



Sermon Transcript June 30, 2019

When Jesus Turns Your Life Around Jesus Connects Us 1 Thessalonians 5:12-28

This message from the Bible was addressed originally to the people of Wethersfield Evangelical Free Church on June 30, 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

Sermon Text

1 Thessalonians 5:12-28

¹²We ask you, brothers, to respect those who labor among you and are over you in the Lord and admonish you, ¹³and to esteem them very highly in love because of their work. Be at peace among yourselves. ¹⁴And we urge you, brothers, admonish the idle, encourage the fainthearted, help the weak, be patient with them all. ¹⁵See that no one repays anyone evil for evil, but always seek to do good to one another and to everyone.

¹⁶Rejoice always, ¹⁷pray without ceasing, ¹⁸give thanks in all circumstances; for this is the will of God in Christ Jesus for you. ¹⁹Do not quench the Spirit. ²⁰Do not despise prophecies, ²¹but test everything; hold fast what is good. ²²Abstain from every form of evil.

²³Now may the God of peace himself sanctify you completely, and may your whole spirit and soul and body be kept blameless at the coming of our Lord Jesus Christ. ²⁴He who calls you is faithful; he will surely do it.

²⁵Brothers, pray for us. ²⁶Greet all the brothers with a holy kiss. ²⁷I put you under oath before the Lord to have this letter read to all the brothers. ²⁸The grace of our Lord Jesus Christ be with you.

Introduction

I would like to begin this morning by asking two questions. Here is the first question: Can we have Jesus without the church? There are several ways you can ask this question. Can I have a take-it-or-leave-it attitude when it comes to the church? Can I be spiritual but not religious? Can I embrace Jesus but ditch the church? In other words, can the church be an optional feature of our faith? Can one have Jesus but not the church?

It really is a provocative question to consider. Most likely, many of us know people who would confess belief and faith in Jesus but have long turned their back on the church. Their faith has become strictly a private matter. I don't pretend to be the judge of anyone's soul, but can we at least agree that this is not the way it is meant to be. The church and Jesus—the imperfect church and the perfect Son of God—go together. The image we are given in the New Testament is that Jesus is the head and the church is the body. In other words, they are connected. Brett McCracken has a graphic way of putting it. He said that if you embrace Jesus but ditch the church you “are creepily embracing a decapitated head.”¹ That is never good.

Charles Spurgeon put it this way. He said, “I believe that every Christian ought to be joined to some visible church—that is his plain duty according to Scripture. God's people are not dogs, otherwise they might go about one by one. Instead, they are sheep, therefore, they should be in flocks.”² Sam Allberry adds, “Christ utterly identifies with his people.” And so he concludes, “Neglecting the church is neglecting Jesus.”³ So the question remains, “Can we have Jesus without the church?”

Here is the second question. Can we have the church without Jesus? This seems like a strange question to ask. Why would you be interested in the church if you weren't interested in Jesus? And yet, in this fragmented culture, we long for connection and community and the church is a place where you can experience a sense of belonging. Jeremy Linneman wrote, “For all our great advances in technology, modern Americans are more distracted than ever before. Despite constant, always-on connectivity, we're lonelier than any other human group in history.” He then says, “All is not well with us.”⁴ And yet, in a culture that is looking for a sense of belonging, at the same time we value autonomy, we don't necessarily like being told how we ought to live. As one young man confessed that he believed in God, but he rejected the idea of “a God with strings telling us how to live.” He said, “That didn't work for me.”⁵

Recently I came across something called “the Sunday Assembly.” Listen to how it is

described. “It is filled with progressive, passionate, and idealistic attendees. The congregation sings along to contemporary music. There are messages given, social gatherings, offerings taken, kids clubs, midweek small groups, and social justice projects for the community.” That sounds like something we know. But here is the difference. There is no Jesus. The Sunday Assembly is “a church for atheists.”⁶ It was started by two Londoners—professing atheists—who wanted to enjoy church without belief. Since 2013 there are 480 such congregations that have been planted out of London in key cities across the Western world. In this case, the mantra we often hear—“they like Jesus but not the church”—is turned upside down. Here they like the church but not Jesus. Living in a detached and alienating culture, they longed for the communal benefits that churches bring, but they want to do it without Jesus. I must confess, it is a sobering reminder to us that if they are doing everything we do, it is possible that we can go about our time as a church doing what we do and lose sight of Jesus. May it not be so.

Can we have the church without Jesus? As followers of Christ, we are called to submit ourselves to Jesus. He shapes the tone of our lives. I am reminded of what we discovered about the Thessalonians at the beginning of our journey through Paul’s letter to them. Paul says of them in 1 Thessalonians 1:9-10, “*You turned to God from idols to serve the living and true God [there are strings attached], and to wait for his Son from heaven, whom he raised from the dead. Jesus who delivers us from the wrath to come.*”

Can you have Jesus without the church? Can you have the church without Jesus? I ask these two questions because they help us put together the end of Paul’s first letter to the Thessalonians. When I began to study our passage this morning, it seemed like Paul was getting in every last second piece of instruction he could remember before he concluded his letter. It read like the last second instructions you might get when you leave the house for the day. “Don’t forget to say “hi” to Bob for me when you see him. And, remember to stop at the grocery store on your way home to get those items we need for supper tonight. Don’t forget, you are picking up the kids after school today. Here are some letters that need to go in the mail today, but we are out of stamps.” These are rapid fire reminders and they don’t necessarily connect with each other. That is how the end of this letter first felt like to me. “*Respect those who labor among you . . . admonish the idle, encourage the fainthearted, help the weak, be patient with them all . . . always seek to do good to one another and to everyone. Rejoice always, pray without ceasing, give thanks in all circumstances . . . Do not quench the Spirit. Do not despise prophecies . . . Abstain from every form of evil.*” Is your head spinning?

But the more I studied the passage, the more I realized that these rapid fire commands

can be divided into two categories. The first set of commands deal with our relationship with the church. The second set of commands deal with our relationship with God. They get to the heart of the change Jesus brings in our lives. Jesus connects us. Jesus connects us to the church. Jesus connects us to God. These commands give us a taste of what it looks like to be connected to the church and what it looks like to be connected to God. It is not one or the other. It is both . . . and. You can't have Jesus apart from the church. And you can't have the church apart from Jesus. This morning I am going to narrow my focus on the first set of commands and look at how Jesus connects us to the church.

Jesus Connects us to the Church

Do you remember the little saying we had as kids when we talked about the church? We put our hands together and said, "This is the church. This is the steeple. Open the door and see all the people." When we open the door on the church in verses 12-15, what do we see? Can I suggest to you that when you open the door to these verses you find something incredibly counter-cultural. You being here this morning cuts against the grain of culture. You being a covenant member of this church family goes against the trends of culture. I would like to highlight four things you see when you open the door to the church.

You see family: Notice how Paul likes to call them "*brothers.*" He says in verse 12, "*We ask you, brothers.*" In verse 14 he refers to them this way again, "*And we urge you, brothers.*" He picks up this theme at the very end of the letter in verses 25-27 where three times he uses the word *brothers* to describe their relationship in the church. "*Brothers, pray for us. Greet all the brothers . . . have this letter read to all the brothers.*" So when you open to door, you see family.

Scripture often mixes metaphors to describe the family relationship between Jesus and the church. In one sense, Jesus is our brother. Hebrews 2:11 it says "*Jesus is not ashamed to call them brothers and sisters.*" Unlike the older brother in the story of the Prodigal Son, Jesus freely shares with us the inheritance that rightly belongs to him. At the same time, Paul says that the church is also the bride of Christ. "*Husbands love your wives, as Christ loves the church.*" It is the picture of marriage. Vows are exchanged. Promises are made. Commitment is made with these parameters, "*until death do us part.*" Like marriage and like family, the church is something we commit to.

This is counter-cultural because we live in a culture that doesn't like to make

commitments. Michael Brooks recently wrote an op-ed piece in the *New York Times* with a title that caught my eye” “Rise of the haphazard self is ruining our culture.” The article is based on a study done by *The Journal of Economic Perspectives* which interviewed 107 working-class men. This study discovered that because our culture emphasizes autonomy—being your own person—we are conveying the message that “it’s right to be semidetached, that the best life is one lived in perpetual flux, with your options perpetually opened.”⁷ And often what controls the options we choose is what our culture has deemed to be our highest good: “individual freedom, happiness, self-definition, and self-expression.”⁸ If individual freedom is the highest good, then the most sacred commitments—marriage, family, church—are easily tossed to the side. Sadly, Brooks concludes that it is not working for the children. He says, “Every week, it seems, I meet some young person whose life was decimated when Dad left.”⁹

Do you know what Linneman calls this? He calls it the “swipe-right culture.” It is a reference to a dating app you can get on your phone. When we like something at first glance, swipe right. The moment something—whether a person, relationship, job, or community—loses its appeal, swipe left. Swipe-right culture promises freedom and autonomy: The moment you’re not satisfied, find something new. Probably by using your phone.”¹⁰ But that is not the way family works. No wonder our culture has lost the sense of belonging. There is no true belonging apart from commitment.

Christina Cleveland put it this way. “Theoretically, married people can’t quit a marriage. In the same way, theoretically, Christians can’t quit the body of Christ . . . Our submission to God, irrevocable commitment to each other and interdependence should hold us together when we want to distance ourselves from Christians who fail to live up to our gold standards or who complicate our lives.”¹¹ We are family! Or as, Allberry puts it, “The church is the beloved bride of Christ. Church is not his hobby; it is his marriage—and it is ours too.”¹² And so we are committed to each other. We are family.

You see leaders: The second thing we see when we open the door of the church is leaders. In fact, Paul’s first series of rapid commands has to do with their attitude towards those who are over them as leaders in the church. They are to respect their leaders. He writes, “*We ask you, brothers, to respect those who labor among you and are over you in the Lord and admonish you, and to esteem them very highly in love because of their work.*”

This too is counter-cultural. It implies that we submit to our leaders. I don’t mean that in a harsh way. Paul tells us in Ephesians 5:21 that we are “*submitting to one another out*

of reverence for Christ.” There is mutual submission that takes place within the church. But it does challenge the notion of our culture that we are obligated to anyone other than ourselves. It is interesting that I feel this need to qualify what I mean by the word *submit* because the very notion of it goes against our independent spirit. And yet, Paul exerted his leadership when he told the Thessalonians in chapter 4 to abstain from sexual immorality, to practice brotherly love and to tell those who are idle to get busy working with their hands. When you become part of a church you are willingly coming under the leadership of the church. It is the leaders of the church who are leading the way in following after Christ. *“Esteem them very highly in love because of their work.”*

When Paul talks about leaders in the church, he is not just talking about the pastor. He is talking about the plurality of leaders; namely the elders and the deacons of the church. They are the ones who are overseeing the spiritual and physical needs of the church. The biblical model for church leadership is elders and deacons. This is going to be a big emphasis for us in the next year. In 2020 we want to make the move to elders and deacons and we are going to begin conversation on this in the Fall.

You see problems: The third thing you see when you open the door and see all the people is that you see problems. Paul writes, *“And we urge you, brothers, admonish the idle, encourage the fainthearted, help the weak, be patient with them all.”* It is readily held that this instruction is primarily directed to the leaders. After calling the congregation to respect the leaders, Paul is telling the leaders to be careful how they treat the people they are over. At the same time, by using the word *brothers* it seems to be that this instruction applies to all of us in the church. We are to be careful how we care for one another. And when you look at Paul’s instruction here, you realize that the church is filled with people who are struggling with all kinds of problems.

He begins by telling them to *admonish the idle*. That is not a good translation. We know from the previous chapter that idleness was an issue in this church and so that is why some think the English translation uses this word. The better translation is *“unruly.”* It literally refers to the “one out of line.” This one needs to be admonished. At the same time the church is filled with those who are *fainthearted*. Perhaps in this context this is the one who is struggling with all the persecution they are experiencing because of their faith. Encourage this one. And the weak, help them. With all, be patient. What you discover with all these problems is that church isn’t always a comfortable place. The picture of the church is not the picture you get on Facebook where everything seems great and everyone is living the good life. But that is also the beauty of the church. If we want to be a place of true belonging, we need to be a place where we can be vulnerable.

We are bound together not by what makes us comfortable. Rather, we are bound together by the covenant we make to each other. David Brooks talks about how covenants shape our character. He says that when we are in covenant with each other “the good of the relationship takes precedence over the good of the individual.”¹³ Or, as McCracken says it, “Covenants teach us that keeping promises to others is more important than being true to yourself.”¹⁴ So don’t be surprised if you find church to be an uncomfortable place from time to time. And that is particularly challenging for a culture that values whatever makes you feel happy or comfortable. But covenants shape us for good because they teach us to sacrifice for others and to bear with each other. The irony in all of this is that this is where you find the ultimate freedom.

You find opportunity: This leads us to the final thing you find when Jesus connects you to the church. You find opportunity. Paul says at the end of verse 15, “*always seek to do good to one another and to everyone.*” Notice, Paul doesn’t focus on what they are getting. Rather, he puts his focus on what they are giving. You can approach your association with a church one of two ways. You can approach it with the question: “What do I get out of it?” Or, “What can I give to it?” Whatever question you choose will impact your experience in the church.

McCracken asks three good questions in his book *Uncomfortable: The Awkward and Essential Challenge of Christian Community*. I love the honesty of the title. Our relationship in the church is both awkward and essential. It can be a challenge. This challenge is the very reason some opt to like Jesus but ditch the church. But that is not the way it works. And so he asks

- Will you commit to joining and sticking with a church, not because it is a good fit for you, but because it is fitting you to become more like Jesus?
- Will you commit to looking at church not in terms of what you can get but what you can give, considering how your presence with the body might encourage others and stir them to love and good works?
- Will you embrace the awkwardness and inconvenience and uncool costliness of the uncomfortable church?¹⁵

Linneman gives some practical advice regarding our approach to the church. He writes, “To gain a sense of belonging, make space for others to belong. Take the focus off yourself. Too often, I can wait for others to check in on me, invite me over, or put together a social gathering. But when I take initiative, whether it’s inviting church friends to our home or offering to get coffee with someone outside the church, I usually find others quick to accept. My experience is that the more I take initiative to cultivate

community for others, the more I feel that I belong with those people. This final step fits within the great paradoxes of Christianity. If you want real life, you have to give yours away. If you want to find yourself, you must lose yourself.”¹⁶ *“Always seek to do good to one another and to everyone.”*

Beautiful Connection

There is a real beauty to the way Paul ends this letter. It is the benefit of the church. For those who commit, submit, make covenant and give of themselves—something beautiful and intimate and personal emerges. Paul closes his letter by saying, *“Brothers, pray for us. Greet all the brothers with a holy kiss. I put you under oath before the Lord to have this letter read to all the brothers.”* This final greeting implies relationship. It is warm. It is inviting. It is local. There are real faces attached to it. It is the benefit of what happens when Jesus connects us.

I want to close by telling you a story. Matt Carter is a pastor of a church in Austin, TX. But he grew up going to a Baptist church in a small town in the middle-of-nowhere. He remembers a man from their church who was affectionately known as “Brother Jim.” He remembers him as being good and kind. He said of Jim, “I loved him.”

Jim was the “Children’s Pastor” and Matt remembers many of the talks Jim gave. But one particular talk stood out. Jim had taken a jar of clear liquid and he told the kids that this was the condition of their hearts before sin entered the world—pure and clean. But then when he talked about Adam and Eve and the fall of man, he put a few drops into that liquid and the water turned black to illustrate that their hearts were filled with sin and darkness. And so he talked to them about how our sin keeps us from God and how God sent Jesus into the world—the Son of God. Unlike us, Jesus never sinned and when he died on the cross he took our judgment upon himself. So he put a couple more drops in the vase and the water turned red to indicate how the blood of Jesus took away the darkness of our sin. He then put two more drops in the water and the water became clear again to indicate how Jesus restores our fallen hearts and makes us clean. Of course, the kids are mesmerized by the “wizardry” of Jim. “How did you do that?”, many of them asked. But for Matt, it opened up the wonder of God’s love for him. For the first time, at age 8, he was overcome with the love of God.

Reflecting back on this, Matt Carter wrote, “I recently had a person respond to me on Twitter, bemoaning the evils of the church with all its hypocrisy and failings. They spoke of greedy megachurch pastors and their \$2,000 sneakers. While those failings are real, I

wish this person could have met Brother Jim or one of the many people whose names we will never know, but who quietly and faithfully reveal Christ's beauty to little kids in churches all across this country. They are a force for untold good, not evil. A year after my conversion, Brother Jim left my small town to serve at another church in another city. I haven't spoken to him since, and I'm pretty sure he doesn't know that one little kid he shared the gospel with all those years ago would turn out to be a pastor. I'm also pretty sure he has no idea the difference he made on countless others like me throughout his ministry. But I'm looking forward to finding him one day in heaven and thanking him for being the first to show me the beauty of the gospel. ”¹⁷

This is what you find when you open the doors of the church. You find family united together in Christ: so you make commitment. You find leaders: and so you submit to their leadership as they humbly follow Jesus. You find problems: so you make covenant over comfort and you admonish, encourage and help. You find opportunity: and so you give of yourself and in the end you discover belonging.

Can you have Jesus without the church? Why would you want to? It is the church that causes me to be more like Jesus. It is precious.

I am reminded of the great truth we rehearse in the Heidelberg Catechism.

Q: What is your only comfort in life and in death?

The answer flies in the face of our culture that seeks autonomy above everything else.

A: That I am not my own, but belong, body and soul—in life and in death—to my faithful Savior, Jesus Christ . . . I am not my own. I belong to Jesus. And if I belong to Jesus, I belong to his bride—the church.

Jesus connects us! Get connected!

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- ¹Brett McCracken *Uncomfortable: The Awkward and Essential Challenge of Christian Community* (Wheaton: Crossway, 2017) 179
- ²Charles Spurgeon “The Head and the Body” No. 2653, delivered Aug. 6, 1882, at Metropolitan Tabernacle, <http://www.spurgeongems.org/vols43-45/chs2653.pdf>
- ³Sam Allberry, *Why Bother with the Church* (Epsom, UK: The Good Book Company, 2016) 31
- ⁴Jeremy Linneman “What Our Search For Belonging Reveals” www.thegospelcoalition.org June 28, 2019
- ⁵David Brooks “Rise of the haphazard self is ruining our culture” op-ed *New York Times* May 14, 2019
- ⁶Mark Sayers *Disappearing Church* (Chicago: Moody Press, 2016) 19
- ⁷Brooks
- ⁸Sayers, 16
- ⁹Brooks
- ¹⁰Linneman
- ¹¹Christina Cleveland *Disunity in Christ: Uncovering the Hidden Forces That Keep Us Apart* (Downers Grove: IVP, 2013) 95
- ¹²Allberry, 23
- ¹³David Brooks “The Cultural Value of Christian Higher Education” *CCCU Advance* 7, no. 1, <http://advance.cccu.org/stories/the-cultural-value-of-chrisitan-higher-education>
- ¹⁴McCracken, 184
- ¹⁵*Ibid.*, 185
- ¹⁶Linneman
- ¹⁷Matt Carter “Who First Showed Matt Carter the Beauty of Jesus” www.thegospelcoalition.org June 26, 2019

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COMMUNITY GROUPS

Getting To Know Me Questions

1. Share your earliest memories of church. Are they positive or negative? What do you recall about the people you remember?
2. Why do you think people are attracted to Jesus but not the church? What does it say about the church? What does it say about our culture?
3. What is one thing you are taking from the sermon?

Diving Into The Word

4. Read Ephesians 5:22-27. What do you observe about Christ's relationship with the church? How does that impact your attitude about the church?
5. Read 1 Thessalonians 5:12-13; Hebrews 13:17. What is the role of church leadership? What is your expectation of church leaders?
6. Read 1 Thessalonians 5:14-15. What does this verse tell you about the variety of problems you may encounter in the church? Why is patience required? How does making commitment "fit you" to become more like Jesus?
7. Read 1 Thessalonians 5:25-27. Take note of the personal greetings and the warmth expressed between Paul and the church. How have you experienced the blessing of being part of a local church? Who has impacted your life?

Taking It Home

8. What can you do to reach out and create a sense of belonging for someone in the church?
9. Pray for WEFC—the leaders and the church.