transmitted disease? I can only conclude that there are some people who

want to hide the truth. They don't really want you to know what all of this talk of "just indulge your sexuality however you feel led" is resulting in. Does that suggest to you that they are looking out for your best interest? It doesn't to me. And that's just the physical aspect of our sexuality. There is a parallel or even worse damage being done to people's souls as a result of the flood of sexuality that is inundating our culture.

In verse 6 Paul explains a little further what he means by controlling our own bodies in holiness and honor. He says we should do this so we will not transgress against and defraud our brother. What he's saying there is that there is a big time relational aspect of this command about our sexuality. Paul is claiming under the inspiration of the Spirit of God, that when we express our sexuality in any context other than marriage we in fact are defrauding or cheating someone else. He is saying we are taking something from someone that does not belong to us.

He's right. And it's not too hard to figure out why he would say that. In any context other than between a husband and wife when people have sex, are they doing it to express love? Love as we have seen is a commitment to the good of another person. Love is giving to another person to make their life better and to bless them. When we have sex outside of marriage whatever the context that is not what's behind it. What's behind it is a desire to get something for ourselves. What that means is we are using another person for our purposes, and that is the farthest thing from love.

You will hear all kinds of rationalizations for why that's not true, but they are just that, they are rationalizations. Sex can either be about getting something from someone else, about feeling good myself, in which case I'm using another person. Or it can be about giving and blessing another person. But that blessing only happens in the context of a committed relationship of husband-and-wife.

When we are using other people for our own ends we are doing damage. We are taking something precious from another person. It may be that person's future spouse or it may be that person himself or herself. In most cases it will be both. But the point is free sexuality is always a violation of love and therefore is doing damage in this world.

The current claim is that sex is merely a physical activity with no particular moral or spiritual component. A few years ago the *New York Times Magazine* published an article titled, "Friends, Friends With Benefits, and the Benefits of the Local Mall." The heart of the story was that many teens now have what they call "friends

with benefits." That means they're just friends that they have sex with. No emotional ties, no commitments, just somebody to engage in an activity with. They might have friends to play basketball with, friends to work out with, friends to study with and friends to have sex with. But the article described the confusion and the depression of a girl named Melissa. Her "friend with benefits" had just broken up with her. She said, "How is that even possible? The point of having a friend with benefits is that you won't get broken up with, you won't get hurt."

She found out the hard way that sex is not a purely physical activity. God created it for a purpose, to bring one man and one woman together in an intimate, united relationship. When it is used for another purpose you violate the whole thing and end up doing damage. Any time anyone uses sex in other than that husband and wife context the person is doing damage to their own soul. They are becoming less than what they know they were created to be. Even worse they are doing harm to their sexual partner.

The current belief of our culture is that the people who are having the real fun and the best sex are those or not tied down and can have sex with lots of different people. They can have sex any time they want. But the truth is that studies show the people who have the most fulfilling and enjoyable sex lives are those who are married. God has known this all along. That's why he commanded this. God commands us to please him in regard to our sexuality because he wants the best for us. He wants us to experience the fullness of life that comes from not using other people but loving other people and living every moment to please him.

APPLICATION

KNOW WHAT PLEASES GOD

There most definitely is a love language issue when it comes to pleasing God. People come up with all sorts of ideas about how they can please God, but much of the time their rationale boils down to, "it's just what I think." How does that typically work when it comes to loving another person? Too often we end up being like the guy who is certain that what his wife will love for their anniversary is a brand new 60 inch 4K ultra high definition TV because the football games look better than life...I mean, because she'll love watching *Fixer Upper* on it. What she'd really like is a romantic weekend getaway, but he has no idea.

The only way we can know what truly pleases a person is to listen to that person and to know that person. This means we need to listen to God, we need to hear what he says pleases him. So we need to be reminded to read the Bible often, and we need to gather together to worship him consistently because of 2 human traits.

The first is forgetfulness. Unfortunately we need to be reminded continually of what pleases God because he thinks differently than we do. As a result we easily lose track of what pleases him.

Laurie and I like doing the *New York Times* crossword puzzle each day. One thing about crosswords that I find curious is that they seem to have a fascination with foreign languages. I thought the idea was to use English vocabulary to solve them, but it amazes me how often the clues have to do with French or Spanish words. For instance I have learned through crosswords that the French word for summer is *ete*, the word for here is *ici*. Unfortunately they also frequently ask about German words. I took German in high school and college, but if the question is about anything other than *auf wiedersehen* I am no use whatsoever. That's because I don't use German ever. If I am not continually reminded of it I forget it. Consider it 99.99% forgotten at this point. If we are not continually reminded of things they quickly fade in our memory until they disappear altogether. When we are not reminded of what pleases God we often forget.

In Philippians 3:1 Paul said, "It is no trouble for me to write the same things to you again and it is a safeguard for you." He knew they needed to be reminded because we all forget. In 2 Peter 1:12 Peter said, "I will always remind you of these things." We need to be reminded on a continual basis.

The second human trait that creates trouble for us is our capacity for rationalization. Years ago I met with a man who had been having an affair with a woman he was not married to and was about to leave his wife and children for this woman. I pointed out this was total disobedience to God. He denied this. I said, "How do you figure?" He said, "God wants me to be happy. I can only be happy with this other woman, so it must be God's will." I see. Thanks for clearing that up for me. I had no idea how important it was to God that you be happy. I said, "Let's assume you're right and that what God cares most about is that we be happy. What if I discovered a way to hack into bank accounts and transfer funds from them into my offshore account without being discovered. What if it made me super happy to do that, and the thought of staying poor when I could be totally rich and happy made me miserable? Would that also be God's will?" He said no. Why not? He said because I would be stealing and hurting other people. "Oh," I said. "So, it's not God's will to hurt other people?" He agreed that hurting someone else would be disobeying God. I thought I had him. I said, "I agree. And by your actions you are bringing incredible pain to your wife and children whom you have promised to love. You're hurting them, so can that be God's will?" He said, "But if I stayed with my wife and not this other woman I'd be miserable, and then I'd make my

wife miserable. I'd actually be hurting her by staying with her because I'd bring such unhappiness to her and our children." Wow. This ends the lesson on the powerful human capacity for rationalization.

We need to be continually reminding ourselves and we need to be continually reminded of what pleases God to guard against either forgetting or finding a way to rationalize it away. Why are we supposed to get together on Sundays, sing the songs we sing, pray and listen to God's Word taught? Do you come here expecting to hear something you never knew before or have never heard before? No. We all know that most of the time we are hearing things we have known before and we're just being reminded of them. We need to be reminded of them because we lose track of them. What was said a week ago in the sermon? I don't know, I think it had something to do with Jesus. That's the point. We need to keep hearing about what pleases God or we will both forget about it and rationalize it away.

KEEP THE RIGHT MOTIVATION

It is so very important to remember that the point of this is not doing our duty. It is not doing what is required in order to get God to accept us. We seek to please God because he is the best friend we've ever had, because he has loved us and continued to love us like no one else.

Laurie's birthday is next month. This is something of a challenge for me because Laurie has an interesting philosophy on birthdays. She believes in birth months. In other words her birthday shouldn't be celebrated on May 9, the actual day of her birth, but for the entire month of May. This can be something of a challenge both to my creativity and our budget. But it is a challenge I eagerly accept. I don't do so because it is my duty. I do it because I can't help myself. Given my own preferences we'd celebrate Laurie's birthday every day of the year. I know for a fact the last thing she would ever want is that I would do anything to celebrate her because I know I'm supposed to. She doesn't want me to do something because it is my duty. She wants me to be so overjoyed by her that I have to restrain myself.

God doesn't want you to please him just because you think it's a duty or it's some kind of requirement. You are forgiven and loved because of what Jesus has done. What pleases God most of all is faith in the grace he has given us through Jesus. So keep clear in your head, you seek to please God because you love him and are grateful for his goodness to you. From time to time you will fail to please God. That's when you go back to his grace, thank him for it, and keep trying to please him.

MAKE PLEASING HIM YOUR HABIT

My point here is that you will have many opportunities every day of your life to please God. It may not always be the thing that you might choose. Sometimes God will have you go through things and even do things that you find difficult and you cannot understand why. God doesn't always explain why he has us experience the things we go through. But what we can know is that whatever it is he is always working for our good. Romans 8:28 assures us that he is working our good in everything that happens to us.

So we need to make it our habit to please God in everything. Our sexuality is one thing, but we must also please God in our relationships, our speech, our priorities, our finances, the way we use whatever gifts God has given us, our commitment to others in the body of Christ, and everything else in life. The one thing that should drive all we do is the desire to please God, whatever it takes.

I recently noticed something curious while I was brushing my teeth. I brush them pretty much the same way every time I brush. I don't have some set plan that I follow. What I have is a habit. After brushing twice a day for my entire life I've just fallen into a pattern I don't even think about. It just happens. Wouldn't it be great if we so consistently and constantly asked what would please God and then did that thing that it became a habit? Wouldn't it be great if it was our automatic, default reaction to everything and everyone? Let's make that our habit, for we love our God, and we long to be fully human.