

Sermon: "The Hardest Thing You'll Ever Do"

Text: I Thessalonians 4:9-12.

Sermon Outline.

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Introduction ~ And now for "a tale from yesteryear..."

[movie trailer: "*The Lone Ranger*," first half up the phrase, "the Lone Ranger."]

This morning, we're going to take a closer look at what's been called, "Lone Ranger Christianity," the mistaken approach of trying to be a Christian all by yourself... without the Body of Christ... without being a part of a face-to-face group of other believers.

Jesus gave all His disciples this command: "Love each other as I have loved you." John 15:12. The fact is, it takes your being in group of other believers to be able to obey that command as a disciple of Jesus Christ. That command of Jesus cannot be obeyed all by yourself... in isolation from other believers in Jesus.

Our text today points us to the profound experience of love between the believers in the church in Thessalonika. The believers there not only loved one another; they immediately linked up with other believers in the cities nearby for mutual support and encouragement, to advance the cause of Christ.

The entire New Testament portrays the disciples of Jesus Christ everywhere as 'fervently loving one another.' Paul the Apostle writes to the Thessalonians: "You yourselves have been taught by God to love each other... Yet we urge you, brothers and sisters, to do so more and more." The phrase, "taught by God," in the Greek Text is **qeodidaktoj**. It's an example of Paul inventing a totally brand new word. It has no prior uses before Paul, and next to none afterward. "taught by God to love each other..."

The key idea this morning is this:

? You need the Body of Christ to grow as a disciple of Jesus.

You and I need a face-to-face group of other believers to grow. You need the Body of Christ to learn how to love other disciples of Jesus. God wants to place and position you in a group of other believers to enable you to grow personally and become that dynamic, loving believer in Jesus He always intended you to become. You need the Body of Christ to grow deeper as a disciple of Jesus.

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. In our text, Paul identifies three reasons why you need to be in a face-to-face group of other believers.

I. The first reason why you need the Body of Christ is to sustain your own relationship with Jesus. Bluntly, you need a face-to-face group of believers in your life just to survive as a disciple of Jesus.

A. Many people today practice "the Lone Ranger" version of the Christian faith. They go it alone, seeking always to be strong enough on their own. Their assumption is that the moment they invited Jesus into their heart, they received all the knowledge, all the wisdom, all the strength, and all the skills they need to survive and thrive as a believer in Jesus Christ.

The real path of discipleship to Jesus is way different from that. You and I need other believers in Jesus Christ. You see, even the Lone Ranger had Tonto.

B. Many people deliberately cut themselves off from any face-to-face group of disciples.

Not too long ago, George Gallup's organization discovered a thought-provoking reality. It's been confirmed by Barna and others. *Currently, in our nation, the unchurched segment of our population numbers 100 millions persons – that's one out of three persons in our nation.* That's not the surprise in their research.

The surprise is this: out of those 100 million persons, one person out of three is actually a de-churched person, a person who once was involved in a local church and then chose to cease their involvement. 33 million people more or less fit this profile.

How does that happen? The answer is: One personal story at a time. I came across this true story not too long ago. A man we'll call "Robert" grew up going to his local church and going to Sunday School. One Sunday, he came to church to discover a couple of his church buddies, two classmates who were brothers, were missing from class. The teacher told the class that they had been abused by their parents, also church members, and had been placed in a foster home. "Bob" remembered wondering about those two parents before, even though they were at church every time the doors were open.

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"Bob" had no way of processing the difference in adults between being just a convert and being a disciple of Jesus. But at that point based on what had happened to his friends, "Bob" stopped attending his church.

One significant episode is all it took for "Bob" to become one of the de-churched. It's because of personal and relational events like this that many Americans have become de-churched.

C. You need the Body of Christ to sustain your own relationship with Jesus.

I have a different layout of the Three Priorities up there on the screen going horizontal-across. In terms of the Three Priorities, you need involvement in the Body of Christ to support and maintain your First Priority, a growing relationship with Jesus Christ.

Up in Alaska, the caribou migrate in the spring and the fall. And the wolves always follow the herd. They are experts in cutting off the injured and the weak from the rest of the herd... Once that happens, the wolves make short work of that individual.

You need other believers in Jesus Christ for your own protection as well as your personal growth as a disciple.

II. The second reason why you need the Body of Christ is to be with other disciples who can encourage you to grow.

A. Along with the Word of God, the greatest resource you and I have as disciples is the Presence of Jesus Himself; the second most precious possession is the Body of Christ.

By God's design, the moment you become a believer in Jesus Christ, God seeks to place you in a group of believers to get you moving toward spiritual maturity. God wants to get you moving out of being merely a convert, upward into becoming a disciple.

B. In terms of the Three Priorities of Discipleship, our text is clearly focused on Priority II, isn't it? "A growing commitment to the Body of Christ, your face-to-face group of believers." Paul, Silas and Timothy together were able accurately to model this Second Priority for the disciples in Thessalonika.

Whether it is a Sunday School class or a small group meeting in somebody's home, you need to become part of a supportive fellowship. This is different from a worship setting with everybody

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present. A supportive fellowship is a group of disciples who meet face-to-face weekly to

study and discuss God's Word together;
pray for one another, individually and as a group;
confess your needs and challenges to one another;
hold each other accountable for doing better; and
to encourage one another when things are going good or bad.

And usually within that supportive fellowship, you will find at least one person with whom you really connect and that person becomes a prayer partner.

When I was a single, young adult male at Christ Church of Oak Brook, I was part of supportive fellowship. We called ourselves, "the Brothers." We met monthly at Roland Johnson's house. Roland's Mom cooked dinner for about twelve guys: Bob Stine, Bill Souders, Roland Johnson, Chuck Iser, Alan Berg, Tom Knighton, Steve Toms, Doug Smith, Ken Cozette, Dave Bere – when he was in town, and a couple of others.

Steve Toms was my prayer partner. We still get together with Steve and Jan when we're on vacation in Michigan.

These days, my supportive fellowship is the South Hills Pastors Prayer Group: Rick Wiater, Jeff Marshall, Mark Wright, Herb Shafer, and John Holmes.

C. There's another reason why you need a supportive fellowship: accountability – each and every believer you know is a 100% sinner. Every church member you know is a sinner. Every pastor you know is a sinner. And take a look in the mirror when you get home... We are all in recovery. God is repairing each of us as we meet face-to-face to encourage each other to grow.

Don't you fall for that "All Christians are such hypocrites" routine. You know what I talking about. Whether it's at work or on the local news, you can spot the same basic pattern. There is even a standard Mainstream Media line, stated or implied, whenever some prominent Christian sins. Here it is.

'If one Christian sins one time with high visibility, that automatically proves:

1. all Christians are hypocrites, racists and hate-mongers; and

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2. *that Charles Darwin was right about everything; and*
3. *that all religions really teach the same thing... but none of them is valid... except Islam, the religion of peace.'*

... I'm exaggerating, but only barely. The underlying assumption is that 'unless each believer is totally sinless, 24/7, all Christians are hypocrites.'

Hey, no Christian is ever sinless..., nor do we ever claim that we are. Disciples are sinners in rehab. The Body of Christ is not a museum for the perfect; it's a recovery rehab center for sinners under repair.

So what is the essential in that Second Priority, pursuing a growing commitment to the Body of Christ? Love one another. Encourage each other to grow as disciples...

Maturing disciples are people who are growing in community with other believers, spending time together, encouraging one another and supporting one another.

III. The third reason why you need the Body of Christ is to make an impact on those near you who have yet to believe in Jesus Christ.

A. Verse twelve links up with that command to love one another. "Love each other... so that your daily life may win the respect of outsiders..."

The fact is, you need the Body of Christ to reach your family members, your friends, neighbors and co-workers... especially when you reach the limit of your own personal influence.

Francis Schaeffer rightly said, "our relationship with each other is the criterion the world uses to judge whether our message is truthful – Christian community is the final apologetic" for the Christian faith.

Conclusion ~ "You yourselves have been taught by God to love each other..." When Paul says, "taught by God," he has two realities in mind at the same time:

The first is the teaching of Jesus, especially Jesus' teaching about the Two Greatest Commandments.

Paul is also pointing out the activity of the Holy Spirit teaching the disciples as a group. According to Paul, love is one of the fruit of the Spirit.

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You see, on your own strength, loving other believers is the hardest thing you'll ever do. That's why you need the empowering of God's Holy Spirit, enabling you to love others as Christ loves you. May we as disciples be "taught by God to love each other..."

And consider becoming part of a supportive fellowship, a face-to-face group of believers. It will help you move upward into becoming a dynamic disciple of Jesus Christ.