

# How to Live in a "Fish Bowl"

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*First Things*

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**Bible Text:** 1 Thessalonians 4:7-12

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This morning, it is a privilege to invite you to open your Bibles to the book of 1 Thessalonians 4, 1 Thessalonians, a little bit toward the end of your New Testament. If you're a guest or visitor with us or maybe haven't worshiped with us in some while, I want to invite you to what I believe is a very timely and strategic study. Walking through what we know as the book of 1 Thessalonians is strategic and timely because this is the very first communication that the Lord gave the church after his resurrection. It's been about two decades when the Lord came to whom we know as the Apostle Paul to communicate these five chapters of Scripture. Why is that so strategic? Why is that so critical? Because today we live in a world that when you use the term Christian or you say Christianity, there are so many different opinions, there are so many different expressions, there are so many different perceptions and perspectives, and what has happened is that over time it has had creeds and confessions and debates and discussions that oftentimes bring division and confusion.

So 1 Thessalonians allows us to kind of recapture what the church was always designed to be, yet at the same time, we cannot ignore the fact that today chronologically is the day that we celebrate known as Palm Sunday. This was a day that was prophesied all the way back in the Old Testament in the book of Zechariah that the Messiah whom we know as Jesus Christ would ride into that Temple Mount in the center of Jerusalem on the back of a colt. And there on that famous day, there were crowds by the thousands and the ten thousands who not only waved the palm branches, but they declared, "Hosanna, blessed is he who comes in the name of the Lord." Not only did Jesus Christ not only ride through that famous Eastern Gate, the Bible records in Matthew 21, he went straightway into the temple and it was there that he had that famous scene where he overturned the tables and he said, "You have made my house a den of thieves." I can only imagine the scene. Thousands upon thousands of those who waved the palm branches excited about his presence and then there was a significant number of those who were much the opposite. In fact, the Bible records those that were contrary to Jesus, asked him to ask his followers to please remain in silence.

You know, when you look not just at Palm Sunday, but when you look at the totality of Jesus' ministry, there was an incredible number of those who hung on to every word, there was a great multitude who believed everything he said and he did, but there was

also a significant number of those who despised him. In fact, there are occasions in scripture where men gathered together and said, "We will not eat or drink until this man's life has passed." But one thing, whether for and/or against that you recognize in the life and the ministry of Jesus Christ, is they could not discredit him. They couldn't. In fact, in Mark 3 and in Matthew 12, they claim that he delivered people and healed people by the power of Beelzebub. They could not discredit that lives were changed in their very midst.

You know, when you look at the life and the ministry of Jesus Christ, there has never been anyone who's lived under the microscope more than he did. In fact, in our terminology today, we call it the fish bowl effect. Have you ever seen a little fish that's in a bowl? That if you look at it at the right angle, it is magnified numerous times over simply because of the angle at which you look. Today, as we come to 1 Thessalonians 4, there is going to be a declaration to each and every one of us that our lives as believers in Jesus Christ are much like his in the sense that we're under the microscope as well. We're in that proverbial fish bowl, so to speak, where there are those who are fellow believers as well as those that are contrary to the faith, who always have an eye to see what our lives will appear as. And so today, as we turn to 1 Thessalonians 4, we're going to begin in verse 6, and we're going to discuss how do we live in that fish bowl effect? How do we live under that microscope? What should our lives look like not just as we gather to worship in here, but as we walk and navigate life, out there"?

Beginning in verse 6, it says,

6 That no man go beyond and defraud his brother in any matter: because that the Lord is the avenger of all such, as we also have forewarned you and testified. 7 For God hath not called us unto uncleanness, but unto holiness. 8 He therefore that despiseth, despiseth not man, but God, who hath also given unto us his holy Spirit. 9 But as touching brotherly love ye need not that I write unto you: for ye yourselves are taught of God to love one another. 10 And indeed ye do it toward all the brethren which are in all Macedonia: but we beseech you, brethren, that ye increase more and more; 11 And that ye study to be quiet, and to do your own business, and to work with your own hands, as we commanded you; 12 That ye may walk honestly toward them that are without, and that ye may have lack of nothing.

Now as we walk through these brief passages of scripture, the first thing I want you to notice are the persons that are involved. Beginning in verse 6, there's this encouragement of how we are to live our lives, but it's not until verse 12 that the story picks up about those that are "outside of the faith," and I think this leads to a very important designation and perspective. The majority of what we just read is about how you and I are to interact, how we're to live our lives among fellow believers. Yes, verse 12 is critical, but it is necessitated upon the previous communication. Here's a little perspective. The studies have been done throughout time, whether you are young of age, more mature of age, whether you're from a rural environment or an urban environment, that when an individual comes to that point in life where the Bible declares that we are born again, that

point where we recognize we have a sin condition that we cannot solve in our own merit, we have a sin condition that we cannot somehow obey or refute, whatever it may be, to justify ourselves before God, but that Jesus Christ satisfied our sin problem with the propitiation of his death upon the cross and his glorious resurrection, and we call upon him to save us, whether that's at 13 or at 83 it makes no difference. In this study, here's what they discovered, that the average person, once they get saved, within three to four years no longer has any close friends that are lost. It makes sense. Why? Because before you were saved, there were places that you went that hopefully you no longer go. Before you were saved, there were activities that you cherished and you relished in that no longer are part of your life. Before you were saved, church and Bible study were things that maybe zealots did a couple of times a year, but now it's a regular part of your routine. And so what happens is, as a believer in Jesus Christ, whether we recognize it or not, outside of our "occupation and work environment," the majority of our time is typically spent with those who are fellow believers in the Lord Jesus Christ. You say, "Why is that so important?" Because verse 12, about how we walk among those that are lost, is dependent on how we walk among ourselves and our own family.

Now, let me talk about how we put this into practice. In Galatians 6:10, it says do good unto all men but especially to brethren. Now, why is that important? Because it says, do good to all men. Can I share something very clear this morning? That as a believer in Jesus Christ, you do not have the privilege of instituting your own opinion of a caste system. You don't have the privilege of saying this person should receive more attention than that person, that this one is of greater value than that one. You don't have the opportunity to declare ones of value based on your perception, because last time I checked in John 3:16 for God so loved the world, not just the ones that you think are important, that he gave his only begotten Son.

But especially the brethren. See, this is where the fishbowl effect comes in. This is where that microscope comes in because we live and we navigate a lost and dying world that is always watching. They're always, if you allow me to use the term, they are inspecting not just what we claim to believe and do our lives back it up, but how do we act among each other? How do we treat one another? How do we behave among each other? Which leads to a very important particular. Notice what it says in verse 6, that no man go beyond and defraud his brother in any matter. Now what does that mean by defraud? It means that we should not institute deception, ill intent. We should not desire to pull the wool over somebody's eyes just so that we can gain advantage. Basically what verse 6 is saying, and this is what the rest of the passage is dependent on, that whether it's in everyday life, business life, educational world, it doesn't matter what it is, that one of the most critical things that we can do as a believer is to make sure that not only our lives are transparent and that they're honest, i.e. verse 12, but that when we interact primarily with each other, that we make sure whether consciously or unconsciously, that we don't do anything to take advantage of, to manipulate, or to bait and switch those that are of the family of faith.

Now let me give you a little perspective here. James 2:10 makes this statement, it says that if you break one of the laws of God it's as if you've broken all of them. Now that's

God's economy, not humanity's. Now let me remind you in Isaiah 55, God's ways are not our ways, his thoughts are not our thoughts, but in our terminology, in the human flesh, you know the phrase, if you do the crime then you've got to do the time. But it depends on what the crime is that determines what the time will be. And in our culture and in our context, it is very difficult for us to see this in God's economy and through his eyes.

For example, just as a sake of illustration, I think we would all agree in the flesh, there is a drastic difference between what we call a lie or misrepresentation and first degree murder. There's a big difference. There's a huge difference in the time that would be served, the consequences, no matter where you find yourselves. What's interesting is from God's economy, it's very different. In Revelation 21, in fact we began our service talking about that new Jerusalem, those cities of gold, in Revelation 21 and 22, it is a declaration, it's an explanation of what that's going to look like. It says, "I saw a new heaven. I saw a new earth. I saw a new Jerusalem for the former things were passed away." That's that famous chapter where it says all the tears will be wiped from our eyes. And there in verse 8, it says there are certain people who will not be allowed in New Jerusalem. Now, you can imagine that murderers made the list but do you know who also made it? Liars. Oh yeah, they're both listed. And it's almost as if God is trying to get our attention to say this isn't about your economy, this is about mine. And so when we violate, when we take advantage of, when we manipulate, when we twist, we may think it's just a way to get a leg up, we may think, oh it's no big deal, they don't notice it, it's not that big of a concern, but God says that it is just as if, and you can fill in the blank.

So allow me to give you a practice. This is a practice that I've implemented in my life over the years because even though I'm going to be transparent before you, let me share with you this. there are times in our life, hopefully daily, that we go before the Lord in prayer and when you pray, you may have heard this before, that you need to implement the ACTS system: adoration, confession, thanksgiving, supplication. Well if you've been walking with Jesus for any amount of time, you would hopefully have to confess that your confession is not that real exciting. I mean you think about it, if I quote God on the radio today or on TV and I "told it all," as they like to say, a lot of people listening would say, "Well that's not that big a deal. That's it? That's all you're concerned with? That's what you took before God?" Because there are some people, if they start telling their story, I mean, it'll make your ears burn some of the things they've done and the places they've been. But my story, hopefully your story, particularly as a believer in Jesus Christ, I hope that when it comes to "confessing your sins," from the world's perspective, it just doesn't seem that important and that's why it is so important. How easy is it to slip into this trap by saying, "You know, it's just not that big a deal." How easy is it to say, "You know, they didn't even know. I mean, does it really make a difference? Why should I 'stir it up'?" And so we just kind of say, "Eh, it's how we live life." Can I share with you the practice that I've adopted in my life? I'm not saying you have to do this, but maybe it'll stir up something within you. When I go before the Lord and I'm confessing my sins, my shortcomings before him, in my mind I have to verbalize, "God, I understand in your economy that this is no different than first degree murder. And I need to repent as if it is. I need to confess as it is and I need you to cleanse me as if it is."

And the reason that's important is if we don't watch out, and here the first Christians were falling into this trap, they were walking in the struggles thinking, "Well, there's little problems and then there's really big ones. There's little sins and big sins." He says, "No, no, no, don't defraud one another. Don't take advantage of each other." What the world says is, just "good business" God says, "No, that is sin. That is transgression and it needs to be made right." Why? Not only because you've sinned against somebody, but because the world is watching and that leads to the "problems" of this text. Notice what it says in verse 11. "Study to be quiet. Do your own business. Work with your own hands as we commanded you that you may walk honestly toward those that are without and that you may have a lack of nothing." You say, "What is the problem or what are the problems there?" I want you to notice in verse 11 when it says work with your own hands, do your own "business." one of the things that I want to share with you, a great truth that you need to hold onto today, something you may have never thought of, particularly in this context, but it is also true and we're going to kind of work this out, is that it doesn't matter how you live your life, it doesn't matter what you believe, the convictions you hold, the decisions you make, or the behavior that you exhibit, you do realize, number 1, you cannot affect or you cannot declare how someone will receive who you are, and you cannot determine how someone will accept the communication that you communicate. In other words, even if a life of purity, a life of holiness, as it talks about here, a life that is above reproach, it did not stop those that were opposed to Jesus to blaming him for anything and everything they could come up with. So just because you do exactly what scripture says doesn't mean that people say, "Oh yeah, that's great, that's wonderful, we exalt you." In fact, it may, in fact, just do the opposite.

And so today, let me give you a little perspective of how this works. Maybe you've seen this in your life and then we're going to talk about some details. A few years ago, I received one of those "emails." I'm sure every one of us here has received one of these emails, text messages, or forms of communication sometime throughout your life, where the minute you open it, you just get in the flesh and you lose your mind. You know what I'm talking about, right? Whatever is being said, whatever is being spoken, is so, in your opinion, off the rails that you just lose it. Now to begin with, this particular email that I got was about four to five paragraphs long, which in my opinion is four to five paragraphs too long for an email, but nonetheless, and everything was written in capital letters. So I can just hear the screaming coming through the screen.

The second issue that I had with this email is that I made the mistake of reading it about 10 or 10.30 at night, and so there went my entire night's sleep right there. I mean, because I mean, you talk about an adrenaline rush. No need for coffee because I'm on go right now, right? You know what I did? Same thing you would do. Boy, I started firing back. You give me four paragraphs, I'm going to give you eight. You give me capital letters, here come the exclamation marks. I got done, and I mean, I was typing so loud. You know, sometimes you type normal and sometimes you bang that keyboard. I mean, I was banging at it. I got about toward the end, and the Holy Spirit of God said, "Myers, I don't think that's a real good decision. It's late at night, you're a little bit in the flesh. I think we just need to push delete." I don't know if you've ever had one of those battles with the

Lord over a keyboard before where your finger wants to hit return, and the Lord is saying, don't do that, don't do that.

That night, I'm very grateful that I deleted the email. Never sent it. Didn't sleep all night. But I made a conscious decision the next day, I was just going to call the person that sent me the email. You know, and it didn't take but five minutes for the Lord to teach me a very valuable communication about life. First, when he responded on the phone, this was an individual I'd never met in the flesh. I'd never talked to in person. All I had was an email from him, and I heard this thick, rich, Bostonian accent from the Northeast. Well, they yell ordering a hot dog, much less something else. I mean, everything they do is yelling. And so all of a sudden I realized, oh, that's why everything was capitalized. He's from Boston, that's just how they talk. And then these words came out of his mouth. He said, "Pastor, I am so excited," and he started filling in, and I mean, he just started talking. He went for 15 to 20 minutes explaining his email. I thought he was mad. I thought he was being critical. I thought he was being condemning. What I didn't realize is, and you may have discovered this, you know you cannot read tone in an email? You can't read it in a text message. All you have is communication and here's the problem: we filter that communication through whatever emotions we're currently experiencing.

What does it say here in verse 11 and 12? Just keep to your own business. In other words, don't project onto others what you think they're feeling or what you think their opinion is when you don't have a clue what it is. And so how do we pull back, not just among each other, but the lost world, how do we pull back and actually make it to where we don't defraud? Because if you've ever had this happen before, where you've misread the communication and you respond like I wanted to that night, it always makes it worse than it ever was going to be in the first place.

Two specific biblical areas of practice when it comes to the problems of defrauding, when you do somebody wrong or you hurt somebody's feelings or you mess up or whatever it may be, both within the body and without. Let's just say for the sake of illustration because we're going to go both ways here, that it's your fault. What happens when you discover that you've done somebody wrong? What happens when you discover that you've misled somebody, you've misrepresented whatever the number should have been, and you find out that the conclusion actually should have been B when you were communicating A? What does the Bible say in James 5? It says confess your faults one to another. It does not say air it on an email. It says it one to another. Now let me give you some warning here. When you "confess," you're defrauding your sin, your ills, to another person who you've defrauded, it doesn't mean you rent a billboard and post it to the whole community. It doesn't mean you come to church, you grab a microphone and "tell it all." What happens is the Bible says in James 5:16, confess your faults one to another. What it's saying there is the sphere of impact needs to be the sphere of making it right. In some cases it's just between you and your spouse. The world doesn't need to hear about it. Sometimes it's between you and a coworker, you and a family member, you and a friend, you and somebody, maybe it's you and your neighbor, I don't know who, what, when, or where, but the Bible makes it clear here that there's a lost world that's watching us, and if we don't make it right with each other, why would they want to believe in our Jesus?

And so it says if you've done somebody wrong, go talk to them, fix it, confess it, admit it, and move on. But I know what some of you are thinking, "Well, that's great, but what about those that have done me wrong?" Because most of us think we're right all the time and everybody else is wrong, but that's just an observation of humanity. So what about when others have? You know, Matthew 18, Jesus made this incredible statement regarding the church, the future of the church. He said if somebody has sinned against you, if somebody has done you wrong, he says go to them. Now I want to make this clear and you know that I've got a thorn in my side on this issue. When somebody does you wrong as a believer in Jesus Christ, that is not the time to post it on social media. That is not the time to gossip and to rumor mill whatever it may be. The Bible says if you believe somebody's done you wrong, you go to them mano-a-mano face to face and you talk it out. Now that's not Jeff's opinion. That's not Baptist. That's Bible is what that is. He says, well, if they don't listen to me, what if they don't believe me? Just take a witness. Now it doesn't say take your best friend who's going to amen everything you say. It says take somebody who's in the same place you are because you know what you have here? You have a systematic problem that you were defrauded, they're being defrauded, and if this doesn't stop, it's going to get out of control. Then it says "take it to the church."

Now both of those practices are incredibly uncomfortable and contrary to our flesh to admit that we're wrong originally when we thought we were right or to go to someone face to face and not just fire off an email in the middle of the night, hoping that you can just hide behind the curtain of technology. So why verse 11 and 12? Why is it such a big deal that we have this life of honesty keeping to ourselves? Why do we do such? Because one of the things that we recognize, particularly on this day, is the gravity and the weight of sin. See humanity wants to dismiss sin as that's just how I was born, or that's just how I see things, or that's just how I was raised, or that's just how we do things here. What did Jesus say? Jesus made it very clear whether a person was a Pharisee, or whether they were one of the lower, shall we say, caste system of the culture of his day, he made it very clear that he came to forgive and to save all. And when you get to the book of Romans, last time I checked, it says, for all have sinned and fallen short of the glory of God, and the wages of sin is death. It doesn't say the wages of those sins versus the other sins. It doesn't say the wages of sin that you'll own up to versus the one that you don't. And it doesn't say the wages of sins that you rationalize versus those that you internalize.

What we understand, the reason this passage is so important, not only as we deal with each other, but we deal with the world at large, is because we're dealing with sin and the reason we need to take it seriously, and the reason that we need to handle it biblically, is because it was such of a serious concern that whether it was murder, lying, or in our perspective somewhere in between, that Jesus Christ not only rode in on Palm Sunday on that donkey and overturned those tables, but a few days later, he allowed the world at large to mock him, make fun of him, ridicule him, and nail him to a cross of a guilty criminal of which he was guilty of nothing. He took your lying. He took your manipulation. He took your murder. He took all those things, and he nailed them to his cross because it was so important and so grave that he had to handle it the only way it could be handled. The reason that we struggle with this is because oftentimes we struggle

with how grave and how weighty our own sin is, whatever it may be that we rationalize, whatever it is we justify, whatever it is that we dismiss. In God's economy, he had to go to the cross to cover it.

Let's pray with our heads bowed, our eyes closed. Today as we come to this time in our service, maybe you're here in person, maybe you're watching online, maybe you're listening on the radio, but maybe today is that day where the Spirit of God took the word of God and did what Hebrews 4 says, sharper than a two-edged sword, and today is that day where the Lord showed you the gravity of your sin, the weight of your sin, and oftentimes in an environment such as this and culture such as this, we just dismiss so much of what we call the little things, but we realize that all things contrary to God are big in his eyes. The Bible says that whoever calls on the name of the Lord will be saved. It doesn't say whoever "gets religion" or becomes a Baptist or starts going to church, more often than not, it says whoever calls on the name of the Lord, whoever recognizes their sin condition and asks Jesus to save them. Maybe today that's the position you find yourself in. Maybe today the Spirit of God took the word of God and let you see where you are in relationship to him, and it's not pretty. So maybe today is the day where you call out. You don't have to do so out loud. You don't have to use the same words that I would use or somebody else would use. It's not about taking a phrase and repeating it verbatim. This is about a heart's cry today and maybe your heart's cry will go a little something like this, "God, today I recognize, Lord, I've got a sin problem. I've justified it for years. I've rationalized it for years. What I've bought into the cultural system that says it's just not that big a deal but, God, today I understand it's the reason that you had to go to the cross. So God, today I want you to know I believe. I believe I've got a sin problem that only Jesus can fix. God, I believe that Jesus Christ loved me so much that he came on my behalf. God, I believe he lived a sinless life on my behalf. God, I believe, just as we talked about earlier, that when they nailed him to the cross, he was bearing the pain, the punishment of my sin. And God, I believe three days later, when he rose from the grave victoriously, where he made it possible, he made it feasible for my sin to be forgiven and my soul to be saved. God, today I don't have all the answers to all the problems, the struggles, and the issues of this whole world but there's one thing I know, I've got a sin problem that only Jesus can fix. In the best way I know how, I'm asking you to forgive me, I'm asking you to save me. I just want to turn my life over to you."

With our heads still bowed, our eyes still closed, maybe you're that person today who cried out to Jesus. We'd love to celebrate with you. We'd love to hear your story. We'd love to pray with you and pray for you. So in a moment, I'm going to pray for us. Afterwards, we're going to stand and sing together. We just want to invite you to step out and step forward and maybe today you're one of those individuals who say, "Well, I'm already saved. I believed on Jesus years ago." But maybe like many of those people on our campus say, you need to follow in believer's baptism or maybe you're one of those individuals or couples or families that we meet each and every week who say, "You know, this is our faith family. This is our church home. We just want to plug in." Or maybe you just need to be prayed for or prayed with. Whatever the concern, whatever the decision, we've got a team set aside, a room set aside, we would love to just spend some time just hearing and celebrating what God is doing in your life.



*Heavenly Father, as we come to this time of decision, God, thank you. Thank you that our ways are not your ways. God, if our ways were your ways, we would dismiss things that you take seriously, we would rationalize that which is eternally weighty in your eyes. So God, today may we realize the extent of your love, your grace, your mercy that, God, today through your word, you shared with us hard truths that we must receive and believe to understand your economy. So God, today help us, help us to hear you, to respond to you, and allow all competing voices to just fall by the wayside. It is in the name of Jesus Christ we pray. Amen.*