

On Pleasing All Men

by John Wesley

The sermon emphasizes the importance of pleasing our neighbour for their good and edification, and provides practical advice on how to do so in a genuine and sincere manner.

Scripture: Proverbs 3:3-4, Matthew 5:16, Romans 15:2, Galatians 5:13-14, Ephesians 4:29, Philippians 2:3-4, Colossians 3:12-14, 1 Thessalonians 5:11, Hebrews 10:24-25, 1 Peter 3:8-9

Topics: "Pleasing Others", "Christian Edification"

Description

John Wesley emphasizes the Christian duty to please our neighbors for their good and edification, as stated in Romans 15:2. He acknowledges that while it is impossible to please everyone, we should strive to do so with the right intentions, focusing on their spiritual and eternal well-being rather than mere temporary satisfaction. Wesley critiques various writings on the subject that fail to prioritize the true purpose of pleasing others, which is to build them up in love and holiness. He outlines practical steps to achieve this, including removing hindrances, cultivating love and humility, and being truthful and sincere in our interactions. Ultimately, he concludes that to please men, we must first please God, allowing truth and love to guide our actions.

Transcript

"Let every man please his neighbour for his good to edification." Rom. 15:2.

1. Undoubtedly the duty here prescribed is incumbent on all mankind; at least on every one of those to whom are entrusted the oracles of God. For it is here enjoined to everyone without exception that names the name of Christ. And the person whom everyone is commanded to please, is his neighbour; that is, every child of man. Only we are to remember here what the same Apostle speaks upon a similar occasion. "If it be possible, as much as lieth in you, live peaceably with all men." In like manner we are to please all men, if it be possible, as much as lieth in us. But strictly speaking it is not possible; it is what no man ever did, nor ever will perform. But suppose we use our utmost diligence, be the event as it may, we fulfill our duty.

2. We may farther observe in how admirable a manner the Apostle limits this direction; otherwise, were it pursued without any limitation, it might produce the most mischievous consequences. We are directed to please them for their good; not barely for the sake of pleasing them, or pleasing ourselves; much less of pleasing them to their hurt; which is so frequently done, indeed continually done, by those who do not love their neighbour as themselves. Nor is it only their temporal good, which we are to aim at in pleasing our

neighbour; but what is of infinitely greater consequence, we are to do it for their edification; in such a manner as may conduce to their spiritual and eternal good. We are so to please them, that the pleasure may not perish in the using, but may redound to their lasting advantage; may make them wiser and better, holier and happier, both in time and in eternity.

3. Many are the treatises and discourses which have been published on this important subject. But all of them that I have either seen or heard were miserably defective. Hardly one of them proposed the right end: One and all had some lower design in pleasing men than to save their souls, -- to build them up in love and holiness. Of consequence, they were not likely to propose the right means for the attainment of that end. One celebrated tract of this kind, entitled "The Courtier," was published in Spain about two hundred years ago, and translated into various languages. But it has nothing to do with edification, and is therefore quite wide of the mark. Another treatise, entitled "The Refined [Complete] Courtier," was published in our own country, in the reign of King Charles the Second, and, as it seems, by a retainer to his court. In this there are several very sensible advices concerning our outward behaviour; and many little improprieties in word or action are observed, whereby men displease others without intending it; but this author, likewise, has no view at all to the spiritual or eternal good of his neighbour. Seventy or eighty years ago, another book was printed in London, entitled "The Art of Pleasing." But as it was wrote in a languid manner and contained only common, trite observations, it was not likely to be of use to men of understanding, and still less to men of piety.

4. But it may be asked, Has not the subject been since treated of by a writer of a very different character? Is it not exhausted by one who was himself a consummate master of the art of pleasing? And who writing to one he tenderly loved, to a favourite son, gives him all the advice which his great understanding, improved by various learning, and the experience of many years, and much converse with all sorts of men, could suggest? I mean, the late Lord Chesterfield; the general darling of all the Irish, as well as the English nation.

5. The means of pleasing which this wise and indulgent parent continually and earnestly recommends to his darling child, and on which he doubtless formed both his tempers and outward conduct,

Till death untimely stopped his tuneful tongue,--

were, First, making love, in the grossest sense, to all the married women whom he conveniently could. (Single women he advises him to refrain from, for fear of disagreeable consequences). Secondly. Constant and careful dissimulation; always wearing a mask; trusting no man upon earth, so as to let him know his real thoughts, but perpetually seeming to mean what he did not mean, and seeming to be what he was not. Thirdly. Well-devised lying to all sorts of people; speaking what was farthest from his heart; and in particular, flattering men, women, and children, as the infallible way of pleasing them.

It needs no great art to show, that this is not the way to please our neighbour for his good, or to edification. I shall endeavour to show, that there is a better way of doing it; and indeed a way diametrically opposite to this. It consists,

I. In removing hindrances out of the way; and

II. In using the means that directly tend to this end.

I. 1. I advise all that desire to "please their neighbour for his good to edification," First, to remove all hindrances out of the way; or, in other words, to avoid everything which tends to displease wise and good men, men of sound understanding and real piety. Now "cruelty, malice, envy, hatred, and revenge" are displeasing to all good men, to all who are endued with sound understanding and genuine piety. There is likewise another temper related to these, only in a lower kind, and which is usually found in common life, wherewith men in general are not pleased. We commonly call it ill-nature. With all possible care avoid all these; nay, and whatever bears any resemblance to them, -- as sourness, sternness, sullenness, on the one hand; peevishness and fretfulness, on the other, -- if ever you hope to "please your neighbour for his good to edification."

2. Next to cruelty, malice, and similar tempers, with the words and actions that naturally spring therefrom, nothing is more disgusting, not only to persons of sense and religion, but even to the generality of men, than pride, haughtiness of spirit, and its genuine fruit, an assuming, arrogant, overbearing behaviour. Even uncommon learning, joined with shining talents, will not make amends for this; but a man of eminent endowments, if he be eminently haughty, will be despised by many, and disliked by all. Of this the famous Master of Trinity College in Cambridge, was a remarkable instance. How few persons of his time had a stronger understanding, or deeper learning, than Dr. Bentley! And yet how few were less beloved! unless one who was little, if at all, inferior to him in sense or learning, and equally distant from humility, -- the author of "The Divine Legation of Moses." Whoever, therefore, desires to please his neighbour for his good, must take care of splitting upon this rock. Otherwise the same pride which impels him to seek the esteem of his neighbour, will infallibly hinder his attaining it.

3. Almost as disgusting to the generality of men as haughtiness itself, is a passionate temper and behaviour. Men of a tender disposition are afraid even to converse with persons of this spirit. And others are not fond of their acquaintance; as frequently (perhaps when they expected nothing less) meeting with shocks, which if they bear for the present, yet they do not willingly put themselves in the way of meeting with again. Hence passionate men have seldom many friends; at least, not for any length of time. Crowds, indeed, may attend them for a season, especially when it may promote their interest. But they are usually disgusted one after another, and fall off like leaves in autumn. If therefore you desire lastingly to please your neighbour for his good, by all possible means avoid violent passion.

4. Yea, and if you desire to please, even on this account, take that advice of the Apostle, "Put away all lying." It is the remark of an ingenious author, that, of all vices, lying never yet found an apologist, any that would openly plead in its favour, whatever his private sentiments might be. But it should be remembered, Mr. Addison went to a better world before Lord Chesterfield's Letters were published. Perhaps his apology for it was the best that ever was or can be made for so bad a cause. But, after all, the labour he has bestowed thereon, it has only "semblance of worth, not substance." It has no solidity in it; it is nothing better than a shining phantom. And as lying can never be commendable or innocent, so neither can it be pleasing; at least when it is stripped of its disguise, and appears in its own shape. Consequently, it ought to be carefully avoided by all those who wish to please their neighbour for his good to edification.

5. "But is not flattery," a man may say, "one species of lying? And has not this been allowed in all ages to be the sure means of pleasing? Has not that observation been confirmed by numerous experiments, --

Obsequium amicos, veritas odium parat?

Flattery creates friends, plain-dealing enemies?

Has not a late witty [prominent] writer, in his 'Sentimental Journal,' related some striking instances of this?" I answer, It is true: Flattery is pleasing for a while. and not only to weak minds, as the desire of praise, whether deserved or undeserved, is planted in every child of man. But it is pleasing only for a while. As soon as the mask drops off, as soon as it appears that the speaker meant nothing by his soft words, we are pleased no longer. Every man's own experience teaches him this. And we all know, that if a man continues to flatter, after his insincerity is discovered, it is disgustful, not agreeable. Therefore, even this fashionable species of lying is to be avoided, by all that are desirous of pleasing their neighbour to his lasting advantage.

6. ~Nay~~~, whoever desires to do this must remember, that not only lying, in every species of it, but even dissimulation, (which is not the same with flattery, though nearly related to it,) is displeasing to men of understanding, though they have not religion. Terence represents even an old heathen, when it was imputed to him, as answering with indignation, *_Simulare non est meum_*: "Dissimulation is no part of my character." Guile, subtlety, cunning, the whole art of deceiving, by whatever terms it is expressed, is not accounted an accomplishment by wise men, but is, indeed, an abomination to them. And even those who practise it most, who are the greatest artificers of fraud, are not pleased with it in other men, neither are fond of conversing with those that practise it on themselves. Yea, the greatest deceivers are greatly displeased at those that play their own arts back upon them.

II. Now, if cruelty, malice, envy, hatred, revenge, ill-nature; if pride and haughtiness; if irrational anger; if lying and dissimulation, together with guile, subtlety, and cunning, are all and every one displeasing to all men, especially to wise and good men, we may easily gather from hence what is the sure way to please them for their good to edification. Only we are to remember that there are those in every time and place whom we must not expect to please. We must not therefore be surprised when we meet with men who are not to be pleased any way. It is now, as it was of old when our Lord himself complained: "Whereunto shall I liken the men of this generation? They are like unto children sitting in the market-place, and saying to each other, We have piped unto you, but ye have not danced: We have mourned unto you, but ye have not wept." But leaving these forward ones to themselves, we may reasonably hope to please others by a careful and steady observation of the few directions following.

1. First. Let love not visit you as a transient guest, but be the constant ruling temper of your soul. See that your heart be filled at all times and on all occasions with real, undissembled benevolence; not to those only that love you, but to every soul of man. Let it pant in your heart; let it sparkle in your eyes, let it shine on all your actions. Whenever you open your lips, let it be with love; and let there be in your tongue the law of kindness. Your word will then distill as the rain, and as the dew upon the tender herb. Be not straitened or limited in your affection, but let it embrace every child of man. Everyone that is born of a woman has a claim to your good-will. You owe this, not to some, but to all. And let all men know that you desire both their temporal and eternal happiness, as sincerely as you do your own.

2. Secondly. If you would please your neighbour for his good, study to be lowly in heart. Be little and vile in your own eyes, in honour preferring others before yourself. Be deeply sensible of your own weaknesses, follies, and imperfections; as well as of the sin remaining in your heart, and cleaving to all your words and actions. And let this spirit appear in all you speak or do: "Be clothed with humility." Reject with horror that favourite maxim of the old heathen, sprung from the bottomless pit, *Tanti eris aliis, quanti tibi fu-er-is_*: "The more you value yourself, the more others will value you." Not so. On the contrary, both God and man "resist the proud:" And, as "God giveth grace to the humble," so humility, not pride, recommends us to the esteem and favour of men, especially those that fear God.

3. If you desire to please your neighbour for his good to edification you should, Thirdly, labour and pray that you may be meek as well as lowly in heart. Labour to be of a calm, dispassionate temper; gentle towards all men; and let the gentleness of your disposition appear in the whole tenor of your conversation. Let all your words and all your actions be regulated thereby. Remember, likewise that advice of St. Peter: As an addition to your gentleness, be merciful; "be courteous;" be pitiful; be tenderly compassionate to all that are in distress; to all that are under any affliction of mind, body, or estate. Let

The various scenes of human woe

Excite your softest sympathy!

Weep with them that weep. If you can do no more, at least mix your tears with theirs; and give them healing words, such as may calm their minds, and mitigate their sorrows. But if you can, if you are able to give them actual assistance, let it not be wanting. Be as eyes to the blind, as feet to the lame, a husband to the widow and a father to the fatherless. This will greatly tend to conciliate the affection, and to give a profitable pleasure not only to those who are immediate objects of your compassion, but to others likewise that "see your good works, and glorify your Father which is in heaven."

4. And while you are pitiful to the afflicted, see that you are courteous toward all men. It matters not in this respect whether they are high or low, rich or poor, superior or inferior to you. No, nor even whether good or bad, whether they fear God or not. Indeed, the mode of showing your courtesy may vary, as Christian prudence will direct; but the thing itself is due to all; the lowest and worst have a claim to our courtesy. [But what is courtesy?] It may either be inward or outward; either a temper or a mode of behaviour. Such a mode of behaviour as naturally springs from courtesy of heart. Is this the same with good breeding, or politeness? (which seems to be only a high degree of good-breeding:) Nay, good breeding is chiefly the fruit of education; but education cannot give courtesy of heart. Mr. Addison's well-known definition of politeness seems rather to be a definition of this: "A constant desire of pleasing all men, appearing through the whole conversation." Now, this may subsist, even in a high degree, where there has been no advantage of education. I have seen as real courtesy in an Irish cabin, as could be found in St. James's or the Louvre.

5. Shall we endeavour to go a little deeper, to search into the foundation of this matter? What is the source of that desire to please which we term courtesy? Let us look attentively into our heart, and we shall soon find the answer. The same Apostle that teaches us to be courteous, teaches us to honour all men; and his Master teaches me to love all men. Join these together, and what will be the effect? A poor wretch cries to me for an alms: I look and see him covered with dirt and rags. But through these I see one that has an immortal spirit, made to know and love and dwell with God to eternity. I honour him for his Creator's sake. Lo, I see through all these rags that he is purpled over with the blood of Christ. I love him for the sake of his Redeemer. The courtesy, therefore, which I feel and show toward him is a mixture of the honour and love which I bear to the offspring of God; the purchase of his Son's blood, and the candidate for immortality. This courtesy let us feel and show toward all men; and we shall please all men to their edification.

6. Once more. Take all proper opportunities of declaring to others the affection+ which you really feel for them. This may be done with such an air, and in such a manner, as is not liable to the imputation of flattery: And experience shows, that honest men are pleased by this, full as much as knaves are by flattery. Those who are persuaded that your expressions of good-will toward them are the language of

your heart will be as well satisfied with them, as with the highest encomiums which you could pass upon them. You may judge them by yourselves, by what you feel in your own breast. You like to be honoured; but had you not rather be beloved?

7. Permit me to add one advice more. If you would please all men for their good, at all events speak to all men the very truth from your heart. When you speak, open the window of your breast: let the words be the very picture of your heart. In all company, and on all occasions, be a man of veracity. Nay, be not content with bare veracity; but "in simplicity and godly sincerity have all your conversation in the world," as "an Israelite indeed, in whom is no guile."

8. To sum up all in one word-if you would please men, please God! Let truth and love possess your whole soul. Let them be the springs of all your affections, passions, tempers; the rule of all your thoughts. Let them inspire all your discourse; continually seasoned with that salt, and meet to "minister grace to the hearers." Let all your actions be wrought in love. Never "let mercy or truth forsake thee: Bind them about thy neck." Let them be open and conspicuous to all; and "write them on the table of thy heart." "So shalt thou find favour and good understanding in the sight of God and man."

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