



## Sermon Transcript

### May 12, 2019

# When Jesus Turns Your Life Around From Pleasing Man to Pleasing God

1 Thessalonians 2:1-12

This message from the Bible was addressed originally to the people of Wethersfield Evangelical Free Church on May 12, 2019 at 511 Maple Street, Wethersfield, CT, 06109 by Dr. Scott W. Solberg. This is a transcription that bears the strength and weaknesses of oral delivery. It is not meant to be a polished essay. An audio version of this sermon may also be found on the church website at [www.wethefc.com](http://www.wethefc.com).

## Sermon Text

### 1 Thessalonians 2:1-12

<sup>1</sup> For you yourselves know, brothers, that our coming to you was not in vain. <sup>2</sup> But though we had already suffered and been shamefully treated at Philippi, as you know, we had boldness in our God to declare to you the gospel of God in the midst of much conflict. <sup>3</sup> For our appeal does not spring from error or impurity or any attempt to deceive, <sup>4</sup> but just as we have been approved by God to be entrusted with the gospel, so we speak, not to please man, but to please God who tests our hearts. <sup>5</sup> For we never came with words of flattery, as you know, nor with a pretext for greed—God is witness. <sup>6</sup> Nor did we seek glory from people, whether from you or from others, though we could have made demands as apostles of Christ. <sup>7</sup> But we were gentle among you, like a nursing mother taking care of her own children. <sup>8</sup> So, being affectionately desirous of you, we were ready to share with you not only the gospel of God but also our own selves, because you had become very dear to us.

<sup>9</sup> For you remember, brothers, our labor and toil: we worked night and day, that we might not be a burden to any of you, while we proclaimed to you the gospel of God. <sup>10</sup> You are witnesses, and God also, how holy and righteous and blameless was our conduct toward you believers. <sup>11</sup> For you know how, like a father with his children, <sup>12</sup> we exhorted each one of you and encouraged you and charged you to walk in a manner worthy of God, who calls you into his own kingdom and glory.

## Introduction

When Jesus turns a life around, it is noticeable. It is visible. You can point your finger at it because you can see it.

That is what we discovered last week about this young “church plant” in Thessalonica. Clearly, Jesus turned their lives around. Speaking of their faith, Paul says in 1 Thessalonians 1:9, “*you turned to God from idols to serve the living and true God.*” But what I find interesting about this dramatic turnaround is how visible it was. Their “*work of faith, labor of love and steadfast hope*” could be seen from miles away. They became “*an example to all the believers in Macedonia and Achaia.*” Gordon Fee said it this way, the gospel and its affects in Thessalonica had spread like wildfire probably from synagogue to synagogue all throughout Greece.<sup>1</sup> In other words, they became a visible model of how to live out their faith in the midst of suffering. Their faith was noticeable. It was visible. You could point your finger at it because you could see it.

Now as we move to 1 Thessalonians 2, I can’t help but notice that the Thessalonians were simply imitating what they saw Paul do. Paul’s faith was noticeable. Paul’s faith was visible. You could point your finger at Paul and see the change Jesus made in his life. The visible nature of Paul’s faith is the subject of 1 Thessalonians 2:1-12. In fact, six times in these twelve verses Paul reminds them of what they saw in his faith. He says things like, “*For you yourselves know* (v. 1) . . . *as you know* (v. 2) . . . *as you know* (v. 5) . . . *For you remember* (v. 9) . . . *You are witnesses* (v. 10) and *For you know* (v. 11). What is it that they know? What is it that they remember? What did they witness? In each case it was how Paul’s faith was noticeable to them. Paul summarizes the same thing in 1 Thessalonians 1:5-6 when he says, “*You know what kind of men we proved to be among you for your sake. And you became imitators of us and of the Lord.*”

It is like a rock thrown into the middle of a pond that produces an ever widening ripple throughout the pond. That rock thrown into the pond is Jesus and his life rippled onto Paul, then to the Thessalonians and then throughout Macedonia and Achaia . . . and quite frankly this same gospel has rippled out to us some 2000 years later and all the way over here in Wethersfield, CT. So our prayer is that our faith would ripple into the next generation growing up in this church and to those in our community who are yet to believe and follow Jesus.

This causes me to pause and to simply ask these question: “In what way is our faith noticeable?” “What is visible about our faith?” Can others actually point the finger at us

and say of us, “I can see it!” These are personal questions I can ask of myself. They are also corporate questions we can ask of us as a church family. Either way, they are critical and important questions to ask.

It is not meant to be arrogant and it is not meant to be boastful. But the leadership of a church ought to be able to look at the congregation and say, “imitate us as we imitate Jesus.” Christian parents ought to be able to say to their children, “imitate us as we imitate Jesus.” The older generation of a church ought to say to the younger generation of the church, “imitate us as we imitate Jesus.” This church ought to be able to say to the community where we reside, “imitate us as we imitate Jesus.” In other words, our faith should be noticeable. It should be visible. People ought to be able to point the finger at us and say, “I can see it!”

But see what? What should others see in us as we seek to imitate Jesus? These are the things we are going to discover as we make our way through 1 Thessalonians. All throughout this letter, we discover the various noticeable and visible ways Jesus turns our life around. This morning we are going to hear something Paul said about his own life that speaks to the kind of change Jesus brings to our life. He says in 1 Thessalonians 2:4, “*so we speak not to please man but to please God.*” This is one way Jesus has turned Paul’s life around. His motivation in life is to please God with his life.

Ed Welch wrote a book with a great title to it: *When People are Big and God is Small*. It is a book that teaches us how to deal with our fear of man. One of the things that keeps us from living a life of pleasing God is our fear of man—our tendency to please man over pleasing God. It is a common fear that we all face. Welch says, “Fear of man is such a part of our human fabric that we should check for a pulse if someone denies it.”<sup>2</sup> It is so true. It is a fear that is concerned about what others think about us or say about us or might even do to us. When I evaluate the things that make me anxious, often it comes down to the fear of man over the fear of God.

I want to insert this text and this sermon into the backdrop of our culture. I am currently reading two books that describe for us the challenge of living out our faith in this post-Christian culture. One of the books is called *Disappearing Church* by Mark Sayers. He says, “To get to the heart of our post-Christian context we must understand how we got here, how the ground shifted.”<sup>3</sup> One of the seven key beliefs that pervade our current culture is that “the primary social ethic is tolerance for everyone’s self-defined quest for individual freedom and self-expression. And any deviation from this ethic of tolerance is dangerous and must not be tolerated.”<sup>4</sup> In other words, to “Coexist”

- as the bumper sticker suggests—isn't about living peaceably in a pluralistic culture. Rather, if the highest good is "individual freedom and self-expression" (we define truth for ourselves) then the quest for truth that comes from a higher authority—God—will put us in a position where we need to decide: will I live to please man or will I live to please God. And the point of the book is that this choice comes with a cost.

This is the very same thing that is being said in the other book that I am reading. Elliot Clark has written a book called *Evangelism as Exiles*. We are still called to do evangelism. I love the title of the book. It reminds us that we are "exiles" in this world. Perhaps it is a perspective we lost with the cultural Christianity we enjoyed for many years. Elliot Clark also references the "seismic cultural shift" that is happening in our culture. He said that "the West is fast becoming post-Christian, post-truth, and perhaps even post-tolerant. Our exile and persecution doesn't seem any longer to be a question of *if* or even *when*, but *how far*." And so he asks the question, "How will the church respond?"<sup>5</sup> When it comes to doing evangelism, will this "seismic cultural shift" cause us to keep quiet because we know that "pleasing God" will come with a cost?

This quest to overcome our fear of man and to live a life that pleases God is an ongoing challenge in our culture. It is sticky. It requires wisdom and grace. In 1 Thessalonians 4:1, Paul takes this idea of pleasing God and he exhorts this church—like I am exhorting us—to live a life of pleasing God. He says that they observed in him "*how to live and please God*." He went on to say that they are doing it! But then he said, "*do so more and more*." That final exhortation, "*do so more and more*" points to the reality that this is a process that always has room to grow. We will probably wrestle with the fear of man until the day we die. So, to help us in this process, I want us to observe three things from Paul's life that teach us what it is like to live a life that pleases God. These three things are noticeable. They are visible. You can point your finger at them and say, "I can see it!" I believe these three things are what our culture needs to see from us.

## **Boldly Declare the Gospel**

When Paul describes what it looks like to live a life that pleases God, he is specifically talking about the work of evangelism—declaring the message of the gospel. He says in verse 4 that he was "*entrusted with the gospel, so we speak, not to please man, but to please God who tests our hearts*." Even if declaring the gospel causes Paul to suffer—and it did—his primary motive is to please God. He is not going to allow the fear of man to keep him from declaring the truth and the hope we find in Jesus. Our culture needs the church—that is us—to continue to declare the gospel. But it may come with a cost.

In our passage, Paul rehearses the cost he endured for declaring the gospel. He says in verse 2, *“But though we had already suffered and been shamefully treated at Philippi, as you know, we had boldness in our God to declare to you the gospel of God in the midst of much conflict.”* They arrived in Thessalonica on the heels of having just been beaten and imprisoned in Philippi. Given their recent experience, one might think that Paul might reconsider what he is doing and tread lightly when he comes to a new town, namely Thessalonica. But he didn’t. So he says, *“we had boldness in our God to declare to you the gospel of God in the midst of much conflict.”*

One of the reasons Paul writes this letter is because when he came to Thessalonica he couldn’t stay very long. Some think his stay there lasted as little as a month. Others conjecture, possibly he was there for two to three months. Either way, it wasn’t very long to really establish a strong church. We know from Acts 17 that he went to the synagogue to declare to them that Jesus was the promised Messiah and that he died and rose again from the dead. As a result, some Jews believed along with *“a great many of the devout Greeks and not a few of the leading women.”* Their embrace of the gospel caused a stir among them and so Paul had to leave earlier than what he would have liked. So he was concerned about how this young “church plant” was surviving in this difficult context. In 1 Thessalonians 3, we learn that he sent Timothy to find out how their faith was holding up. Paul was afraid that this young church would shrink back from declaring the gospel because of the suffering that comes with that. Instead, Timothy came back with a good report. You heard the report last week. The news of their *work of faith, labor of love and steadfast hope* had spread throughout the region. Reflecting on this context of suffering for the sake of the gospel, Paul says something to this church in Thessalonica that needs to be said to the church in the “shifting culture” of the West where we once had a privileged seat at the table. He said of their suffering, *“For you yourselves know that we are destined for this.”* We have lost sight of the fact that we proclaim a Jesus who carried a cross. Or as Peter puts it in his letter to a discouraged and persecuted church in 1 Peter 4:12, *“Don’t be surprised at the fiery trial when it comes upon you.”* It is the norm!

Paul says something in our passage that every generation of Christ-followers—the church in that widening ripple of gospel influence—needs to hear and take seriously. Paul says in verse 4 that he was *“entrusted with the gospel.”* Paul says the same thing to Timothy in 2 Timothy 1:14, *“guard the good deposit entrusted to you.”* There may be seismic shifts taking place in our culture, but the truth of Jesus has not changed. The gospel doesn’t evolve with the culture. We have been entrusted with the gospel and it still has the power to save. If we want to live to please God we will declare it!

What is this gospel that has been entrusted to us? When Luke summarizes Paul message to the church in Thessalonica in Acts 17:3 he says that Paul took what we know as the Old Testament Scriptures and “*explaining and proving that it was necessary for the Christ to suffer and to rise from the dead, and saying, ‘This Jesus whom I proclaim to you, is the Christ.’*” The core of the message we declare is that Jesus died on the cross and rose from the dead for the forgiveness of sin. He is the Son of God, the promised Messiah, the Savior and Lord. And so Paul reminds them that he didn’t come with flattering words or to make money off of them or for his own glory. Instead, he came to declare to them that Jesus Christ is Lord and there is no other.

Back then this message was a “*stumbling block*” to the Jew and “*folly*” to the Gentile. It is no different today in a shifting culture that calls people to look within themselves to find meaning and to self-define what will make them happy. At the core of the gospel we declare is that there is something fundamentally wrong with us—namely sin—and that the answer does not lie within us. Rather, our only hope is found in the crucified and risen Savior who offers to forgive us our sin if we repent and turn in faith to him.

So the question we have to ask ourselves is whether or not we really believe in the hope that is offered in the gospel. At the beginning of the letter, Paul commends them for their “*steadfast hope*.” One of the features of this letter is that each of the five chapters end with the reminder that because Jesus rose from the dead he is coming back and we have an eternal hope. This is the very thing that enables us to boldly declare the gospel even if it costs us something. You can take my life, but you really can’t.

In his book *Evangelism as Exiles*, Elliot Clark recounts a story when he and his wife were missionaries in a predominantly Muslim culture. One day they were standing at the kitchen window and they saw their 11-year-old son surrounded by a group of boys known in the neighborhood as the “Rough Uncles.” They could tell that these boys were threatening their son. In fact, the boy closest to their son had his arm cocked and ready to throw a large rock at their son. Before they could do anything to intervene, the boy dropped the rock and the boys scattered and their son walked back into the house. When they asked him what had happened they discovered that these boys knew their son was a foreigner and presumed he was a Christian. They asked their son if he believed that Jesus was the Son of God who died on the cross and when he answered in the affirmative, the boy pick up the stone to throw at him. His mother said, “So what did you do?” Their son said, “I told them I wasn’t afraid of them. I told them they could kill me, but that didn’t matter, because I would just end up in heaven.”<sup>6</sup> Do we actually believe the truth we declare?

Clark went on to say that “the dominant reason for our lack of evangelism in America isn’t the fear of death.” He says we face a “softer persecution” and it seems like it doesn’t take much for us to keep quiet—to please man instead of God. “If we open our mouths with the gospel, we run the risk of others thinking we’re close minded or unloving . . . It may not be overt persecution that crushes your spirit or tamps down your witness: it can simply be the shame of having those closest to you consider you to be foolish, ignorant, arrogant, misguided or a prude.”<sup>7</sup> What is the remedy to this shame and fear of man? It is actually believing in the hope and the glory that is to come.

May we live to please God and may we boldly declare the gospel to this ever changing world. May this be noticeable about us. May it be visible. May others point their finger at us and say, “we can see it!”

### **Affectionately Love People**

There is something else that is noticeable and visible about Paul’s desire to please God that needs to be seen in light of our call to boldly declare the gospel. It speaks to how he treated people. It speaks to how he carried himself towards people. He says in verses 7-8, “*But we were gentle among you, like a nursing mother taking care of her own children. So, being affectionately desirous of you, we were ready to share with you not only the gospel of God but also our own selves, because you had become very dear to us.*” “Gentle” and “affectionately desirous of you” and “very dear to us” are strong images of the relationship Paul had with this church. I like how he said that they didn’t just come declaring a message—as good as that message might be—but they *were ready to share . . . our own selves.*”

This gentle demeanor is essential to taking on a posture that enables us to live a life that pleases God. But where does this gentle demeanor come from? It starts with our relationship with God. Jesus says in The Beatitudes, “*Blessed are the meek.*” The one who is meek or gentle, is someone who bows the knee to God and who knows their need for grace.

The Beatitudes form a progression of thought. It starts with, “*Blessed are the poor in spirit.*” To be poor in spirit is to recognize my own sin. “It is not my brother, or my sister, but it is me oh, Lord, standing in the need of prayer.” The next Beatitude is, “*blessed are those who mourn.*” After you recognize the sinful state of your heart, it causes you to sorrow and to mourn and to grieve over your sin. It is at this point we come to the third Beatitude, “*Blessed are the meek.*” Those who acknowledge their



shortcomings, and who sorrow over their sin, then turn to Jesus with faith and, in meekness, because they recognize Jesus is their only hope. Their “Nothing in my hand I bring, simply to Thy cross I cling; Naked, come to Thee for dress; Helpless, look to Thee for grace; Foul, I to the fountain fly—Wash me, Savior, or I die!”

This has a profound impact on how you look at yourself. Martin Lloyd Jones says that the one who is meek is “the man who is amazed that God and man can think of him as well as they do and treat him as well as they do.”<sup>8</sup> We tend to operate the opposite of that. When we aren’t treated like we are something special, we get offended. See, if you are meek, you recognize that, before God, you stand in need of grace and you are no better than the person sitting next to you. Can you see how this is a fountain for demonstrating a gentle spirit toward others? If you are meek in your relationship with God, you know there is nothing in you to commend you to God. Your need for God is total. Therefore, you can be gentle with the next person, because your need is no less than theirs.

Let’s bring this back under the backdrop of living this out in our current culture where we just saw that pleasing God involves “*declaring the gospel*.” This message must also be accompanied with the same affection for people that Paul had for this church. Granted, his affection deepened as they responded to the gospel and as they became brothers and sisters. But I would argue that before they ever became brothers and sisters in Christ, Paul was gentle and affectionate towards them as he declared the truth of the gospel. And so he gave himself to them. He didn’t just stand on a street corner with a bullhorn like I saw the other day. He gave himself.

I think this is the difficult lesson we need to learn as we move from a cultural Christianity to a biblical Christianity. Elliot Clark observes that we have a tendency to “play dodgeball with shame.”<sup>9</sup> If we are insulted, we insult back. This is especially true with how people interact over cultural issues that are part of the cultural shift taking place. In the State of Connecticut, there is a bill being debated that if passed would not allow pro-life pregnancy centers to advertise their services because of what their opponents call “false and misleading and deceptive” advertising because they are “limited in their services.” Meaning, they don’t provide abortions. This is one of many cultural issues and I am not suggesting that we shouldn’t engage in these issues. But Peter instructs a suffering group of Christians living under the Roman Emperor—to be subject to those over them with “*respect, not only to the good and gentle but also to the unjust*.” On succinct words he says to them, “*Honor everyone. Love the brotherhood. Fear God. Honor the emperor*.” The cultural debates before us may not go your way.

The elected officials may not be the ones you want. But as you maintain a humble and gentle posture before God, you can please God by expressing gentle affection towards others—even those who revile you. In fact, showing this kind of respect and honor and affection has a way of validating the gospel we preach. I think this pleases God.

## Live Holy Lives

There is one more thing the Thessalonians saw in Paul when he was among them, even though his time with them was brief. He says in verse 9 that it is something they should remember about Paul and in verse 10 it was something that they witnessed. In other words, these were clearly visible to them. It was how he and his apostolic team conducted themselves. They weren't a burden to anyone. They worked hard. They supported themselves. Their conduct was "holy." And so Paul *"exhorts—encourages—calls them to likewise 'walk in a manner worthy of God.'"*

How we live matters if we want to please God in this culture. I am not going to say much about this at this time because we will tease out this thought more as we walk through this series. However, I will say this. One of the best things the church can do for this growing secular culture is to *"exhort—encourage—charge"* one another to live holy and blameless lives.

After the fall of the Roman Empire all the structures that once brought peace and structure were suddenly gone. It was a chaotic time socially and culturally. Some observers of culture see many parallels between the West and Rome. We do know there is one kingdom that lasts forever, the kingdom of God. But during this time St. Benedict took a strategy that sought to go deep with a few instead of trying to appeal to the masses. They lived by a code, they lived quiet lives, they valued work and had high moral values. They were an alternative to what was happening in the culture. Mark Sayers writes, "By going deep with a few, living by code, submitting themselves to God, dwelling in Scripture, and quietly living out the kingdom, the community that gathered around Benedict became magnetic."<sup>9</sup>

He is basically describing what the church ought to be and ought to look like. If we want to go wide with our faith—to see the ripple affects of the gospel go beyond our generation—we need to go deep. We need to be the alternative to where our culture is going. Because what our culture has to offer is empty and it will implode. It is the church that needs to be that "magnetic" community that is committed to more and more grow in pleasing God.

## Conclusion

Is it noticeable? Is it visible? Can you point your finger and say, “I see it!”? May it be so more and more that our aim as a church is to live to please God above all that we do.

We should not shrink back from declaring Jesus to this world, even if it is somewhat out of step with our culture. But we need to make sure we do so with gentle affection and honor for all. As we seek to live holy lives—together as a church community—over time we become a community where people can turn to for hope in a very broken world. May God be so gracious to allow the ripple affect of the gospel widen through us for generations to come. May it be so.

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<sup>1</sup>Gordon Fee *The First and Second Letters to the Thessalonians* (Grand Rapids: Eerdmans, 2009) 41

<sup>2</sup>Ed Welch *When People are Big and God is Small* (Philipsburg: P&R Publishing, 1997)

<sup>3</sup>Mark Sayers *Disappearing Church* (Chicago: Moody Press, 2016) 16

<sup>4</sup>*Ibid.*, 16

<sup>5</sup>Elliot Clark *Evangelism as Exiles* (The Gospel Coalition, 2019) 23

<sup>6</sup>*Ibid.*, 28-29

<sup>7</sup>*Ibid.*, 33

<sup>8</sup>Martin Lloyd-Jones *Studies in the Sermon on the Mount*, 2 vols. (Grand Rapids: Eerdmans, 1959-1960) 1:69-70

<sup>9</sup>Sayers, 120

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## COMMUNITY GROUPS

### Getting To Know Me Questions

1. Spend time “checking-in” with each other. Share with each other something you are celebrating and something that is a concern. Pray for each other.
2. Encourage one another by sharing how you “see” Christ in each other.
3. What is something that stood out to you from the sermon?

### Diving Into The Word

4. Read 1 Thessalonians 2:4. What do you find challenging between the tension of “pleasing man” and “pleasing God”?
5. Read 1 Thessalonians 2:1-6. What do you admire about Paul’s example of “declaring the gospel in the midst of much conflict”? Describe the “conflict” we face in declaring the gospel. How do we overcome it?
6. Read 1 Thessalonians 2:7-8 and 1 Peter 2:13-23. Be gentle, affectionate and show honor and respect for everyone. What do you find to be most challenging about this?
7. Read 1 Thessalonians 2:9-12. What are ways you can “exhort, encourage and call” each other to holiness? Why is this important to our witness?

### Taking It Home

8. Identify a specific way the fear of man influences you. What step would you like to take to address that?
9. Where do you find it difficult to show honor and respect to people? What step can you take to help show honor in this circumstance?