

**July 11, 2021 | Summer Worship Service**

**TEXT: [1 Thessalonians 4:1–12](#)**

**TITLE: First Words, Last Words: On Pleasing God**

*By the Rev. Dr. Randy Bush*

Just about eight months ago, Alex Trebek died, the well-known host of the TV quiz show Jeopardy. For years, he would read answers off the Jeopardy game board and contestants would have to provide the correct question that goes with that answer. Now, at the risk of being too flippant, I would suggest that the apostle Paul has a lot in common with Alex Trebek—or at least reading the letters of the apostle Paul has similarities with the way Alex Trebek hosted Jeopardy. For example, this first letter to the church in Thessalonica is an answer to a conversation held earlier between Timothy and this young congregation. Timothy has just returned from Thessalonica and told Paul about his time there. Today's passage is Paul's answer to what Timothy told him; so part of our church-Jeopardy challenge today is to guess the Thessalonians' questions that Paul is answering. Bible Study for \$400, if you will.

Paul truly loved this little congregation. In the first chapter, he speaks about how he constantly remembers them in prayer and sees them as an example to all the other churches in Greece for their loving and generous spirits. In fact, the last two sentences in chapter 3 contain these encouraging words from Paul: *May the Lord make you increase and abound in love for one another and for all, just as we abound in love for you. And may God strengthen your hearts in holiness that you may be blameless before our God at the coming of our Lord Jesus.* That's the language that precedes chapter 4—*Strengthen your hearts in holiness as you await the coming of Christ.* More importantly, that's the context out of which Paul moves on to talk about his next awkward subjects of lustful passions, fornication, and how to behave properly with outsiders.

Now, in Jeopardy, if you pose a wrong question, Alex Trebek would politely but firmly reply "No" and move on to another contestant. There are lots of churches in America that could benefit from an Alex Trebek who is willing to say "No" when preachers pose wrong questions to the apostle Paul's answers. 1 Thessalonians 4 for \$500 Alex. The answer is: In verses 3-7 Paul writes that we should abstain from fornication, know how to control our own body, and avoid lustful passion and impurity. Yes, preacher 1: What are sexual commandments for today? No. Preacher 2: What are Paul's strict rules about sexual ethics? No. Preacher 3: What does the Lord say about this wicked world in which we live today? No, no, no. The correct response is: What is one part of how we ought to live and to please God? (1 Thessalonians 4 vs. 1) Let me explain the difference between the wrong and the right Bible Jeopardy answers.

The most common misuse of scripture is when you take a verse out of its context and then tell someone else what you think it means. "Abstain from fornication"—"Control your own body in holiness and honor"—I can well imagine lots of preachers quite anxious to explain precisely what they think these short phrases mean. But that is the wrong approach. We need to first take a step back and hear the tone of voice Paul is

using in this passage. Remember how chapter 3 ended with gracious words from Paul—*May the Lord make you abound in love and strengthen your hearts in holiness.* Chapter 4 uses that same tone with Paul saying: *As you learned from us and as you are already doing, please do so more and more.* These are words of exhortation and encouragement, not words of condemnation and rebuke.

Next, recognize that Paul is primarily talking here about sanctification—about growing stronger in faith by God’s grace. He offers a brief challenge to them to practice self-control and be faithful in their loving relationships, but his focus is on what builds us up, not what tears us down. His tone is positive—they should be open to the Holy Spirit and live a life pleasing to God. Unfortunately, lots of folks get distracted once he mentioned sexual misbehavior and they are quick to demand more details. They want the preacher to give them a simple and short checklist of what to do and what not to do so they can get a passing grade in life and earn a golden ticket for heaven. That’s a natural inclination but not a helpful inclination. Imagine waking up in the morning, opening your eyes and telling yourself “I’m going to be good today, because it will pay off and get me into heaven.” That sounds virtuous, but it is actually a selfish perspective. It is doing something just to get something—calculating what to do so that you alone are taken care of. In the end, no matter who is helped or how many public service awards you can hang on your wall, the primary beneficiary is yourself. This is a humanist, anthropocentric focus. And that is not what Paul is suggesting at all.

Ancient Greek and Roman society had lots of rules and codes of behavior on how to lead a good life. We shouldn’t read Paul and assume that everyone in ancient Greece was a terrible person. Then, like now, there were people who led exemplary lives and others who led lousy lives; and all of them had good days and bad days. The Greek philosopher Aristotle taught that we become just by doing just acts, temperate by doing temperate acts, brave by doing brave acts. Since our actions shape our character, it is good and right to do things that are good and right. But there is not necessarily a place for God in these ethics. This is a moral philosophy—a secular philosophy. It helps us live together while we seek our own happiness. That’s not a bad thing, but it is not the best thing.

This same reality exists today. There is lots of advice and wisdom available to us on how to lead a good life—a healthy, purpose-driven, justice-seeking, successful life. But most of these approaches do not include a place for God. They are secular ethics. They teach “do good as often as you can and you’ll be a good person. Help someone else and you’ll be helped in the process.” It’s the Church of Aristotelian Ethics. It prompts people to do many things that are good, just, and positive in this world. But it begs the question: Where is God in this approach? Is faith an after-thought, an addendum at the end of book of life? Or is there a better, more faithful way to answer the question posed by the poet Mary Oliver, “What is it you plan to do with your one wild and precious life?”

Several years ago, a man in New York City was walking around Central Park when he saw a man approaching who looked a bit disheveled. He heard him talking loudly to himself, “This is my city, this is my park and I can do anything I want.” Making sure he

did not have designs on doing something erratic, the first man maintained eye contact as they passed one another. Then, the disheveled man in a slightly softer tone added, "Well, within reason."

The secular, humanist, dare I say 'spiritual-but-not-religious' approach has much in common with the assertion of "This is my city, my park, and I can do anything I want within reason." Humanity is the measure of all things. While that is not without value, as Paul has said elsewhere, let me "show you a still more excellent way" (I Corinthians 12:31). At the start of this passage, Paul intentionally links two verbs—we are to live and to please God. Paul's ethical philosophy is totally oriented to God and then moves down to us, not the other way around.

Let's consider the morning scenario a second time. Imagine waking up, opening your eyes and telling yourself "This is the day the Lord has made. Let us rejoice and be glad in it." (Psalm 118:124) Or hearing in that moment the comforting words of Jesus, "I am with you always even to the end of the age" (Matthew 28:20). This perspective is not anthropological but theological. The fundamental reality is affirming that God is with us—that we exist this day and always as creations of God, in relation to a resurrected Christ, daily upheld and guided by the Holy Spirit. Out of that orientation come our ethics, combining how to live and how to please God.

The bible is like a Jeopardy board containing lots of answers, broken down into lots and lots of categories. Some are positive, some are negative—things to do and things to avoid doing. *Love your enemy. Abstain from fornication. Live quietly, mind your own affairs, work with your hands. Feed the hungry, clothe the naked, visit the prisoner, welcome the stranger.* But if those are the answers given to us, and you buzz in as a contestant, don't let your question be, "What must I do to get into heaven? What must I do to win this game of life?" No, let your question be "How shall I live and please God, who is before all, in all, through all, my hope and my greatest confidence in whom my heart rejoices?" Everything good follows from that.

POSTSCRIPT: I write my sermons on Saturday morning and that last sentence is where it ended. I went down to the kitchen and turned on the radio and heard Ira Glass lead into his show "This American Life." He talked about riding in a car with a Methodist pastor and he asked the pastor why so much of scripture insists that we praise God. He wondered if God needs all this praise. I felt Ira was talking to me so here's my response. God doesn't need our praise—although it does please God, just as all things beautiful, creative, loving, and nurturing please the Lord. But in orienting ourselves toward God with a humble attitude of open and expectant faith, we align ourselves with the way God's diverse, interconnected creation is meant to be. Honestly facing God, seeking to trust God, be led by God, and pleasing to God is how all good things in life follow. None of us do this perfectly or consistently or even particularly well. But the focus isn't on us. In life and death we belong to God—holding on to that good news as our guiding principle is both pleasing to God and makes for a life worth living.

AMEN