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1 THESSALONIANS 4:9-12

Series: Real Christians in Challenging Times

I like the story of the director of the mental hospital who is giving a tour to some visitors. One of the visitors asked a good question. “How do you get admitted here? How do you determine whether someone needs to be admitted here or not?” The director said, “Oh that’s a good question. See here’s what we do. We fill a bathtub full of water and then we give the person a bucket, a cup, and a spoon. We tell them to empty the bathtub and then we watch and see what he does.” And the visitor says, “Oh I see. The bucket would empty it faster, so I suppose that’s the right answer.” And the director said, “No, a normal person would empty the drain. Would you like a bed by the window?”

Now I like that joke because it illustrates this question about normalcy. Are we normal? I don’t know if you view yourself as normal or not, and I’m sure that there is some reaction to even that word normal. But I want to talk to you today about what it means to be part of the normal Christian life. Now maybe some radar goes up for you because you want to say we’re not normal, we’re special. It is true that as Christians we are special and God has given every person a unique spiritual gift, a unique path of things that they’ve followed. So each one of us has this roadmap that’s unique and special and we rise above. Even the Christian life itself is so special. But that’s normal for the Christian. You see the Christian lives in a world that’s different because they experience God in a special way. I want to talk about what this normal looks like and what it means for us.

In 1957 Watchman Nee wrote a book called *The Normal Christian Life*. An excellent book that gets you dropped into the Christian life in some ways that just inspire you. It’s a theological book. In fact here’s one of the things that he says. Every person who becomes a Christian needs to understand the difference between the blood of Christ and the cross. You see, when you come to Christ and you understand the blood of Christ you understand that that was shed for us so that we could have a personal relationship with Jesus Christ. That when God looks at us He looks at us as perfect and holy because of Christ’s sacrifice, because of the blood that was shed on the cross for us. When we understand that and we realize this was just such a tremendous gift that God gave to us that we have fallen in love with Jesus and we want to give our lives to Him.

Kelly Fox was sharing at the Bible study on Wednesday that this was one of the main reasons that she came to Christ. When she realized that Jesus Christ died for her she realized that this was something that she needed and she wanted and she wanted to give her life to Jesus Christ.

Then there’s the cross. Each one of us bears a cross in our lives. It’s our pilgrimage, our road. Jesus said – *Take up your cross and follow me*. There’s this cross that represents the suffering

that Jesus Christ experienced. We too have our own set of challenges that we experience. In the way that the blood represents the standing before God that only God can make us righteous, there's the cross of Christ that's moving us along in our lives and helping us to become holy in a very personal way. That's describing our walk. We have our standing and our walk. When we understand those things, we begin to get a glimpse of what's normal in the Christian life.

What is normal? What does it look like? Well that's what Paul is going to talk about and is talking about with the Thessalonians. We've been watching this passage. If we look back at the first verses in 1 Thessalonians... You can take your book, by the way, and open it up because I'm going to make some statements that you're going to want to jot down in your little workbook that you can use as a journal of your study during this time.

But let me go back to verse 1. In 1 Thessalonians 4:1 it says that there is this normal that we have that we're walking. And what are we doing? We're doing that to please God. The verse in verse 12 says that we need to love God more and more. So I just want to say, it is normal for us to be loving. That's the normal part. Normally we are loving as Christians. In fact, if you get up grouchy or you're being irritable or you're snapping at someone, you have moved outside of the normal Christian life and you are in disorder, in disease, and need to move back into the normal Christian life. How do you do that? When you're out of step with the Lord, what needs to happen? You need to make this decision to allow the Holy Spirit to fill you again so that you can be back into the center. God's grace moves us back into the center, and so when we find ourselves not experiencing the normal Christian life, we need to move back into that using the power of the Holy Spirit in our lives.

Another part of normalcy is not just love, but it's growing. We're walking, as the passage says, and we're doing it more and more. So we're moving forward, growing is what it means to be normal in the Christian life. There's sometimes when we become ingrown and selfish, and so we're not growing. When that takes place then we are outside of the normal Christian life and we need to move back in because we need to grow, we need to experience that growth.

Another part of the normal Christian life is that our desire is to please God. But sometimes we get too busy to think about God. Sometimes we think about pleasing other people and not pleasing God. In those cases we find ourselves outside of the norm and we need to move ourselves back in or allow God to move us back in with His grace into this normal of the Christian life. You see the normal of the Christian life is way up there. It's where God is answering prayers and providing blessings for us and we're experiencing that. We're being a blessing to other people. We're hearing the voice of the Lord. That He does more than we can ask or imagine. That's normal for the Christian. And if we're not in the midst of that then we need to move back into it. Sometimes sin moves us outside of that. God wants us to deal with that so we can get back into the normal Christian life.

Now you see in the passage there it talks about this idea of sanctification. This is back in verse 1 and 2 and 3 here. Sanctification is this idea that God is moving us. When we are inside of the circle, the normal Christian life, God is able to grow us and build us and move us in our sanctification toward Him. So that's the normal Christian life. It's this tremendous experience

and knowledge of where we are and God wants to do some good things and powerful things in us as we're moving forward.

So I want you to think about normal Christian life today because Paul is going to share with the people what it means to be a part of this normal Christian life. That's where we enter the story in verse 9. So let's read the passage starting in verse 9 and going to verse 12.

It says this: *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, and to aspire to live quietly, and to mind your own affairs, and to work with your hands, as we instructed you, so that you may walk properly before outsiders and be dependent on no one.*

Now the first thing I want to do is look back at verse 9 and I want to talk about this word *love*. I want you to see that there are two Greek words being used here. So you can circle the word *brotherly love* and draw a line over to the side where you're taking notes. And you can write the word *philadelphios* because that's the word being used, *philadelphios*. It describes a family kind of love. And then later in that same verse it uses the word *love* again, but that's the word *agapé*. The word *agapé* is this sacrificial committed kind of love.

Now both of those kinds of words describe love in a very important way and they don't seem to be used in contrast with each other. They're used as synonyms in the passage. But I know that sometimes people experience a family dynamic that they are missing out on some of the love that they maybe should've experienced. In fact I would say that every family is imperfect and thus every family, no matter how you grew up, there are some love needs that likely were not met in your home. That's why God has designed His love for us. The only person that can fill up all of those love needs is God Himself.

That's why in verse 12 of chapter 3 remember it says *may God increase your love*. See God is the one who builds that love inside of us. He's the one who fills us up with that love. But once that's filled up, he's talking about here about loving one another. As we love one another and think about each other and care for each other then there's something important that happens there. So he's talking about this love and he's doing it in a way that's describing it as normal for Christians. I want you to realize that love, a high level of love, being filled up with love and sharing it with others is normal in the Christian life.

Now look down at verse 12 in the passage. I'm going to keep referring to verse 12 because it gives us kind of the reason all these things are happening. It says – *so that you may walk properly before outsiders*. You see people are going to look at us and they're going to see that we are Christians. Jesus says they will know you are Christians by your love. Now that love that we have is something that's part of the normal Christian life. God wants you to feel loved, He wants you to know that you're loved. He wants you to act as if you're loved. All that love is right there. But it's not just to fill you up. Notice in the passage they were practicing that with *all the brothers throughout Macedonia*. So this love is a very important part of who we are and that is normal in the Christian life.

Now do you see verse 10 there in the passage? In order to explain verse 10 I'm going to pull it out of that passage and I'm going to put it on the next slide, just verse 10, because I want to tie in some other verses to it. But notice it's in context with this idea of loving. So let's go there. Verse 10 says this: *for that indeed is what you are doing to all the brothers throughout Macedonia.*

Now *you are doing* is a very important word here. It has the idea of what you're practicing. It's what you do normally. This is where I get the idea of the normal Christian life in this passage. It comes right out of this word. In other words this is the kind of thing you're doing on a regular basis.

The same word is used, *you are doing*, in Matthew 3:8 and it's translated *produce*. Continually produce. This is the story in Matthew 3 of the Sadducees and Pharisees who come to John the Baptist and say, "Hey, baptize us too." But John knew that these people's hearts were not serving the Lord. They were just wanting to please people or somehow get connected to the movement or something. So John told them no, you go and *produce fruit in keeping with repentance*. In other words you go practice the Christian life. You demonstrate that it's normal for you. You do what God wants you to do first, then come back and see me and we'll talk about this. So this idea of produce fruit is part of that idea of practicing.

When Jesus called the disciples from the Sea of Galilee, He used these words: *Follow me, and I will make you fishers of men*. I'm going to turn a different side of life for you. I'm going to help you to experience a new normal for your life. Your normal for right now is to take care of fish. But what I'm going to do right now is I'm going to teach you how to fish for people. That's going to be your new normal. That's going to be what you do. I'm going to make you into fishers of men. I'm going to help you do something. So you see this word is so powerful. When Paul uses it with them, he's saying you want this to be your normal way of interacting and it already is, just do it more and more.

One more verse I wanted to share with you is this one in Matthew 7 where Jesus says – *Likewise, every good tree bears good fruit, but a bad tree bears bad fruit*. The idea is it's not just it's a one-time doing something, but it characterizes us. Now let's just apply this for a moment because I want for you to understand that there's a normal in the Christian life that's true for all of us. Yes, there are differences that exist that make us unique and special. There are differences that allow us to be different and God is doing different things. But there are some things that are common. Those common things are the normal things in the Christian life. If you're not experiencing them, action needs to be taken on your part to allow God to move you back into that norm, that norm to love people, to experience God's love. That's what he's talking about in this passage. So we want to understand what he's saying because it's a very important part of what he's doing.

Now if we look at that verse again, notice the last part of the verse. He says – *But we urge you, brothers, to do this more and more*. I love those words *more and more*. Notice in your text (and you can draw a line between these) verse 1 of chapter 4 also uses the same words, *more and more*. And if you go back to chapter 3:12 where it says that *God may increase your love* (increase is to increase in quantity) so that it *abounds*. *Increase and abound*. The word *abound* is

the same word used here, *more and more*, and then in verse 1, *more and more*. It has the idea of leftovers.

I described this when we were talking about verse 12, but I really like this idea. The idea is that you have so much love inside of you that it's abounding and the fact that's abounding means that you have leftovers that you can share with other people. The exact same Greek word is used by Jesus when He tells the disciples after the feeding of the five thousand to go out and gather the leftovers. The leftovers are the food that they had that wasn't able to be consumed by the people. They were leftovers. So God wants us to have leftovers with the love that we can then share with other people and allow them to experience this whole idea of love. Because when they do, they're going to see that the Christian normal is something that they want. That outsiders will see how we're acting.

Well let's go on to the next verse. I want to take you to verse 11 because as we're talking about the normal Christian life, Paul mentions three things in this passage. He says – *and to aspire to live quietly, and to mind your own affairs, and to work with your hands, as we instructed you, so that you may walk properly before outsiders and be dependent on no one*. But in verse 11 he's mentioning three things and I want to talk about each one of those three things.

The first thing he says is *and to aspire to live quietly*. Well first of all let me point out that the two words here are opposites. Work really hard to be quiet. We call that in English an oxymoron. When you put two words together that don't seem to go together, that's what we're talking about here and that's the word that's used in this passage. So we use the word... A bank will say "I need you to get me an original copy." Well what is it? An original? Or is it a copy? Or you get your car repaired and he says "I'll give you an exact estimate." An exact estimate? Those are two opposites put together. That's what we call an oxymoron.

Now that's what's happening in the passage. God uses oxymorons in His word. He talks about the foolishness of God is wiser than the wisdom of man. He's putting these words together here and you're saying I need to think about this for a moment. What is he saying there? Well in this passage he's saying *aspire to live quietly*. He's saying *work really hard in order to live quietly*. That's what he's saying here.

Well now I've got to think about this. Live quietly being a goal? Think about who's writing this. Paul the apostle is writing these words and he's telling them to live quietly. Would you consider Paul to be a quiet guy living a quiet life? I wouldn't. He's the kind of guy that's described in Acts 17 as turning the world upside-down. That's what he does. So as Christians we must recognize that part of our job is to be salt, to be light. That in essence we are stirring the pot or lighting a fire under someone. We are helping people become uncomfortable where they are. So we can't be talking about quietness in that form. What he's talking about here must be this inner quietness that we experience. That we live a quiet life in the midst of our ability to stimulate others toward the gospel. There's this dual presence inside of us of a passion to go out and share with other people, while at the same time there's this quietness inside of our hearts. I need that quietness in my life.

I was talking to Ben Freudenberg. He's one of the guys we were in a Zoom meeting together this week and Dr. Ben Freudenberg was giving a little bit update personally. He was saying that during this time he and his wife are spending some time now as they're coming out of the whole pandemic experience trying to decide what God has taught them and where they want to go. One of the things they've decided is during the pandemic there was a certain amount of quietness that existed. Hard to get used to in some respects because the activity level had decreased. The couldn't go out and do the things they normally did. They want to keep that, they said. But they realize the world is a noisy place. And all the noise that's generated by our world we have to turn the volume down in order to hear God speak. I was so grateful. The meeting wasn't about this, but we were talking about some other things at the end of the meeting and I said the most important thing in this meeting that was said was what Ben said about quietness and turning the volume down on the noise of the world.

I think that's what Paul's talking about here. We have something in the normal Christian life that other people don't have. We don't have to live a hectic life. We can live a calm life inside. Yes, we're busy people. Yes, we're out there doing things, but there's a quietness that we enjoy that's very special and appreciate.

You know that this week Ravi Zacharias passed away. A great man. A man who has grown our ability to share our faith because of his apologetics approach. I just admire him and I've learned so much from him and watching him working with people.

Several years ago when I was pastoring Calvary Chapel Mercer County, Gregg Downs wrote to Ravi and said, "Hey, would you come to Princeton." Ravi wrote back and said, "Yes, I will do something with the churches in Princeton if you'll also get me on the campus to do something there." So we did. We organized all the churches in this area and we had this large event and Ravi came and spoke on the Princeton campus, but he also spoke to an event that the churches put together. There was not enough room for us to meet together, so we did this whole event at Princeton Alliance Church with satellite places and the ability for people to watch it in their homes. It was broadcast around the world.

I had the privilege to be in that auditorium where Ravi was present. People had been encouraged to bring their friends to that experience. One young man was there. He stood up and made a comment and he was actually arguing with Ravi about whether Christianity was viable as opposed to atheism. I was just so impressed with Ravi's attention to that young man. Because not only is Ravi concerned about the truth, but he's also concerned about the individual. He modeled and exemplified what I think Paul is talking about here. That there is this quietness inside of him, so confident, so secure, but eager to provoke this young man to think differently. What an amazing experience. And I appreciate him greatly. He's made a tremendous mark on the Christian community. His memorial service will be this Friday. You can tune in and listen to it and all the people that will be giving testimony about his life.

I had another conversation with another person this week about quietness. He was talking about how we want to be calm inside and peaceful and I was talking about tensions and so on. He says, "Well quietness is not just an absence of tension." It got me thinking for a minute because I tend to think of quietness tends to be absence of noise. But he says there's a spiritual dimension to

peacefulness or quietness that makes it much bigger than just absence of quiet or absence of noise. In fact he says if you have absence of tension in the body so much, pretty soon you become numb. That's not what Paul's talking about here, being numb. This man said to me, "In the same way that a person experiences joy, it's not just absence of depression. But joy is this additional spiritual benefit that we experience and what it does is something powerful inside of us." You see that is the normal Christian life. But sometimes we have to work at it.

So as Paul is speaking in these words in verse 11 and he's saying aspire to live quietly, he's saying work hard to live a quiet life. Because it does take work, doesn't it? It takes intentionality. It takes a plan to live a quiet life. That stands out as one of those things that's true of the normal Christian life.

The next thing he says – *and to mind your own affairs*. Now keep in mind that these Thessalonians were new believers. They hadn't been Christians for a year; just a few months as he's writing this, and he's excited about their faith and they're excited about their faith.

Here's something that happens sometimes when a person becomes a Christian. They are so excited about what God has done for them, it's transformed their life, they now have a new normal, and within this normal they do different things and they act different ways. They look at everything differently now. And they're so excited about that that sometimes they want to lay those convictions they have on other people and say, "You shouldn't live that way because this what the normal Christian life looks like." They might say to someone, "Let me talk to you about how you should handle Halloween differently or how you should handle Christmas differently." You see there are areas in the Bible where it's very clear that there's sin and there's not sin. In areas of sin, we have a responsibility to encourage each other to get back out of sin, to repent as it were and get back into the normal Christian life. In those cases we get involved in people's lives. We make a statement to prompt them. That is the loving thing to do. But there is a whole host of things that fall into this other category where there's no specific guidelines.

For example the amount of money you spend on a car. Someone may have a very expensive car and someone might not have an expensive car. They might have some convictions about that. Those convictions are based on their relationship with God and how they're responding, and that's okay. We need to allow people to experience their own convictions before God and to exercise those. There are some people who are adamant because of their convictions that their children should go to a public school. There are others who are adamant based on their convictions that their children should go to a private school. And there are others who are adamant that their children should go to home schooling. Now that's fine for anyone to have those convictions and be adamant about those things until they start imposing those on other people and suggesting that everyone else needs to do what they do. In that case they are minding their own affairs. So the big flag goes up here by Paul, MYOB (mind your own business) in those cases.

We need to be careful about that. We will experience that at Calvary Chapel Living Hope. It's going to happen. We're going to come together. There are some people who are going to come together and they're going to wear masks. That's fine. There are some people who are going to come together and not wear masks. And that's fine too. It's based on their conviction. We're not

going to judge each other. We're going to try to live together in the midst of that and experience the benefits of being a church. Some will be masked and some will not be masked. It's just a part of the freedom we have in Christ. Paul is saying that we need to be careful to mind our own affairs.

That's the next thing he's talking about because in the Christian life we are concerned about what God is doing in our lives. We share those things with each other and maybe we'll convince them, but we're very careful about how we handle ourselves. Why? Because as we look at verse 12 let me show you it again, in verse 12 it says *so that you may walk quietly before outsiders*. People are watching how we handle things. The Christian community there is tolerance in areas that are gray and there's conviction expressed in areas where God has made it very clear what He wants us to do with sin and not sin.

The third thing he mentions there and you see in the passage is to *work with your hands*. Now the Greeks were known for philosophy. They like to think about the latest philosophies. In 1 Corinthians 1:22 it says the Greeks are interested in philosophy and wisdom. When Paul came down from Thessalonica he went to Athens and in Athens he saw all of these people talking about... Because they're the Greeks in Athens, just like Thessalonica is in Greece. It says in parenthesis in Acts 17 that the people would get together to talk about the latest things. There can be a temptation in regards to that that some people will talk instead of act. And when they're doing all this talking about not acting maybe they're not being a good testimony. So it might be that the Greeks were in philosophy and Paul is encouraging them to work with their own hands.

But there's something else going on in this passage that gives us another indication of what might be happening here. In the verses to follow, 13 and following, Paul begins to talk about the rapture of the church, the second coming of Christ. Next week I'm going to share with you more about the second coming of Christ and what the rapture is all about. But sometimes people misunderstand the rapture. When you get this truth and you realize Christ can come back at any moment. He's coming back for us and it could be today. Christ could come back today. There's some people who have taken that understanding of theology and misunderstood that and decided they're going to sell everything they have, they're not going to work, they're going to just sit and wait for Christ to return. Paul, if that's the case, is exhorting them to work with their hands, to be a good testimony, to do your part.

If you'll notice at the very end of the passage that we're looking at today, it says – *and be dependent on no one*. All this passage ties together. What he's saying is don't be overly dependent on anyone. Instead work with your own hands. Be a good testimony that you're a Christian. Christians have a different normal. They live within different parameters. Why do we do that? So we may walk properly before outsiders.

Now notice in verse 12 the word *walk* in verse 12 you can circle that word because the word *walk* is the same word used in verse 1, *peripateo*. It has the idea of putting one foot in front of the other, walking, or it has the idea of conducting yourselves in a particular way. Of course that's what it means in our passage. That we live in a way. That our normal way of living fits into this circle of normal. And that normal is different than what the world is looking at. The

world's going to be attracted to that because we are walking properly. So notice what it says there in the passage. *So that you may walk properly.* There's a normal way that Christians walk.

Now sometimes Christians aren't walking normally. They're tripping up, so they need to get back in step with the Holy Spirit. They need to get back in step with God's plan for them. They need to get back into the normal. There are some times when Christians fall. And when they fall they need to experience repentance and then forgiveness, and move back into the normal Christian life.

One of the beauties of the normal Christian life is that you can be there right now today. You see when you're Spirit-filled, that is you have the Spirit filling you, you're just as Spirit-filled as anyone on the block who's committed to Jesus. You're just as Spirit-filled as me or Billy Graham or your parents or anyone else. You either are or you aren't Spirit-filled. In this moment as you come before the Lord I'm going to pray that you'll be Spirit-filled in this moment so that you can trust the Lord in this normal part of the Christian life.

But as soon as you sin you fall out of that and you're outside of the norm and you need to get back in. How do you get back in? You come back in by confession. And when you do that you ask the Lord to fill you up again. Yes, you get filled up again. That's why Ephesians says – *be continually filled with the Holy Spirit.* The Holy Spirit moves you back into this normal space and He wants you to live there. Because when you're in that normal space then you're experiencing sanctification, you're growing in your relationship with God, and God is doing amazing things in your life. You're hearing the voice of the Lord. He is doing things through you in your life. That is normal in the Christian life. God has given us that privilege to be there and He does that so when other people that are outside look at that they will see, "Wow, that normal is different than my normal. I need that in my life."

I'm going to encourage you right now to pause and pray and to ask God to fill you with His Holy Spirit right now in this moment. And then take that into the next five minutes and ten minutes, and take that into the next hour. As you face the other experiences of your life that each step of the way you will rely on the power of the Holy Spirit to guide you and to be in step with the Holy Spirit as you move forward. When you mess up, I would encourage you to confess right away. Don't wait for a special time at night when you confess all your sins. I call it confession on the run. Just come back before the Lord. "Lord, I want to be right in your presence. I want to be Spirit-filled right now." And God will bring you back into this normal place in the Christian life.

Normal is great for the Christian. Now that's very important since we live in a world right now that is somewhat abnormal. We've never experienced the whole world shutting down as we have in this last couple months. The world is abnormal, and your world, I'm sure, is abnormal in some different ways. But you can experience the normal of the Christian life, and God wants you to enjoy all that that means as He develops you and encourages you and positions you well so that other people can see how you're walking properly.

Would you pray with me together?

[PRAYER] Heavenly Father, I want to thank you for your Spirit and the power that your Spirit has to overcome any shame that we experience, any guilt that we experience. Lord, I just pray that you would right now fill us with your Holy Spirit. Give us such boldness in our lives, confidence that you are in control. Give us wisdom to know how to handle each situation and to trust you in the midst of that. Lord, thank you. We are your church. We represent you and we're honored to be brothers and sisters in Christ. So Lord, continue to do a work in our hearts and we'll look forward to sharing with each other soon in person. In Jesus' name, amen.