

January 23, 2011 by Steve Brandon



How To Please God

Hebrews 11:6

1. Believe in His Reality 2. Believe in His Reward

As I was preparing my message this week, I came across an article on ChristianityToday.com written by a woman named Amber Penney. In this article, she wrote of her experiences.

"I tried my hardest to live out what I believed. I had a quiet time every morning. I prayed often. I memorized Scripture. I led a small Bible study group. And I never missed Sunday school or church. But it never seemed like I was doing enough, and I kicked myself for it. What would it take to please God? What else did I need to do?" [\[1\]](#)

You can sense the anguish in her heart. She so desperately wanted to please God. And so, she engaged in everything that she could to please God. But, there was an aching in her heart. She said, "it never seemed like I was doing enough." And so, I ask you the same questions and Amber Penney was asking, "What does it take to please God?"

Does it take quiet time every day? Does it take praying throughout the day, every day? Does it take Scripture memory. Does it take leading Bible studies? Does it take Sunday School attendance? Does it take church attendance? Can you ever truly know that you are pleasing to God?"

Well, our text this morning answers these questions. The title of my message this morning is this: "How to Please God." Before we begin, I do want to ask you directly: do you want to please God? Is this in your heart? Above all things, do you want to please the Lord? As you have come here this morning, I trust that this is your heart.

Pleasing the Lord is in the heart of every Christian. Paul wrote in 2 Corinthians 5:9, "Therefore we also have as our ambition, whether at home or absent, to be pleasing to Him." In the context, you can see that Paul was talking about living or dying. Either way, he was seeking to please the Lord. Such is only right. When a child's relationship with his parents is healthy, all he wants to do is please them. He wants to make them happy. With the Lord, it's the same way. Everyone who believes in the Lord has a deep-down desire to please our master. So, "How do you please the Lord?"

I'm glad you asked. I invite you to open your Bibles to Hebrews, chapter 11, and verse 6. We will focus this morning on a single verse of Scripture: Hebrews 11:6. Let me read it now:

Hebrews 11:6

And without faith it is impossible to please Him, for he who comes to God must believe that He is and that He is a rewarder of those who seek Him.

I know that there are many of you who know this verse well. I first remember memorizing it as a senior in college, when I got hold the Navigator's topical memory system. Another guy and I challenged each other to memorize these 75 verses, which were placed in 5 different categories. Over the period of the next few weeks, we did so. Many of those verses have stuck with me until today. [\[2\]](#)

This verse is one of them, ...

Hebrews 11:6

And without faith it is impossible to please Him, for he who comes to God must believe that He is and that He is a rewarder of those who seek Him.

Now, in the context of Hebrews 11, this verse flows naturally from verse 5, which spoke about Enoch, who was pleasing to God.

Hebrews 11:5

By faith Enoch was taken up so that he would not see death; and he was not found because God took him up; for he obtained the witness that before his being taken up he was pleasing to God.

That is, Enoch's life was such that it put delight in the heart of God. Verse 6, then, explains how Enoch was pleasing to God. But, verse 6 doesn't merely apply to only Enoch. Rather, it's a universal statement that true at all times, and for all peoples, informing us how to please the

Lord. In this way, verse 6 is much like verse 1, which is a universal description of faith.

Hebrews 11:1

Now faith is the assurance of things hoped for, the conviction of things not seen.

That is, faith is what sees beyond the here and now. Faith is the confidence of the things we don't see. In some regards, verse 6 is similar. It describes the believing in Him who is invisible. It describes the seeking of Him who promises.

Hebrews 11:6

And without faith it is impossible to please Him, for he who comes to God must believe that He is and that He is a rewarder of those who seek Him.

Now, fundamentally, we see in this verse what it takes to please God. You want to please God? You must believe. "Without faith it is impossible to please Him." That's a negative way of saying this positive statement: "Faith is necessary to please God." Do you want to please God? You must have faith.

Such is the testimony of everyone listed here in Hebrews, chapter 11. Abel had faith. Enoch had faith. Noah had faith. Abraham and Sarah had faith. Isaac and Jacob and Joseph had faith. Moses and his parents had faith. Rahab had faith.

On the one hand, this is obvious, because faith is tied to each of these people. By faith, Abel offered to God a better sacrifice than Cain. By faith, Enoch was taken up so that he would not see death. By faith, Noah, in reverence, built an ark. By faith Abraham, went out, not knowing where he was going. By faith, Sarah received ability to conceive. By faith, Abraham offered up Isaac. By faith, Isaac, Jacob, and Joseph blessed their sons in their dying days. By faith, Moses was hidden. By faith, Moses refused to be called the son of Pharaoh's daughter. By faith, Rahab was saved from destruction.

But, in verse 39, we see it explicitly stated that these people were pleasing to God. "All these, [have] gained approval through their faith." Here, we see God, looking down upon each of these people in the hall of faith. And as God looks down, He is doing so with a critical eye, evaluating them. They either had His approval, or they didn't have His approval. They either pleased God, or they didn't please God. And, the conclusion here is that they all "gained approval through their faith" (verse 39). They all were pleasing to God.

Notice here (in verse 39) how it is that they gained the approval of God? It was "through their faith." In other words, faith was the means of pleasing God. But, you might easily say, "Didn't they do wonderful things?" They worshiped and walked with God. They witnessed for God. They obeyed God. They chose His path, rather than the easy path of the world. They conquered kingdoms and performed acts of righteousness. They shut the mouths of lions and escaped the edge of the sword. They put foreign armies to flight and were persecuted.

Wasn't God pleased with the things that they did? To be sure, He was. But, verse 39 is very intentional with what gained their approval. The text doesn't say, "All these, [have] gained approval through the mighty things that they have done!" That's not what the verse says. That's not what verse 6 says. That's not the message of Hebrews 11. It's not "things that we do for God" that ultimately pleases God.

This means that Bible reading, by itself, doesn't please God. This means that prayer, by itself, doesn't please God. This means that sacrifice and service, by themselves, don't please God. To please God, you must have faith. Paul said it well in Romans 14:23, "whatever is not from faith is sin." In this way, faith is like love. We see it in 1 Corinthians, ...

1 Corinthians 13:1-3

If I speak with the tongues of men and of angels, but do not have love, I have become a noisy gong or a clanging cymbal. If I have the gift of prophecy, and know all mysteries and all knowledge; and if I have all faith, so as to remove mountains, but do not have love, I am nothing. And if I give all my possessions to feed the poor, and if I surrender my body to be burned, but do not have love, it profits me nothing.

And if I worship the Lord, but do not have faith, God is not pleased. And if I obey the Lord, but do not have faith, God is not pleased. And if I shut the mouths of lions and put foreign armies to flight, but do not have faith, God is not pleased.

"Without faith it is impossible to please Him." It's not just hard to do. It's not just really, really difficult. No, it's impossible. That means, "it cannot be done." You cannot please the Lord without faith. You must have faith to please the Lord.

Now, you might well ask, "So, where do all of the mighty deeds of those in Hebrews 11 fit in?" All of these things flowed from their faith. That is, they were an expression of their faith. That's the thrust of the repeated, "By faith ..., by faith ..., by faith." These two words are repeated almost 20 times in these verses. The great things that God's people have done through the ages that have pleased the Lord, have all been by faith. Do you want to please God? Have faith in God. And let everything that you do flow from your faith.

Let's go back to the quote that I began my message. You remember Amber Penney was seeking to please God with all of her religious activity, but was finding futility in the process. She continued, ...

One day I asked my pastor these questions, and he had some encouraging words: "If you're a Christian, God is pleased with you," he said. "It sounds like you're looking at your relationship with God as a to-do list. That's what's stealing your joy."

...

"Now, don't quit having your quiet time or leading your Bible study. Those things are evidence of a changed heart. But you mustn't think that God's approval rests on how well and how often you do them." [\[1\]](#)

What a great response. If you believe and trust in Jesus Christ for your salvation, then you don't have to worry about God's approval of you. He has gone on record to say that "There is no condemnation for those who are in Christ Jesus" (Romans 8:1). Jesus had bore your sins in His body on the cross (1 Peter 2:24). If you believe in Christ, God is pleased with you. But, that doesn't mean you go out and sin as you please. Such would be inconsistent with your profession of faith. If you do that, it demonstrates that you don't believe.

So, you pursue God and serve Him and love Him and love others. But you do so not to gain merit before God. Rather, you do so because you love the One who died for your sins. That's why you read your Bible and pray. That's why you serve others and give of yourself. It's all for Him, not for yourself.

C. J. Mahaney helps us here at this point. He recommends that whenever you finish any sort of devotional exercise, that you "close your Bible, and make this declaration to God, 'Lord, thank you for how I have benefited from my study of Your Word. But, I want to declare to you that that practice is not a means of meriting forgiveness, justification, or acceptance. [It is an expression of my dependence upon You]. I can never through my obedience merit what only Christ could achieve in light of your holiness and my sinfulness.'" [\[3\]](#)

If you do that with your Bible reading, it will carry over into all other areas of your Christian life. "God, this morning, I have spent some time praying. My praying isn't a way to gain your approval. Rather, it's an expression of my continued dependence upon you. God, I was able to serve someone today. I don't do so to earn my favor before you. I'm thankful to be your hands and your feet upon this earth to care for others made in Your image."

Such is the life of faith. Such is the life to which the writer to the Hebrews calls us this morning. He calls us to embrace our redemption and respond appropriately. Jesus Christ "gave Himself for us to redeem us from every lawless deed, and to purify for Himself a people for His own possession, zealous for good deeds" (Titus 2:14).

Now, here in verse 6, we see two aspects to this faith we must possess. These two aspects form my outline this morning. How do you please God? First of all, you need to ...

1. Believe in His Reality

Or, as the writer puts it here, "You need to believe that He is." This is the first part of faith. It's believing in the existence of God. It's believing in the reality of God.

Do you believe in the existence of God? Down through the centuries, theologians have put forth many, many arguments for the existence of God. They often call these "proofs".

There is the cosmological argument for God. Everything that we see in our universe has a cause. Therefore, the universe, itself must have a cause. The cause is God, Himself. There is the teleological argument for God. There is order and design in the universe. This implies an intelligent purpose behind the creation. The designer is God, Himself. There is the moral argument. This comes from the fact that we all have a sense of right and wrong. This implies a source of right and wrong. The source must be God, Himself. [\[4\]](#)

Do you believe in the existence of God? If you want to please Him, this is where you must begin. "You must believe that He is." You can't please God if you don't believe in His existence.

Recently, I've been reading a great book by Tim Keller, called, "The Reason for God." In the book, he thoughtfully puts forth reasons for the Christian faith. One of the things that I appreciate about his approach is that he recognizes the limitations of each of these "proofs" for God. None of them are ultimately convincing in and of themselves. That's why we still have atheists in this world. And so, one of the approaches that Keller makes is this: Rather than looking at arguments like these as "proofs," he has encouraged those who are skeptical to look at them as "clues."

So, think about the cause of the universe and say, ... Hmmm. Then, look at the design of the universe and say, Hmmmm. Look at how we all have a sense of morality and say, ... Hmmmmmm. Look at the laws of nature -- where did they come from? And say, ... Hummmm. Look at the fact that we all know of beauty and say, ... Hmmmmmm. Finally, put all of these clues together -- let all of the evidence speak -- and they are all testifying to the same thing: God exists. And thus, there is an overwhelming weight of evidence for why we believe as we do. Every argument converges on the same place: God exists.

Now, as much as those sorts of things might address the issue of many in our day, such really wasn't the issue of the original readers. Think about them. They were Jewish people. They were religious people, who looked to the pages of Scripture as authoritative (that's why so much Scripture is used in the book of Hebrews). The existence of God really wasn't an issue for them. Or was it.

What led Israel to complain after they left the bondage of slavery, but an unbelief in God? What led Israel to forsake their God and pursue their idols, but an unbelief in God? What led the wicked kings of Israel and Judah to lead the people into covenants with nearby countries, and the embrace of their gods, but an unbelief in God? What led the Pharisees to live lives so contrary to God's heart, but an unbelief in God? Within the life of Israel, there was often a disconnect between their creed and their conduct.

And the same happens today. Some have used the term "Practical Atheists". We may profess a faith in God, but our lives often deny it! At times it's clear. At times it's not. I was recently talking with a gal who professed to believe everything that I believed. Yet, her life was not at all reflecting her profession. She had grown up religious and still professes to believe what she was taught. But, the way that she is living now,

she is denying the very existence of God.

What does she need? She needs to believe in the reality of God. Because, if she did, her life would change. A genuine belief in the reality of God changes the way that you live. And a life that believes in the reality of God will live pleasing to the Lord.

Perhaps the sense of Hebrews 11:6 is this: we must "believe God." There is a difference in believing in God and believing God. So, if you want to please God, Believe in His Reality. My second point comes from the second half of the verse. If you want to please God, ...

2. Believe in His Reward

Look again there at Hebrews 11, verse 6, ...

Hebrews 11:6

And without faith it is impossible to please Him, for he who comes to God must believe that He is and that He is a rewarder of those who seek Him.

Fundamental to our faith is the reality that there is a reward awaiting those who follow Christ. There is reward in this present life. There is reward in the future life.

The Proverbs spell out the rewards of this life: peace, riches, honor, life, safety. Proverbs 16:7 promises, "When a man's ways are pleasing to the LORD, He makes even his enemies to be at peace with him." Proverbs 22:4 says, "The reward of humility and the fear of the LORD, Are riches, honor and life." Proverbs 14:26 comforts, "In the fear of the LORD there is strong confidence, And his children will have refuge."

But, the greater reward will be in the life to come. Jesus told the parable of the man who found a treasure hidden in the field, which he promptly hid. And then, "from joy over it he goes and sells all that he has and buys that field" (Matt. 13:44). In other words, the kingdom of heaven is giving up all that you have in this life, to gain something far greater in the next. In the very next verse, Jesus tells of the merchant seeking fine pearls, "and upon finding one pearl of great value, he went and sold all that he had and bought it" (Matt. 13:45-46). Again, Jesus taught the same thing. You give up your life on earth, and you will gain the one pearl that you really want.

In the Sermon on the Mount, Jesus said, ...

Matthew 6:19-21

Do not store up for yourselves treasures on earth, where moth and rust destroy, and where thieves break in and steal. But store up for yourselves treasures in heaven, where neither moth nor rust destroys, and where thieves do not break in or steal;

In other words, Jesus wants for us to have a great treasure. But, the treasure isn't here on earth. The treasure is in heaven. So, Jesus calls for us to store away our treasures for a later time, when God will richly reward us! When Jesus calls followers to Himself, He guarantees them that any sacrifice made will be worth it all.

Matthew 19:27-29

Then Peter said to Him, "Behold, we have left everything and followed You; what then will there be for us?" And Jesus said to them, "Truly I say to you, that you who have followed Me, in the regeneration when the Son of Man will sit on His glorious throne, you also shall sit upon twelve thrones, judging the twelve tribes of Israel. And everyone who has left houses or brothers or sisters or father or mother or children or farms for My name's sake, will receive many times as much, and will inherit eternal life.

I trust that you catch the heart of Jesus. He says, "Pursuing the Lord and following Him is something that is ultimately better for you." Don't ever think that God is using you as a pawn to accomplish His grand design at your expense. No, that's not it at all. God cares for you. God wants the best for you. And you will be most happy when you are seeking His reward.

I love the way that Charles Spurgeon put it, ...

If any man pleases God, he does that which contributes most to his own temporal and eternal welfare. Man cannot please God without bringing to himself a great amount of happiness; for if any man pleases God, it is because God accepts him as his son, gives him the blessings of adoption, pours upon him the bounties of his grace, makes him a blessed man in this life, and insures him a crown of everlasting life, which he shall wear, and which shall shine with unfading luster when the wreaths of earth's glory have all been melted away; while, on the other hand, if a man does not please God, he inevitably brings upon himself sorrow and suffering in this life; he puts a worm and a rottenness in the core of all his joys; he fills his death-pillow with thorns, and he supplies the eternal fire with faggots of flame which shall for ever consume him. He that pleases God, is, through Divine grace, journeying onward to the ultimate reward of all those that love and fear God; but he who is ill-pleasing to God, must, for Scripture has declared it, be banished from the presence of God, and consequently from the enjoyment of happiness. [\[5\]](#)

And so, all that Jesus tells us of seeking life beyond this one is for our own good and eternal happiness. Those in Hebrews 11 had grasped this. Look at Abraham in verse 8, "By faith Abraham, when he was called, obeyed by going out to a place which he was to receive for an inheritance; and he went out, not knowing where he was going." Here is faith in action. God says, "Go! I will give you a land." Abraham didn't

know where this land was, but, he went by faith. He had the conviction of things not seen. According to verse 10, "He was looking for the city which has foundations, whose architect and builder is God". He was looking for the city that God would build him.

Consider those in verses 13-16 who died in faith. All they could see was the future inheritance. Talking about Abel and Enoch and Noah and Abraham and Sarah, we read, ...

Hebrews 11:13-16

All these died in faith, without receiving the promises, but having seen them and having welcomed them from a distance, and having confessed that they were strangers and exiles on the earth. For those who say such things make it clear that they are seeking a country of their own. And indeed if they had been thinking of that country from which they went out, they would have had opportunity to return. But as it is, they desire a better country, that is, a heavenly one. Therefore God is not ashamed to be called their God; for He has prepared a city for them.

That's their reward -- a future city, a heavenly city. That is the reward they seek, not earthly treasures. Consider Moses, in verses 24-26.

Hebrews 11:24-26

By faith Moses, when he had grown up, refused to be called the son of Pharaoh's daughter, choosing rather to endure ill-treatment with the people of God than to enjoy the passing pleasures of sin, considering the reproach of Christ greater riches than the treasures of Egypt; for he was looking to the reward.

Do you see what Moses did? He willingly suffered in this life, because he knew that the riches at the hand of God were more than any riches in this life--even the riches of Pharaoh! He had his eyes on the reward!

And it wasn't only those in the Old Testament times who lived this way. The original hearers lived this way as well. Look back at chapter 10, verse 34, ...

Hebrews 10:34

For you showed sympathy to the prisoners and accepted joyfully the seizure of your property, knowing that you have for yourselves a better possession and a lasting one.

Now, we don't know all of the details surrounding these events. Somehow, the government raided their homes and took their property. But, since their eyes weren't on the things of the earth, it didn't much bother them. Their eyes of faith were upon the things not seen (Heb. 11:1). They knew that they had something better awaiting them. So, they accepted this injustice with joy. They were looking for the reward.

The message of Hebrews is this: press on! Look at verse 35, ...

Hebrews 11:35-36

Therefore, do not throw away your confidence, which has a great reward. For you have need of endurance, so that when you have done the will of God, you may receive what was promised.

The life that pleases the Lord is the life that looks for God's reward. The life that pleases the Lord is the life that looks for what God has promised.

So, here's my final question for you this morning, "Are you seeking Him?" Look at the end of verse 6: "... He is a rewarder of those who seek Him." The reward is for those who are seeking Him!

Several translations make this seeking intensive. For instance, the New International Version puts it this way, "he rewards those who earnestly seek him" The New King James Version says it like this, "He is a rewarder of those who diligently seek Him." The Amplified Bible (which seeks to bring out the nuances of the original texts) says it this way - "He is the rewarder of those who earnestly and diligently seek Him [out]." These are all legitimate translations.

And so, I ask you: Are you "earnestly seeking Him?" Are you "diligently seeking Him?" Does this characterize your life? Do you want to please the Lord? Then, Believe in His Reward and seek the Lord.

This sermon was delivered to Rock Valley Bible Church on January 23, 2011 by Steve Brandon.
For more information see www.rvbc.cc.

[1] <http://www.christianitytoday.com/iyf/hottopics/defendingyourfaith/7.50.html>

[2] <http://www.navigators.org/us/resources/illustrations/items/Topical%20Memory%20System>

[3] C. J. Mahaney delivered this message at the PDI Leadership Conference in 2002. The thrust of this quote can also be found in his wonderful book, "The Cross-Centered Life."

[4] Wayne Grudem, Systematic Theology, pp. 143-144

[5] Charles Spurgeon, Sermon 107, <http://www.spurgeon.org/sermons/0107.htm>