



## Sermon Transcript

### June 9, 2019

## When Jesus Turns Your Life Around

### The Simple Way

1 Thessalonians 4:9-12

This message from the Bible was addressed originally to the people of Wethersfield Evangelical Free Church on June 9, 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 4:9-12**

<sup>9</sup> Now concerning brotherly love you have no need for anyone to write to you, for you yourselves have been taught by God to love one another, <sup>10</sup> for that indeed is what you are doing to all the brothers throughout Macedonia. But we urge you, brothers, to do this more and more, <sup>11</sup> and to aspire to live quietly, and to mind your own affairs, and to work with your hands, as we instructed you, <sup>12</sup> so that you may walk properly before outsiders and be dependent on no one.

## Introduction

The best way is often the simple way. By simple, I don't mean that it is the easy way. In fact, it is far from easy. Instead, what I mean is that you don't have to make it so complicated. At the end of the day, it is rather simple. What is so simple? It is living out our faith in such a way that it has gospel and kingdom impact. It is the simple things that God often uses to impact the world for Christ.

We noted last week that when Paul writes this first letter to the Thessalonians, he is addressing a church—followers of Jesus—who live in a pre-Christian culture. Everything in the Roman culture seems to be working against them. This was highlighted last week when Paul called the church to “*abstain from sexual immorality*.” The Christian sexual ethic—purity before marriage and fidelity within marriage—was not just a differing opinion from Roman practice and thought. Rather, the Christian sexual ethic actually stood opposed to the sexual ethic of Rome. The Christian view of sexuality was actually an attack on Rome's religious, political and social virtues and structures. This led to some of the hostility the early Christians had to endure.

With all these forces working against the early church, one wonders how the church endured. But it did more than endure. It grew rapidly. Rodney Stark is a sociologist of religion and he says that the number of Christians within the Roman Empire went from a few thousand in 40 A.D. to 25 to 35 million by the fourth century. That is 40% growth per decade for hundreds of years.<sup>1</sup> Stark set out to answer this question: “How did a tiny and obscure messianic movement from the edge of the Roman Empire (Jerusalem) dislodge classical paganism and become the dominant faith in Western civilization?”<sup>2</sup> Another way to ask it is like this: “How did Christians living in a pre-Christian culture that was hostile to them and their faith make such an impact for Christ?”

After careful historical research, Stark identifies four main reasons for the advance of the church in this pre-Christian culture. Granted, you can't discount that God was at work and that this was a movement of God that you can't reduce down to a human formula. And yet, there is something to be learned by these four observations. I am struck by how these four reasons reflect “the simple way” we are invited to live out our faith. Here are the four reasons Christianity grew as it did in the Roman Empire:

Social Networks: It is relationships. Through everyday friendships and personal interactions of average believers, people came to faith. These social networks were formed around “churches.”

Caring for the sick, widows and orphans: When the plagues and natural disasters hit the areas where Christians lived, they didn't flee like the pagans did. Instead, they stayed to care for their own and for others. Over time, this led to many coming to faith.

Stance against adultery, abortion and infanticide: It is what we talked about last week—a Christian sexual ethic led to stable families where women and children were valued. Some Christians would rescue abandoned babies and raise them as their own.

A theology of love: Christians insist that God loves the world and he desires that those who love him to love their fellow man.<sup>3</sup>

Reflecting on this, Seraphim Danckaert observed, “Research like Stark’s provides an unmistakable and powerful lesson: the regular witness of ordinary, every-day Christian people tending to the poor, the orphans, and the sick in their own urban communities contributed decisively to early Christianity’s tremendous growth.”<sup>4</sup> In other words, they were committed to relationship (church), extending mercy to the one in need, sexual purity (the family) and an ethic of love that comes from God. They were committed to “the simple way.” The best way is often the simple way.

I say this for two reasons. First of all, these are the very things Paul *urges* the Thessalonians to be doing in the first half of 1 Thessalonians 4. If you recall, we said last week that the word “*finally*” at the beginning of 1 Thessalonians 4:1 could be better translated “*as for other matters.*” What are these “other matters” Paul wants to bring to their attention? These “*other matters*” are the “simple things” that Rodney Stark said were the reasons for the spread of Christianity throughout the Roman Empire. In other words, what Paul writes about here is what became their simple way of life that had gospel impact. At the top of Paul’s list of “*other matters*” was Paul’s instruction to *abstain from sexual immorality*. Sexual purity leads to the strengthening of the family and caring for those most vulnerable in our society: the unborn and the abandoned.

This morning we come to verse 9 where Paul introduces “another matter” in his list of *other matters* he wants to address. It is here he *urges* the believers to demonstrate brotherly love. That is what Stark was talking about when he talked about “social networks of relationship” and “a theology of love.” And then, in the second half of the passage, he calls the followers of Christ to live quiet lives—to take care of themselves. This puts them in the position of caring for others, namely the one in need.

This is the second reason why I think it is good to look at this passage and be reminded

that “the best way is often the simple way.” It is because we live in a post-Christian culture—with many similarities that the Thessalonians had to face. At the very least, we feel the things we believe often stand opposed to the virtues of our culture and we wonder if we can be of any impact for Christ where we live. My encouragement to you is to look to history and know that you are having impact. But sometimes we don’t see it because we forget it is the slow impact over time as we live out the “simple way” as Paul urges us through this letter to the Thessalonians. It is a commitment to each other, our relationships in the church. It is extending mercy to the one in need. It is maintaining sexual purity and the sanctity of the family. It is a life of love. The steady drip of these things is what makes long term gospel impact. Be encouraged this morning as we reflect on the power of the “simple way” of living out our faith. Be committed to this “simple way” knowing that God uses it to for gospel and kingdom impact.

### **The Simple Way of Brotherly Love**

After Paul addresses the issue of sexual morality, he moves to the next item of “other matters” to the topic of “*brotherly love*.” He writes in verse 9, “*Now concerning brotherly love you have no need for anyone to write to you, for you yourselves have been taught by God to love one another, for that indeed is what you are doing to all the brothers throughout Macedonia. But we urge you, brothers, to do this more and more.*”

The term *brotherly love* is a word that is used to describe the mutual love between siblings. We like to say around here that because of God’s grace through faith in Jesus we are sons and daughters of God. That is our identity. We are deeply loved by God and so we cry out to God with tender affection *Abba*, which means “father.” We have been adopted into the family of God. And so, if God is my Father, then you are my brothers and sisters and we should experience a mutual kind of love—a *brotherly love*—a family love that is anchored in our love for God. This is the first time you find this word used in the New Testament. But every time it is used, it refers to our relationship in the community of faith, because through Christ, we have a common Father.

What a wonderful thing Paul says to this church about their display of *brotherly love*. He says to them that he doesn’t need to say much to them about this because they are a wonderful demonstration of this kind of love. In fact they are known for it all throughout Macedonia. What a wonderful reputation to have. I think that their reputation spread throughout the region as Christian travelers from around Macedonia made their way through Thessalonica they received incredible hospitality and were enveloped into the community of Christians there and when they left to return home,

they just couldn't stop talking about the kind of love this church demonstrated. It was powerful. And so Paul, knowing how fragile this love can be at times, encourages them to keep it up. He says, "*But we urge you, brothers, to do this more and more.*" Why? Because like Rodney Stark discovered, it is through the power of the social network of the church—the power of relationship—friendship—*brotherly love*—the church is able to have gospel impact. The best way is often the simple way.

One of the hidden gems of this passage is found in the phrase, "*for you yourselves have been taught by God to love one another.*" When I first read that phrase this week, I thought the point was rather obvious. In both the Old Testament and the New Testament we find clear teaching that the essence of God's law is to love God and to love others. The Scripture is filled with this teaching and so quite naturally, they "*have been taught by God to love one another.*" But there is a hidden gem here that you don't pick up in the English translation of this verse. That phrase *taught by God* is not really a phrase in Greek. It is actually a word that can be translated "*God-taught.*" What is interesting about this word "*God-taught*" is that you don't find it anywhere else in the New Testament, nor do you find it anywhere else in Greek literature prior to Paul. So Ligon Duncan suggests, "apparently Paul invented it."<sup>5</sup> Many scholars believe that Paul was influenced by Isaiah 54:13 where God says through the prophet Isaiah that there is going to be a day that comes when God teaches his own children. In the Greek version of Isaiah 54:13 the words "God" and "taught" are put side by side and so some think Paul simply put the words together and said, "Thessalonians, you are God-taught."

When the prophet Isaiah spoke about a coming day when God's children would be taught by God—would be *God-taught*—he was talking about our day. The Bible is divided between Old Testament and New Testament. Another way you can say it is that the Bible is divided between "old covenant" and "new covenant." The command is the same in both the Old Testament and the New Testament. We are to love one another. But in the Old Testament, this command was written on tablets of stone and if there is one thing that we learned through the Old Testament is that as simple as the command sounds—love God and love others—man is incapable of doing that on their own. The testimony of the Old Testament is that man is incapable of keeping the commands of God—loving others as we should—and is therefore sinful and rendered guilty before God. Our crimes against each other, against humanity are too numerous to count. This self-seeking nature of man still fills the headlines of the paper today.

But the Old Testament prophets Isaiah, Jeremiah and Ezekiel began to talk about a day when God was going to do something new. He was going to write his law on the hearts

of his people. Last Sunday, you held the cup in your hand and it was pronounced to you, “*this is the blood of the new covenant.*” Through the atoning work of Jesus on the cross, our failure to love God and love others has been forgiven. But that is not all. The prophet Ezekiel said in Ezekiel 36:26-27, “*I will give you a new heart and put a new spirit in you; I will remove from you your heart of stone and give you a heart of flesh. And I will put my Spirit in you and move you to follow my decrees and be careful to keep my laws.*” That is what we celebrate today, Pentecost Sunday. It is the coming of the Holy Spirit to indwell and empower us to love one another.

Jesus spoke of the coming of the Holy Spirit in John 14:15-17. He said, “*If you love me, you will keep my commandments.*” But he knew we need God’s power to do that, so he said, “*And I will ask the Father, and he will give you another Helper, to be with you forever, even the Spirit of truth.*” In other words, as the Spirit of God dwells in you, you will be “God-taught.” You will be changed from the inside. This is how Jesus makes a difference in our lives. But to be truly “God-taught” doesn’t mean that you just have knowledge. Paul says in 1 Timothy 1:5 that the goal of their instruction is love. And so when Paul encourages us to demonstrate “*brotherly love*” he is not just suggesting that we just learn how to get along with each other. There is something far more supernatural and powerful at play here. He is saying to the Thessalonians, and to us, “I can tell that you have been ‘God-taught’ and I can tell that the presence of the Spirit of God is here and at work in you because of your love. There is no way you would be doing what you are doing if the Spirit of God were not here. It is supernatural!”

When Paul tells us to *be filled with the Spirit*, he says that the evidence of the filling of the Spirit is seen in what comes out of our mouths and how we relate to each other. When Paul describes what it is like to *grieve the Spirit*, he talks about ways we talk to each other that fail to show the kindness of God and his grace to each other. When Paul tells us to *keep in step with the Spirit*, he does so after describing the Fruit of the Spirit—which is love. See it is the simple things—not always easy—but nonetheless, simple—that demonstrates that God is here and this is what God uses to advance his kingdom.

One of the lessons to draw from how Christianity spread throughout the Roman Empire is a lesson observed by Seraphim Danckaert. When we think of the story of Pentecost and Acts 2, we tend to be drawn to the sings and wonders of the Spirit of God—the miracles. And I don’t think we should discount the miraculous even today. But, when you look back on the influences that led to the spread of the church in Rome, Danckaert says, “we must set aside the belief that Christianity’s early growth happened entirely because of miracles.”<sup>6</sup> Instead it was the “simple way” of God’s love on display by the

way his people loved each other and their neighbor. In fact, I would say that this kind of love is far more powerful than any miracle you might witness. It is the evidence that we are “God-taught” and that the Spirit of God is with us and thus we are different. Where the Spirit of God is, there is power. May this simple way be ours in increasing measure. May the Spirit empower us to grow more and more in this love, and may he start in me.

### **The Simple Way of A Quiet Life**

In verse 11, Paul moves from the broad category of “brotherly love” to a specific way that some within the church at Thessalonica were failing to show brotherly love. Last week we saw Paul begin with the broad topic of sanctification and what it means to be holy. But then he narrowed the topic of holiness down to sexual purity. He is doing the same thing here in our passage this morning. In verse 11, we get the first inclination that some within the church are taking advantage of the “brotherly love” within the church by not working and by not taking care of their own needs. Instead, they are becoming a burden to the church. So Paul writes these instructions to them, *“But we urge you, brothers, . . . to aspire to live quietly, and to mind your own affairs, and to work with your hands, as we instructed you.”*

I get the impression that when Paul wrote these verses, he didn’t fully appreciate the extent to which this problem was impacting the church in Thessalonica. The reason I say that is that in his second letter to them, he gets very direct with them in addressing this problem. It is generally held that the second letter was not written too long after the first letter. I wonder if whoever delivered the first letter came back and told Paul that this issue is bigger than what Paul first thought. And so in 2 Thessalonians 3:6-12 he addresses those whom he calls “idle.” The general consensus is that some thought that Jesus was coming back at any moment, so why work? And given the delay of Christ’s return, the longer it went the more of an unnecessary burden these idle people became to the church. So Paul reminds them that when he was with them, he wasn’t a burden at all to them. He could have expected them to take care of him, but instead he met his own needs. And so he says to them *“For we hear that some among you walk in idleness, not busy at work, but busybodies. Now such persons we command and encourage in the Lord Jesus Christ to do their work quietly and to earn their own living.”* In fact, it is in this passage where he says *“If anyone is not willing to work, let him not eat.”*

So in our passage this morning, when Paul says “aspire to live quietly,” he is literally saying that this ought to be your “ambition.” You are taking care of your life in such a way that it is not a disruptive force within the body. You are not being disruptive in that



you are not sticking your nose into places where you shouldn't. Often that comes with a judgment or an opinion about someone's personal life that becomes disruptive to showing brotherly love. And of course, you are not being disruptive to the body when you are taking care of your own affairs—living within your means—and not becoming an unnecessary burden to the church.

I say “unnecessary” burden because I don't want to convey that anyone who needs the benevolence of the church should feel like they are being disruptive to the church. On the contrary, we are here to help the one who is in need. One way we do that is through our Deacon Fund where we assist our brothers and sisters who are in need—and we do so generously and liberally. But Paul is talking about the one who takes advantage of this “brotherly love” when they could be taking care of their own needs.

There is something incredibly encouraging in Paul's corrective here. The encouragement once again is that often the best way is the simple way. There is a powerful testimony on display when we live quiet and responsible lives. Quietly we get in our cars on Sunday morning—perhaps the only ones on our street—and we quietly come and gather with God's people to worship God. Quietly we care for the needs of the poor and the hurting, not calling attention to ourselves. Michael Gove, a British politician said it well when he said, “The reality of Christian mission in today's churches is a story of thousands of quiet kindnesses. In many of our most disadvantaged communities it is the churches that provide warmth, food, friendship, and support for individuals who have fallen on the worst of times.”<sup>7</sup> It is the quiet sexual ethic that establishes stable families where women and children are valued and flourish. It is the quiet expression of God's love that is seen in churches over and over again.

My point is that we should not under estimate the power of a “quiet life.” It speaks louder than what you may realize. St. Benedict established monasteries during the time of the fall of the Roman Empire. You don't get much quieter than a monastery. And yet, they are attributed to having incredible impact to restoring the culture that was in disarray. John Henry Newman likened St. Benedict's monasteries to “a kind of revolution of ‘silent men’ who quietly got on with the job of rejuvenating the culture behind the scenes in the most mundane ways.”<sup>8</sup> Mark Sayers says, “By going deep with a few, living by code, submitting themselves to God, dwelling in the Scripture, and quietly living out the kingdom, the community that gathered around Benedict became magnetic.”<sup>9</sup> Don't underestimate the power of a small community quietly living out their faith and becoming the very kind of community and family that our world longs for but can't seem to find. Often the best way is the simple way.

In fact, Paul concludes this passage by saying that our quiet way of life is our testimony to those around us and it enables the church to be the church. He says that this quiet way ought to mark us *so that you may walk properly before outsiders and be dependent on no one*.

## Conclusion

My goal is to encourage you this morning. Learn from history. We are so easily attracted to what is new or what seems to be dynamic. I am not denying that God doesn't do new things and that when it comes to the work of the Spirit, we should expect the dynamic to happen—things we can't explain apart from the Spirit of God.

At the same time, don't lose sight of how often the best way is the simple way. Over time it shapes a culture. It may take generations, but we have a role to play. So what do we do? We maintain sexual purity. We commit ourselves to love one another. We are content to live quiet and responsible lives. Through all of this, God advances his kingdom through the normal and the simple way we live out our faith. He has done it over and over again throughout church history.

Quietly commit yourself to each other.

Quietly commit yourself to show mercy to the one in need.

Quietly commit yourself to sexual purity and the value of family.

Quietly commit yourself to an ethic of love.

When we quietly do these things, God speaks loudly through us.

Because often the best way is the simple way.

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<sup>1</sup>Rodney Stark *The Rise of Christianity* (Princeton: Princeton University Press, 1996)

<sup>2</sup>Ibid

<sup>3</sup>Seraphim Danckaert “Four Reasons Why Early Christianity Grew So Quickly” [www.myocn.net](http://www.myocn.net)  
July 2, 2014

<sup>4</sup>Ibid

<sup>5</sup>Ligon Duncan “Living in Light of Jesus’ Return: A Call to Brotherly Love and Neighborly Witness” Sermon preached at First Presbyterian Church, July 8, 2012 <https://www.fpcjackson.org>

<sup>6</sup>Danckaert

<sup>7</sup>Micahel Gove “Why I’m Proud to be a Christian (and Jeremy Paxman Should Be Ashamed) *The Spectator* April 4, 2015 [www.spectator.co.uk](http://www.spectator.co.uk)

<sup>8</sup>Richard Dawson *Religion and the Rise of Western Culture* (New York: Doubleday, 1959) 53-54

<sup>9</sup>Mary Sayers *Disappearing Church* (Chicago: Moody Press, 2016) 119

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## COMMUNITY GROUPS



### Getting To Know Me Questions

1. What is your full name and are you proud of it? Are you named after anyone?
2. What encouragement do you take from the four reasons for the rise of Christianity in the Roman Empire? How is it instructive for us in living out our faith?
3. What is one thing that stood out to you from the sermon?



### Diving Into The Word

4. Read 1 Thessalonians 4:9-10. Why do you think our love for one another is vital to our testimony to those outside of faith?  
Can you think of an example when you saw or experienced “brotherly love” in the church?  
What impact did it have on you. Can you think of an example where you failed to see or experience “brother love” in the church. What impact did it have on you?
5. Read Ephesians 5:18-21—Describe what it looks like to be filled with the Holy Spirit.  
Read Ephesians 4:29-32—Describe what it looks like to grieve the Holy Spirit.  
Read Galatians 5:22-26—Describe what it looks like to walk by the Holy Spirit.  
How does this help you understand what it means to be “God-taught”?
6. Read 1 Thessalonians 4:11-12 and 2 Thessalonians 3:6-12. What do you think “a quiet life” looks like. Why do you think a “quiet life” speaks loudly to those around us?



### Taking It Home

7. Read through the conclusion to the sermon on page 10. Which of the four “quiet commitments” do you need to grow in the most?
8. What word of encouragement are you taking from the sermon and your discussion?