



THE HEIGHTS

CHURCH

LIFE GROUP TEACHING PLANS
THE SIMPLEST WAY TO CHANGE THE WORLD
LESSON 6

THE SIMPLEST WAY TO CHANGE THE WORLD

FROM TEST TO TESTIMONY

LESSON 6

TEACHING PLAN

PREPARATION

- > Spend the week reading through and studying 1 Thessalonians 5:12-18. Consult the commentary provided and any additional study tools (such as a concordance or Bible dictionary) to enhance your preparation.
- > Determine which discussion points and questions will work best with your group.
- > Pray for the upcoming group meeting, your teaching, your group members, and their receptivity to the study.

HIGHLIGHTS

- > **Series Theme Aim:** Loving our neighbors means choosing to engage rather than unplug, open rather than close, and initiate rather than sit idly.
- > **Biblical Emphasis:** God has called us to live in community together, and to do it in such a way that we reflect the two greatest commands—love God and love each other.
- > **Teaching Aim:** When we begin to love our neighbors, our tests turn into testimonies.
- > **Memorize:** 1 Thessalonians 5:17

INTRODUCTION

As your group time begins, use this section to help get the conversation going.

Notes:

- 1 Note that today marks the halfway point in our study. What have you learned so far that you didn't expect to learn, or how have you been unexpectedly challenged?

- 2 As you think about the call to love your actual neighbors and change the world, rank the following factors in order of importance: time, pure motives, courage, endurance, having "a way with words", prayer, and personality. Explain.

We've been learning practical instruction from God's Word on how to love our neighbors the way God wants us to. There are many factors that impact our success in that endeavor, but none of them outweighs the power and presence of God. We can have great intentions and become the very best neighbors, but only God can truly change the world. It is through prayer that we lean into God's power and presence.

Christian community is also key, because it helps with all the other factors. You might be the only person trying to reach your neighborhood with the gospel, but you are not alone. We gather together in Christian community to remind each other to prioritize people with our time, to examine our motives, to have courage to share the message of Christ, and to endure whatever obstacles we face. God redeems us into a community of faith by which we can experience and live more fully in the grace and purpose He has called us to.

UNDERSTANDING

Unpack the biblical text to discover what Scripture says or means about a particular topic.

Notes:

- > Ask a volunteer to read
1 Thessalonians 5:12-15.
- What did Paul ask the Thessalonian believers to do in this passage?

 - In the context of the call we have all received to love our actual neighbors, what do Paul's words challenge us to do?

 - Why is it important to affirm those among us who are answering God's call to love their neighbors? Why is it equally important for us to warn, help, and encourage those of us who are still struggling to take steps toward loving our neighbors?

 - Do either of those aspects of Christian community—affirmation and warning—make you feel uncomfortable or awkward? Explain.

The verb “ask” introduced a strong exhortation. It was an expectation, not a mild request. The term “brothers” helps us understand this instruction applied to persons in the Christian family. “Respect” translates a verb literally meaning “know” or “take note of.” We are to take note of and affirm those who faithfully carry out their ministries.

Many in the Thessalonian church had stopped working (1 Thes. 4:9-12). “Fainthearted” occurs only here in the New Testament. Because of the increased persecution, it is likely that many were losing resolve and were in need of encouragement.

While it is perhaps easier to let a pastor or teacher attend to these needs, to do so is to shirk a God-given responsibility. God has given us each other in Christian community to build each other up. As part of that process, a patient Christian realizes we are all subject to weakness and discouragement and seeks to encourage others to continue in faithfulness.

Notes:

- In an effort to carry out Paul's instruction in 1 Thessalonians 5:12-13, share a testimony about something God has shown you or allowed you to experience these last few weeks (i.e. you've been praying for your neighbors and developing a heart to love them well, you've moved from surface conversation with a neighbor to personal conversation, or you've identified obstacles of time or comfort that have kept you from loving your neighbors.) OPTION: If the class is too big for everyone to share, consider breaking into smaller groups of 3-5.
- Now, in an effort to carry out Paul's instructions in 1 Thessalonians 5:14-15, share about an obstacle or difficulty you've experienced these past few weeks in loving your actual neighbors (i.e. I haven't set aside the time to learn my neighbor's names, I am afraid to let conversation move beyond the surface, or I haven't made a regular practice of praying for my neighbors.)

> Ask a volunteer to read
1 Thessalonians 5:16-18.

- How do these verses relate to verses 12-15?

Constant, faithful prayer recognizes our complete dependence on God and shows our desire to be in fellowship with God. In the context of this study in particular, prayer acknowledges that we can't make any difference in the lives of our neighbors apart from Him. Prayer is powerful! It is a privilege to pray

faithfully and fervently together, thanking God for the work He is doing, confessing our struggles, and inviting Him to move among us in the days ahead.

Notes:

DO NOT SKIP THIS

- Considering what you've personally identified these past several weeks as challenges and obstacles to getting to know your neighbors, going deeper in conversation, and loving them well, how can this group pray for you specifically? Take time to pray together as a group, both about victories and struggles faced in loving your neighbors. Praise God for the victories already experienced in your group as He has given you hearts to love your neighbors well and opportunities to do so. Thank Him for those among you who have been open to His instruction and have taken steps to carry it out. Invite God to continue developing those relationships so that He might be glorified in your neighborhoods. Next, acknowledge that we all struggle to love our neighbors well. Thank God for His patience with us and His desire to continue to use us even when we've failed. Thank God for those among you who are honest about their struggles to carry out His commands. Ask Him to strengthen them in the days ahead and to give them hearts that overflow with newfound love and commitment to His kingdom purposes. OPTION: Pray in the groups you created in the previous step.

NEXT STEPS

Help your group identify how the truths from the Scripture passage apply directly to their lives.

Notes:

- 1 In the second half of our series, “The Simplest Way to Change the World”, we’re going to talk about how to move from stranger to friend, how to share your faith, how to deal with rejection, and how to receive help from your neighbors instead of only trying to give. Why is it going to be vital that prayer continue to be a priority for you going forward? How can this group pray specifically for you this week?

DO NOT SKIP THIS

- 2 As a way of preparing to move forward, look to take any steps you’ve neglected to take up to this point. If you haven’t filled in your block map, try to finish that this week. If you haven’t identified what calendar and comfort barriers stand between you and loving your actual neighbors, do that. If you haven’t chosen a few neighbors you can develop a better relationship with, choose them. If you haven’t attempted to move a conversation with a neighbor to the next step, try that this week.

PRAY

Thank God for the privileges of prayer and Christian community. As you commit to praying for your neighbors, ask Him to continue to draw you closer to Him and to understanding His call on your life. As you commit to affirm believers who are loving their neighbors and encourage those who are struggling to do so, ask Him to deepen fellowship among you and draw the lost into that fellowship.

FOR NEXT WEEK

> **REMIND:** Before you dismiss, remind group members to read John 6:1-13.

Notes:

> **EMAIL:** Midway through the week, send a reminder email with the following information

- Read John 6:1-13.
- Think through these questions before we get together again: 1) Are there any steps toward neighboring you've been given that you haven't taken up to this point? 2) Are you praying for your neighbors each day?

1 THESSALONIANS 5:12-18

5:12. Paul turned to some practical matters of church life. The first involves the relationship between the congregation or community and its church leaders. Paul first called the congregation to give respect to those who work hard among them, who are over them in the Lord. Honor is due to church leaders, whether they are paid staff or officers who give their time and energy (elders, deacons). Spiritual leadership is difficult and weighted with responsibility. These leaders are engaged in hard work. One of their “thankless” duties is to admonish. This deals with pointing out faults or mistakes—errors in individuals or the community. Those who perform this task take on a difficult responsibility, and they are to be respected and honored.

Notes:

There are implications for the leaders as well. They are to work hard. It is good work, and they are to get their energy from God. Part of the job description of the church leader is to “stand before” or be over others in the Lord. This is not a dictatorship, but a way of lovingly and authoritatively teaching the Word of God to the people. Leaders are also to point out wrongs, sins, and failures in the lives of their people and congregation. This is not a favorite task, but it is essential to the health of believers and the church.

5:13. Not only are we to honor our leaders; we are to think of them in a special, affectionate way. We are to love them. The basis for this love is their work. Church leaders are performing a good work for Christ and his people. This deserves our highest respect and love.

Paul then turned our attention toward the person sitting next to us, or across the aisle, and commanded us to live in peace with each other. This is a maintenance program for a healthy church: keep the peace.

To live in peace means to go as far as possible to live in harmony with others, or “as far as it depends on you” (Rom. 12:18). Many people who would not rob a bank or tell a blatant lie will sin against this clear command. They speak or act in ways that are divisive. People who act this

way hurt not only themselves and other persons, but they also hurt the church. People outside the church notice such things and stay away.

Notes:

5:14. Paul next launched into some short, staccato instructions and commands for Christian living. He focused on three types of people in the Thessalonian church who presented different concerns for him. He spoke about the idle, the timid, and the weak.

The idle were to be warned. There were those in the Thessalonian church who were so certain of the imminent return of Christ that they became lazy in their daily living. If Christ is coming back soon, they may have reasoned, what is the point of the daily grind? In their neglect they became careless in their responsibilities, spent too much time chatting over the back fence, and contributed little to the general welfare of the church.

Today the attitude is opposite to that first-century expectation, but the result is the same. Christ seems so long in coming, and life keeps rolling along at a predictable clip. We become idle in our Christian responsibilities. Too absorbed in the daily routine, we fail to use our gifts, time, and lives for others and the church. Idleness springs from distorted thinking, and such thinking deserves a warning: it is wrong—stop it!

The timid were to be encouraged. These were people who had become discouraged, perhaps depressed. They may have felt this way because of difficult circumstances, or because they despaired of living up to the high standards of the Christian faith. These people needed to be helped, not warned. They needed to hear, “You can do it.”

The weak were to be helped. These were the spiritually weak in Paul’s time, and they are still found in every church. Perhaps they lack knowledge or experience; it could be that they struggle with certain sins that continually defeat them; they may lack courage or find it difficult to trust God. They are weak in the faith and need to be helped along the way.

In our weakness and inability to conquer sin, we find that Christ helped us by the sacrifice of His life. Can we who have been so blessed do any less for others in their time of need?

Notes:

Everyone should be dealt with in patience. “People work” can be frustrating at times. We are all so different. We mature at different rates, have different personalities and backgrounds, likes, dislikes, and habits. These factors can make it complex and difficult when we are called on to warn, help, instruct, or encourage others.

Love is what helps us be patient with everyone. Love is patient. It does not seek its own way. Because of our selfish tendencies, we need patience from others, even as we need to be patient. Perhaps that is why God can be so patient with us. He recognizes that our mistakes, our bungling efforts, our one step forward and three steps back are valuable learning exercises in growing in grace and character.

5:15. Paul was concerned not only with relationships within the church, but relationships outside the church. He gave commands for behavior to each other and to everyone else.

The payback rule is common: You get me—I will get you. You shove me—you had better be ready. Getting even, exacting our own sense of “justice,” is a strong human tendency.

Jesus was different. He contradicted just about everything we naturally do. He often began his moral lessons with “you have heard” and then called for a change by following up with “but I tell you” (Matt. 5:21-30; 33-37; 38-42; 43-47). He brought a new way to live. He is the new way.

Only as we abide in Christ and entrust our grievances, hardships, and the wrongs we suffer to him can we live with this command. It is not natural, but it is possible. It marks a distinctly Christian approach to life. Paul detailed this approach by quoting Proverbs 25:21-22 in the Book of Romans when he called us to live in peace, to not take revenge. He told us, “If your enemy is hungry, feed him; if he

is thirsty, give him something to drink” (Rom. 12:20), then added “Do not be overcome by evil, but overcome evil with good” (Rom. 12:21). And so Paul told the Thessalonians to be kind to each other and to everyone else. This means everyone both inside and outside the church.

Notes:

5:16. Paul admonished his readers to be joyful always. This is short and to the point. The key, however, is the word always. Paul meant this literally. Christian joy is not bound by circumstances or hindered by difficulties. In fact, joy in the New Testament is often coupled with sorrow or suffering.

The Thessalonian believers had already experienced this strange duet, like an inspiring song played in minor key (1 Thess. 1:6). When the sorrow or suffering results from being identified with Christ, the Holy Spirit creates a supernatural joy—a wellness of soul that cannot be dampened by adverse situations. The explanation may be found in 2 Corinthians 4:16-18: “For our light and momentary troubles are achieving for us an eternal glory that far outweighs them all.”

But we should remember that we have a part in this joy. We are the ones commanded to be joyful. It is a choice, a deliberate response that focuses on the grace and goodness of God. As the writer to the Hebrews directed us, “Let us fix our eyes on Jesus, the author and perfecter of our faith, who for the joy set before him endured the cross, scorning its shame, and sat down at the right hand of the throne of God. Consider him who endured such opposition from sinful men, so that you will not grow weary and lose heart” (Heb. 12:2-3).

5:17. The next staccato note follows: pray continually. This means never stop praying. Paul was a busy missionary, and he wrote about the Christian’s duty to fulfill daily responsibilities, so this is not a command about speaking non-stop prayers. It refers, however, to the attitude of prayer, or reverence before God. The Christian’s life of righteousness and his approach to relationships and responsibilities should be such that he maintains a constant attitude of

being in God's presence. Such a person will pray often and about many things, including requests, praise, and thanksgiving. This command also means that we should never quit praying.

Notes:

5:18. The next command requires trust in the sovereignty of Christ: give thanks in all circumstances. It recognizes God's eminence in all events. A thankful spirit does not come naturally to most of us. Certainly it pushes us beyond our natural capacities when difficult or painful situations invade our life. This command to be thankful, no matter what happens, is possible only by God's grace. When we can agree with God that He works all things out for good to those who love Him and are committed to obedience (Rom. 8:28), then we can thank Him.

For those who wonder about God's will, here it is emphatically stated: this is God's will for us in Christ Jesus. There is no need for searching, seminars, books, or "fleeces." God's will is that we are to be joyful, prayerful, and thankful because we are His children.