SESSION 6

Uncomplicated Relationships

THE POINT
Let God’s love drive how you relate to others.

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 PASSAGE
1 Thessalonians 4:3-12

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, he 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.
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.

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. Bearing witness to Christ requires us to demonstrate the same purity in our relationships with people who haven’t given their lives to Him. Learning to live out the Lord’s expectation in this way compels us to recognize the importance of boundaries in our relationships. Relational boundaries provide lines that our walk with Christ will forbid us to cross. In this verse, sexual purity serves as a critical boundary.

Believers in Thessalonica had devoted themselves to Christ, but they still needed to grow in Him. Paul referred to the challenge of growing from spiritual infancy to maturity in Him as sanctification. The Greek term meant being set apart for God. For Thessalonian believers, 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. Then we ask the Lord to give us His direction so we can know which road we should take. Paul’s assertion shows that doing God’s will involves making our growth in Him our priority every day, as well as seeking His direction at crucial junctures in our lives.

One area of sanctification that needed the Thessalonian Christians’ attention dealt with sexual purity in their relationships with each other. 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.

PRAY: Begin the Bible study with prayer. Ask God to help us in our relationships.

Study the Bible
1 Thessalonians 4:3-5

GUIDE: Before reading the passage, refer to “The Setting” on page 70 to establish the context of the passage.

READ: Ask a group member to read 1 Thessalonians 4:3-5.

SUMMARIZE: Refer to Bible Commentary to provide explanations for the following terms:

- **Sanctification**—to be set apart for God. Synonym: holy. Carries the idea of spiritual growth from spiritual infancy to spiritual maturity.

- **God’s will**—spiritual maturity is what God intends to happen in the life of each believer. God’s will is much more than seeking direction from God at significant crossroads in the journey. God’s will is that spiritual growth in Him become a daily priority for believers.

- **Immorality**—primary issue in this context was sexual immorality. This was a call for sexual purity.
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.” In the setting of this verse, some Bible scholars think Paul had wives in mind. Accordingly, they translate this verse to underscore the mandate for men to devote themselves sexually to their wives exclusively. Other translators understand the term to do with Christians bringing their own bodies under control. Either approach pointed the Thessalonian believers in the same direction. 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. Maturing Christians learn we cannot accommodate divided loyalty. We cannot strive toward growth in Christ and give in to sexual immorality at the same time. When Christ saved us, we gave Him our lives and set our bodies apart for Him. Second, honor matters to us. 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 (Rom. 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. To the nonbeliever, lust might appear to be a harmless way to experience the warmth of passion in a cold world. But a closer investigation reveals that giving in to lust leads to being controlled by it. In fact, lustful desires can enslave us. Paul warned Christians about the power of lust to reign over us (Rom. 6:12). Peter gave believers similar warnings (2 Pet. 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. People went where their passions took them. To make matters worse, pagan worship practices often incorporated sexual behavior into worship, placing them even more on a downward spiral of immorality.

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. Granted, they might have heard about God; they might even have been in conversations about spiritual matters. However, they had never given themselves to Christ. 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.

**Verse 6.** Sexual immorality reflects another problem for Christians. It causes us to take advantage of other people. We take advantage of others when we disregard them as individuals to be respected, regarding them only as opportunities for satisfying our lust. That’s why Paul urged believers to respect the boundaries in relationships that have been created by marriage.

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 (Gen. 2:24). Honoring marriage means believers do not try to steal another Christian's spouse. Paul considered such a lack of consideration to be a transgression. In other words, that kind of behavior crossed the line. He also described it as fraud. Such behavior violated the sense of trust that is meant to be nurtured among believers.

Crossing the line by taking advantage of the trust among believers won't go unnoticed. 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. He will make sure such behavior will be met by serious consequences.

Paul had already addressed the need for Christians to honor the boundaries that had been established by 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. By bringing up the issue once more, Paul underscored the importance of boundaries in healthy relationships among spiritual siblings in Christ.

Verse 7. The fear of the Lord's punishment should make believers think twice before they cross the line and run the risk of hurting marriages. But Paul didn't stop there. He 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 rebellious denial of the truth about who we are—God's people who have been set apart for Him through Christ.

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. Accordingly, we refuse to cross the line marriage has drawn in our relationships with one another. As we live out His call on us, we learn to appreciate the value of pressing on in our walk with Him (Phil. 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. As we grow from spiritual infancy to maturity, we can count on His gracious presence. The Holy Spirit keeps on working in us to renew our minds, warm our hearts, and strengthen our resolve. Each day, He enables us to live out the call to be set apart for Christ alone (Rom. 8:9-11). The process of sanctification is possible only because of the Holy Spirit’s involvement. Therefore, a Christian who ignores God’s standard has also turned a deaf ear to the work of His Spirit.

By denying the Holy Spirit and giving in to lust, believers harm their walk with the Lord. Paul warned Christians about quenching the Holy Spirit (1 Thess. 5:19). He also encouraged believers not to grieve the Holy Spirit (Eph. 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 so we can grow in Christ.

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**GUIDE:** Refer group members to PSG page 73-74 for three reasons not to act in this way:

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

**SUMMARIZE:** Refer to Bible Commentary 5 to provide further explanation regarding the Lord who is the avenger; He will punish those who are responsible for the damage.

**SUMMARIZE:** Refer to Bible Commentary 6 for reasons to avoid sexual immorality:

- **Holiness**—immoral behavior clashes with God’s call for believers to be set apart for Him.
- **Rejecting God**—engaging in sexual immorality causes believers to cross the line formed by marriage which means we reject God.

**DISCUSS:** Question 3 (PSG, p. 74): Why do you think God places a high value on purity?

Alternate: When have you had an opportunity to stand for holiness in the face of immorality?
1 Thessalonians 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.

Verse 9. So far, Paul simplified the relationships Christians would nurture with one another. Their interpersonal relationships would reflect the priority they had given to growing in their relationship with the Lord. Accordingly, they would reject sexual immorality and refuse to give in to lust. In other words, they would respect relational boundaries.

7 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. Peter and the writer of Hebrews also used this word to describe such love (Heb. 13:1; 1 Pet. 1:22; 2 Pet. 1:7). Paul affirmed that he didn’t need to teach about this kind of love because God had already taught them. Thanks to Him, 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. As Paul affirmed the Thessalonian Christians, he commented on the reach of their love. Not only did they
love one another in their church family, their love reached Christians 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 because of challenging circumstances. Still other Christians allow the love God taught them to reach out to other believers through a variety of mission partnerships. As we reach farther, the Lord shows us what it means to live in contentment so we can serve Him joyfully.

Verse 11. While we think about the effect loving each other has on Christians, we do well to consider lost people too. By the way we live each day, we demonstrate we have a relationship with Christ that sets us apart. Paul pointed us to three practical expressions of our uniqueness that believers should take seriously. First, we're challenged to live quiet lives. That challenge would have made sense to the Thessalonian believers. The church had experienced quite a controversy in the city. Opposition to the message of Christ led to a public outcry against Paul as well as the congregation (Acts 17:5-9). Without compromising that message, Paul urged believers to strive for quiet relationships.

Second, we're urged to stay focused on our own business. Again, the Thessalonian church probably understood the reason for this challenge. Some of the believers had become idle and had turned into busybodies who tried to get involved in matters that didn't concern them (2 Thess. 3:11).

Third, we're directed to work. That directive may appear somewhat strange to us. However, it probably didn't come across that way to the Thessalonians. The Jewish people in those days had a solid work ethic, but the Romans perceived work as an impediment. Work got in the...

SUMMARIZE: Refer to Bible Commentary 8 to provide further insights about the three practical expressions of our uniqueness that believers should take seriously.

- Live quiet lives.
- Mind your own business.
- Work with your own hands.

OPTIONAL ACTIVITY: Place group members in groups of four or five. Say: Work as a team to make a list of pairs of famous friends. These can be from the Bible, history, TV, movies, or books. List as many as you can think of. After a few minutes, allow a volunteer from each group to share the list they created. Write their responses on the board. Highlight ones that appear on more than one list. Ask: What made these relationships so strong? What kind of struggles did one have with the other? How did they work through problems? Discuss responses. Point out that we sometimes think relationships are complicated, but they really just boil down to loving people well. Ask: How can you express love to a friend this week? Challenge group members to live out today's session by finding at least one way to show love to a friend in the next several days.
way of their ambition to fulfill their desires. Therefore, a Christian’s work ethic made a statement about his or her spiritual priorities.

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. They don’t know the Lord, so they may not comprehend our love for Him. But with our actions, we show them the connection between what we believe and how we behave. When we refuse to draw attention to ourselves, mind our own business, and devote ourselves to honest and dependable work, we show them that Christ has given us contentment. In turn, they’re drawn closer to Christ and perhaps will be more willing to listen to the gospel message.

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. His care comes from His love for us. We express His love in our relationships with our spiritual siblings in God’s family. At the same time, we reflect it in our actions so lost people who watch us can see it. A life of contentment in a complicated world speaks volumes about the Lord who is the believers’ source of contentment.
LIVE IT OUT
What will you do this week so that God's love drives how you relate to others?

▸ **Evaluate.** 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 an individuals placed here to meet your needs.

▸ **Apologize.** If you have a relationship with someone that is not Christ-honoring, seek to change that. Apologize, if needed. Rebuild the relationship based on your love for Christ.

▸ **Connect.** 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.

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**ENGAGE**

*Choose the area that could use some work in your life. List some things you can do to improve this area this week.*

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

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**Live It Out**

5 minutes

**GUIDE:** Emphasize The Point: Let God’s love drive how you relate to others.

**REVIEW:** Live It Out (PSG, p. 77); (see text to the left). Encourage each group member to follow through this week with at least one of the applications.

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**Wrap It Up**

**GUIDE:** Encourage group members to reflect on living a life of simplicity, especially in the area of relationships. Encourage group members to consider taking specific steps based on topics discussed in this session.

**PRAY:** “Father help us honor you by how we treat others.”

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Grow with other group leaders at the Groups Ministry blog.
LifeWay.com/GroupMinistry
PREPARE TO TEACH YOUR GROUP IN JUST 30 MINUTES A DAY

By Ken Braddy

Tom Landry, my favorite NFL coach, once said, “The will to practice must be greater than the will to win.” Leaders in the world of Sunday School and small groups have recognized something similar: if you commit to prepare, you’ll experience success—preparation is key.

Your success as a Bible study leader is largely determined by how much preparation you are willing to make before your group meets for Bible study. It’s also about the quality of that preparation. So with that in mind, here is a simple schedule that will help you consistently lead great Bible studies. (This schedule assumes you are teaching a group on Sundays. If you teach on another day of the week, simply modify the schedule below.)

And, by the way, this only takes 30 minutes a day. If you are willing to give up a sitcom or other television show that lasts 30 minutes and use that time to prepare your group’s Bible study, you’ll experience a new level of success as a group leader.
SUNDAY AFTERNOON
• Read next week’s Bible study passage at least twice.
• Pray for God to speak to you through His Word and your prayers and circumstances.
• Pray for insight and wisdom into your group members and the way the Scripture may intersect their lives.

MONDAY
• Read the lesson passage again, but this time in different translations. Note how words are sometimes translated differently, and see if this helps you sharpen your understanding of the original text.
• Jot down any themes you see in the passage.
• Continue praying for wisdom and insight.

TUESDAY
• Identify key words and concepts, Bible characters, and places mentioned in the passage.
• Consult commentaries, your curriculum’s Leader Guide, a Bible atlas, a Bible dictionary, or other resources as needed.

WEDNESDAY
Read the lesson passage again, asking these application questions of the text:

  Is there an attitude to adjust?
  Is there a promise to claim?
  Is there a priority to change?
  Is there a lesson to learn?
  Is there an issue to resolve?
  Is there a command to obey?
  Is there an activity to stop or start?
  Is there a truth to believe?
  Is there a sin to confess?
  Is there an example to follow?

THURSDAY
• Review your curriculum’s Leader Guide to be sure you’re familiar with the commentary and the teaching plan. Highlight and make notes where needed.
• Think about using a teaching method(s) you haven’t used recently to meet the needs of the different types of learners in your group.

FRIDAY
• Finalize your teaching plan.
• Gather needed supplies.

SATURDAY
• Review your teaching plan a final time.
• Get to bed on time that night!

SUNDAY MORNING
• Get up on time.
• Get to church early (remember, early is on time … on time is late).
• Set up your classroom.
• Start on time.
• End on time.

Ken Braddy manages LifeWay’s Ongoing Bible studies, leads his church’s Groups ministry, and blogs daily on Sunday School and small groups at kenbraddy.com.
6 WAYS TO MINIMIZE THE STRESS OF LEADING A GROUP

by Dwayne McCrary

If you have led any kind of Bible study group, you are familiar with the stress that comes with it. As soon as the group time is over, another one sits in the future awaiting your attention. Responding to each individual’s questions that come during the group time just adds to the stress all the more. And it always seems that some crisis at work happens right before your group meets. Here are a few things you can do to address the stress of leading a group.
1. **Prepare.** This may come as a shock, but “winging it” only adds to the stress. We may buy into the “I want the Holy Spirit to be free to work in the group time” excuse, pretending that our failure to prepare is somehow spiritual. The truth is the Holy Spirit is at work outside the group time just as much as He is in it. Sharpened axes tend to be the most effective.

2. **Start early.** It is one thing to prepare; it is another thing to prepare on your way to the group meeting. Urgency adds stress and gets in the way of us doing our best. The moment our group time concludes, we can—and should!—start preparing for the next one. This gives us time to think about all that happened—both positive and negative—during the group time and put together an even greater experience for our members.

   *The Holy Spirit is with us as we prepare, present in the lives of the believers in our group, and stands with us during the group time.*

3. **Delegate.** We can’t do everything and we shouldn’t even try. The more we take on, the more we cheat our members of using their giftedness within the group. Delegation is part of starting early; asking a person to volunteer the day of the group time is unfair.

4. **Use a plan.** Half of the stress of leading a group is deciding what you will study and when. Rely on your church leaders and other experts like those at LifeWay to create a well thought-out study plan for your group. Adapt as needed, but having a basic plan to adapt removes the pressure of deciding on your own.

5. **Get feedback and act on it.** Ask someone you trust in the group to evaluate the group time. Look for constructive actions you may need to take to improve as a leader. This is not about being perfect, but about being better.

6. **Remember you are not alone.** Nothing adds to our stress more than feeling like we are on out on the limb with all eyes on us. The Holy Spirit is with us as we prepare, present in the lives of the believers in our group, and stands with us during the group time. God shows up when His truth is examined and we are in partnership with Him.

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