SESSION 6

Uncomplicated Relationships

The Point
Let God’s love drive how you relate to others.

The Passage
1 Thessalonians 4:3-12

Life Connection
Living a life of simplicity includes living in simplicity in our relationships with others. Just as we can simplify our lives by eliminating the demands we place on ourselves, we can simplify our relationships by eliminating the demands we place on others. We can avoid the drama that complicates our relationships with an attitude that puts Christ first, people second, and ourselves third.

The Setting
Paul wrote 1 and 2 Thessalonians to encourage Christians as they struggled to serve the Lord in a challenging environment. He also wanted to give them complete assurance about the return of Christ. In 1 Thessalonians 4, Paul provided practical instruction on how to grow toward maturity in relationships with each other as Christian siblings. At the heart of his instruction was an eagerness for believers to allow God’s love to saturate their interpersonal relationships.
GET INTO THE STUDY

**DISCUSS:** Question 1 on page 53 of the Personal Study Guide (PSG): “What are some key characteristics you look for in a good friend?” Allow time for each person to respond.

**RECAP THE BIBLE MEETS LIFE (PAGE 54):** We have no statistical evidence to prove this, but some of our most enjoyable relationships just may be those we had as small children. No drama. No demands on each other. We were just kids, simply playing together—and enjoying having someone to play with.

**SAY:** That changes as we get older because we make the relationship more about us and what our friend can do for us.

**SUMMARIZE THE BIBLE MEETS LIFE (PAGE 54):** It would be nice to get back to the simplicity of our childhood relationships, and that’s not as unrealistic or naïve as some people might think.

- Pursuing simplicity in our lives includes our relationships.
- In his first Letter to the Thessalonians, Paul gave us insights into what such an uncomplicated relationship looks like.
- It’s all driven by love—not a love for ourselves, but a love for God that carries over into how we love others.

**LEADER PACK:** Direct attention to the Pack Item #2, “Simplicity” poster.

- Remind group members of the first five sessions.
- In advance, obtain and distribute index cards to each member. Direct them that as today’s session unfolds to write down on their cards how uncomplicated relationships can help them have simpler lives.

**GUIDE:** Call attention to “The Point” on page 54 of the PSG: “Let God’s love drive how you relate to others.”

**PRAY:** Transition into the study through prayer, asking God to help us to see and love others the same way He sees and loves us.
1 Thessalonians 4:3-5

3 For this is God's will, your sanctification: that you keep away from sexual immorality, 4 that each of you knows how to control his own body in holiness and honor, 5 not with lustful passions, like the Gentiles, who don’t know God.

READ: Ask a group member to read aloud 1 Thessalonians 4:3-5 on page 55 of the PSG.

RECAP THE PSG (PAGE 55): As we dig into this passage, we’ll see principles that apply to all types of relationships, but Paul began with a specific focus: relationships that might involve or lead to sexual immorality. The world today has attempted to redefine what constitutes sexual immorality; some people refuse to call anything two consenting adults agree to do as immoral.

DISCUSS: Question 2 on page 55 of the PSG: “Where do you see evidence of sexual corruption in today’s culture?”

SAY: God’s standard: sexual intimacy should be experienced only between one man and one woman within a marriage relationship. Sexual immorality is not God’s will for believers.

SUMMARIZE THE PSG (PAGE 55): Ultimately, God’s will is tied to our sanctification—being set apart for His purposes and His glory.

- When we live by the world’s standard, we’re not living holy, set apart lives.
- When we pursue whatever lusts our sinful nature craves, we’re not living for God’s glory but for our own.
- We’re not made holy or sanctified through such behavior; therefore, we’re out of God’s will.

GUIDE: Use the commentary for verse 4 on the next page of this Leader Guide to explain setting boundaries and controlling our bodies so we can remain in God’s will.

ACTIVITY (OPTIONAL): See optional idea in the Bonus Content (on page 77 in this Leader Guide) to help group members understand the impact of the culture on Christian relationship boundaries.

TRANSITION: In the next verses, Paul further instructed the Thessalonian Christians on the importance of boundaries in relationships.
1 Thessalonians 4:3-5 Commentary

[VERSE 3] Paul shared with believers the wisdom the Lord expects in our relationships with one another. Growing together as spiritual siblings in Christ means approaching our relationships with one another with absolute purity. Learning to live out the Lord’s expectation in this way compels us to recognize the importance of boundaries in our relationships.

Believers in Thessalonica had devoted themselves to Christ, but they still needed to grow in Him. Paul referred to the challenge of growing as sanctification. The Greek term meant being set apart for God. It underscored the process in which they grew to be mature followers of Christ who had been set apart to worship and serve Him alone.

Paul’s assertion about sanctification beckons Christians to see our growth in Christ as God’s will. We tend to seek God’s will when we find ourselves at a significant crossroad in our journey. Paul’s assertion shows that doing God’s will doesn’t only involve pivotal decisions at crucial junctures in our lives; God’s will involves making our growth in Him our priority every day.

One area of sanctification that needed the Thessalonian Christians’ attention dealt with sexual purity in their relationships. The city of Thessalonica fostered a culture of sexual immorality. The culture prompted people to live without any sexual restraints. When people immersed in the culture became Christians, they had to grow spiritually so they could nourish God’s attitude about sexual purity. As a result, they would abstain from immorality.

[VERSE 4] Holding fast to purity in relationships requires believers to set boundaries. Setting, keeping, and respecting relational boundaries proves beneficial for an assortment of reasons. Paul drew attention to one reason in particular: When we make up our minds that we’re going to avoid sexual immorality in our interpersonal relationships, we set ourselves on the path of discipline. We learn how to bring our bodies under control.

Paul encouraged the Christians at Thessalonica to take to heart his mandate about controlling their bodies. Incidentally, the word he used for body literally meant “vessel.” They had to learn how to set and honor sexual boundaries in their relationships.

What can enable Christians to practice the kind of control Paul mandated? We’re encouraged by two realities. First, sanctification involves bringing our bodies under control. We cannot strive toward growth in Christ and give in to sexual immorality at the same time. Second, we never want to do anything that would dishonor the Lord. We demonstrate that we have given Him the honor He deserves when we offer our bodies to Him as living sacrifices (Romans 12:1-2).

[VERSE 5] Such a perspective on our bodies stands in stark contrast to views taken by people who allow lustful desires to rule them. For people under the control of lust, a person’s body isn’t meant to honor the Lord; it’s little more than a tool for selfish pleasure. Paul warned Christians about the power of lust to reign over us (Romans 6:12). Peter gave believers similar warnings (2 Peter 1:4; 2:10).

Paul’s reference to the Gentiles recalled for Christians those people in Thessalonica who had come under the control of lust. Apparently, Thessalonica resembled other cities in the Roman empire. Very few limits had been placed on Roman citizens when it came to sexual behavior. Without a moral standard, lust ruled with no restraint.

Why did the Thessalonians give themselves to such dishonorable behavior? Paul answered that question by writing that they didn’t have a personal relationship with the Lord. An intimate walk with Him would have opened their eyes to the Lord’s intention for the bodies. They would have come to see that their bodies belonged to Him. For that reason, their love for Him would have nourished in them the eagerness to honor Him by setting their bodies apart for Him.
1 Thessalonians 4:6-8

6 This means one must not transgress against and take advantage of a brother or sister in this manner, because the Lord is an avenger of all these offenses, as we also previously told and warned you. 7 For God has not called us to impurity but to live in holiness. 8 Consequently, anyone who rejects this does not reject man, but God, who gives you his Holy Spirit.

READ: Ask a group member to read aloud 1 Thessalonians 4:6-8 on page 56 of the PSG.

GUIDE: Use the commentary on the next page of this Leader Guide to explain in detail the warning against taking advantage of a brother or sister.

RECAP THE PSG (PAGE 56): Paul gave us two words of instruction for keeping our relationships on the right footing.

- Don’t transgress against another person. To “transgress” is to overreach, to go beyond the boundaries God has established.
- Don’t take advantage of another person. We take advantage of someone when we exploit the person to gain something.

DISCUSS: Question 3 on page 56 of the PSG: “What do these verses reveal about how God views our relationships?”

LEADER PACK: Distribute the Pack Item #6, “Healthy Relationships” handout. Review the six signs of a healthy relationship. Ask volunteers to choose one sign and describe how it can help make our relationships healthy.

SAY: The practice of these signs will help to prevent one from transgressing against or taking advantage of another person.

SUMMARIZE THE PSG (PAGE 56): Paul gave us three strong reasons why we shouldn’t “transgress against and take advantage of a brother or sister.”

- Such behavior is subject to punishment by God, who “is an avenger of all these offenses.”
- Such behavior is inconsistent with the call “to live in holiness.”
- Such behavior is a rejection of “God, who gives you his Holy Spirit.”

TRANSITION: In the next verses, Paul told the Christians in Thessalonica the love they share with each other should be brotherly love.
1 Thessalonians 4:6-8 Commentary

[VERSE 6] In the previous verses, Paul instructed Thessalonian Christians about honoring the Lord with their bodies. Now he shifted focus to the honor that marriage deserves. For Christians, marriage links one man with one woman for life. Therefore, they need to honor marriage because it has been established by God (Genesis 2:24). Honoring marriage means believers don’t try to steal another Christian’s spouse. Paul considered such a lack of consideration to be a transgression. That kind of behavior crossed the line. Such behavior violated the sense of trust that is meant to be nurtured among believers.

Paul assured believers the Lord would not overlook such damaging behavior. It could ruin the lives of believers who had been victimized by it and destroy the homes that suffered from it. Spouses and children who are left to pick up the pieces of what used to be a home can count on the Lord to be their avenger. They can depend on Him to punish believers who are responsible for the damage.

Paul had already addressed the need for Christians to honor the boundaries set in marriage. He had warned them to be on their guard so they wouldn’t take advantage of other believers by defrauding them and damaging their marriages.

[VERSE 7] Paul went on to give another reason for respecting marriage boundaries. This reason goes to the heart of a growing believer’s walk with Christ. That kind of immoral behavior clashes with the Lord’s call for believers to be set apart exclusively for Him. If we ignore the call of God on us to grow in Him, we find ourselves giving in to impurity. Lust maintains control of us, and we give in to immorality. That’s when we ignore relational boundaries and do whatever we can to satisfy our lust. Such immoral behavior reflects a denial of the truth about who we are—God’s people who have been set apart for Him.

When we take seriously the call of God on us as Christians, we embrace the priority of living according to His ways. Living out such a priority requires us to discipline our thoughts, words, and actions in keeping with His direction for us. Moreover, it demands that we pay close attention to reflecting His character in our relationships with others. For that reason, we don’t allow ourselves to give in to lust. Instead, we live reflecting that we have given ourselves to Him. As we live out His call on us, we learn to appreciate the value of pressing on in our walk with Him (Philippians 3:14). Sanctification implies pressing on toward moral excellence.

[VERSE 8] Paul added another factor: When Christians cross relationship boundaries by practicing immorality, they demonstrate that they are rejecting God. The boundary drawn by marriage isn’t a serious issue because a person decreed that it should be established. The mandate to make sexual purity a priority didn’t start with an order from individuals. Quite the contrary, God Himself established the sanctity of marriage and commanded His people to honor it. Therefore, crossing the line formed by marriage means rejecting God.

Saying we serve the Lord then rejecting Him in this way leaves other, less-mature Christians perplexed. Paul addressed our perplexity by bringing up the work of the Holy Spirit. When we gave our lives to Christ, the Holy Spirit came to live in us and began to help us. He helped us then, and He continues to help us now. The Holy Spirit keeps on working in us to renew our minds, warm our hearts, and strengthen our resolve. Each day, the Holy Spirit enables us to live out the call to be set apart for Christ alone (Romans 8:9-11). The process of sanctification is possible only because of the Holy Spirit’s involvement. A Christian who ignores God’s standard has also turned a deaf ear to the work of His Spirit.

Paul warned Christians about quenching the Holy Spirit (1 Thessalonians 5:19). He also encouraged believers not to grieve the Holy Spirit (Ephesians 4:30). However, when we’re sensitive to the leading of the Holy Spirit, we’re consistently refreshed by His presence and strengthened by His power.
1 THESALONIANS 4:9-12

9 About brotherly love: You don’t need me to write you because you yourselves are taught by God to love one another. 10 In fact, you are doing this toward all the brothers and sisters in the entire region of Macedonia. But we encourage you, brothers and sisters, to do this even more, 11 to seek to lead a quiet life, to mind your own business, and to work with your own hands, as we commanded you, 12 so that you may behave properly in the presence of outsiders and not be dependent on anyone.

READ: Ask a group member to read aloud 1 Thessalonians 4:9-12 on page 58 of the PSG.

GUIDE: Use the commentary on the next page of this Leader Guide to explain the phrase “brotherly love.”

DISCUSS: Question 4 on page 58 of the PSG: “What are some words that should describe godly relationships?”

RECAP THE PSG (PAGE 58): In quick succession, Paul gave four commands.

Invite several volunteers to read the following commands Paul gave:

- Love one another.
- Seek to lead a quiet life.
- Mind your own business.
- Work with your own hands.

DISCUSS: Question 5 on page 58 of the PSG: “What are some practical steps we can take to live the kind of life Paul describes?”

SAY: When Paul’s teachings on brotherly love are practiced we make an impact on non-believers.

SUMMARIZE THE PSG (PAGE 58): Why is this important? When we “behave properly in the presence of outsiders” and do “not be dependent on anyone,” we will have no hidden motives or barriers in our relationships with them, and we will present a positive picture of a Christ-follower.

DO: Direct group members to Engage with “Driven by Love” on page 57 of the PSG (page 77 in this Leader Guide) to help group members simplify their relationships.

GUIDE: Refer back to “The Point” for this session: “Let God’s love drive how you relate to others.” Ask group members to refer to any notes they made on their index cards about how uncomplicated relationships can make their lives simpler. Call for volunteers to share.
Let God’s love drive how you relate to others.

1 Thessalonians 4:9-12 Commentary

[VERSE 9] With verse 9, Paul began to instruct them on how to express brotherly love in ways that would allow them to nourish healthy relationships. He used a Greek word for brotherly love that would suggest the affection family members would have for each other. Paul affirmed that he didn’t need to teach about this kind of love because God had already taught them. Thanks to God, they could identify it and live it out in their interpersonal relationships.

When we treat other believers like beloved family members, we express that kind of love. We demonstrate this love in actions as well as in words, but we don’t generate it ourselves. It’s the kind of love God nourishes in our intimate walk with Him, and it spills over into our relationships with our spiritual siblings in Christ.

[VERSE 10] Paul commented on the reach of the Thessalonian Christian’s love throughout Macedonia. God had called Paul to establish churches in that region (Acts 16:9-10). In keeping with God’s call, he established churches in Philippi and Berea, as well as in Thessalonica (16–17). His comment suggested that love prompted Thessalonian believers to reach out to these churches.

Paul’s encouragement to love even more and the Thessalonians’ example challenge Christians today to extend the reach of our love too. Of course, stretching ourselves in this way may take us out of our comfort zones, but the eagerness to practice uncomplicated love prompts us to do it. When we put love to work by helping other believers, we’re showing the world that we belong to Christ (John 13:35). Some churches extend their brotherly love by helping congregations that have been devastated because of natural disasters. Other churches show family love by praying for congregations at risk. As we reach farther, the Lord shows us what it means to live in contentment so we can serve Him joyfully.

[VERSE 12] By putting these three expressions into practice, we give clear testimony with our actions. That’s why Paul encouraged believers to consider these expressions to be important. They send a message about the difference Christ makes in a person’s life. When we walk properly, we say something to the outsiders who watch us.

Paul mentioned another value of expressing our walk with the Lord in our actions, especially our work. We’re able to provide ourselves with what we need. In turn, we won’t have to depend on people who don’t know the Lord to care for us. Furthermore, our actions testify that we depend on the Lord and that He’s faithful to take care of us as we serve Him. A life of contentment in a complicated world speaks volumes about the Lord who is the believers’ source of contentment.

Read the article “Sexual Climate of the First Century” in the Fall 2019 issue of Biblical Illustrator. Previous Biblical Illustrator articles: “Sanctification” in 1 Thessalonians” (Winter 2014-2015), “Paul’s View of Sex” (Winter 2008-2009), and “Thessalonica in the First Century” (Fall 2005) relate to this lesson and can be purchased, along with other articles for this quarter, at lifeway.com/biblicalillustrator. Look for Bundles: Bible Studies for Life.
GUIDE: Direct group members to page 60 of the PSG. Encourage them to choose one of the following applications to carry out this week.

SAY: What will you do this week so that God's love drives how you relate to others?

- **Evaluate your list of friends.** Review your list of friendships and ask yourself: *Why are we friends? Are we friends because the person wants something from me or I want something from them?* Determine to see the people you interact with as people loved by God and not as individuals placed here to meet your needs.

- **Rebuild relationships.** If you have a relationship with someone that isn’t Christ-honoring, seek to change that. Apologize, if needed. Rebuild the relationship based on your love for Christ.

- **Connect with others.** Surround yourself with a group of believers who will encourage your relationships. Help each other maintain uncomplicated relationships. A Bible study group is a great place to start.

**Wrap It Up**

TRANSITION: Read or restate the final paragraph from page 60 of the PSG.

Friendships don’t have to be complicated. **Simplify them with an attitude that puts Christ first, people second, and ourselves third.**

PRAY: Conclude with a prayer, thanking God for the example of His love. Ask Him to help us uncomplicate our relationships by loving others the way He loves us so we can simplify our lives.

Grow with other group leaders at the Groups Ministry blog. LifeWay.com/GroupMinistry
**ENgage**

**Driven by Love:** Which of the following words can you truly say best describes what drives your relationships?

- _______ Guilt
- _______ Competition
- _______ Joy
- _______ Selfishness
- _______ Loneliness
- _______ Love
- _______ Other ___________________

If you choose a word other than love, how can we simplify our relationships and make them more of what God wants them to be?

**Bonus Content**

**Activity (Optional):** Direct group members to use their cell phones or other electronic devices for this activity. Explain that our media saturates us with beliefs about relationships and how to relate to one another.

- Divide the group into four subgroups and direct them to look up popular magazines.
- Instruct two of the subgroups to find ads or articles that falsely represent what is important in relationships. Direct the other two subgroups to find ads or articles that represent what is important in relationships.
- Invite group members to compare their findings. **Ask:** “Why is it important for us to have spiritual filters when we are exposed to the relationship standards of our culture?”