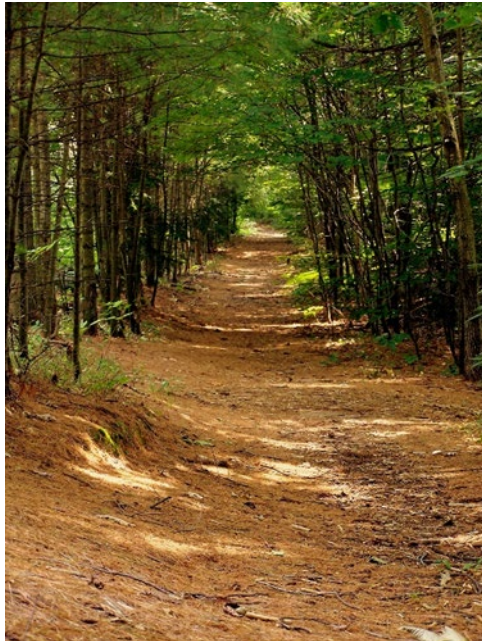


The Normal Christian Life



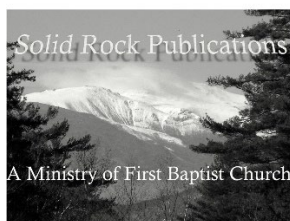
by
Laurence D. Brown

The Normal Christian Life

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Edited by Lorie Brown & Rebekah L. Brown
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First Baptist Church
P.O. Box 600
North Conway, NH 03860, USA
Tel. 603.356.6066
firstbaptistnorthconway.org
YouTube Channel: FBCNorthConway

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There are a lot of jokes that float around regarding “normality.” After all, what’s normal for me might look mighty strange to you; and what you consider ordinary and routine I might think is really weird. And who gets to decide what is normal, anyway? Isn’t that just an artificial standard? To some degree these ideas are valid. However, we, as children of the Creator-God of the universe must acknowledge that ultimately God gets to make the rules for what is normal and what is abnormal. The Bible, God’s revelation of His character and plan, sets the pattern for normality, and we can find a lot of places in the Bible that teach this truth: God’s template for character, beliefs, behavior, and thinking is that which is normal.

I Thessalonians 4:1-12 is a great place to begin to study the concept of “normality” from God’s perfect point of view. We could call this paragraph “an outline of the normal Christian life.” It gives us instruction on how to live and how to behave; this instruction is expressly designated as “the will of God” – that is, what God desires for His children to do.

There are two sets of pressures that align themselves against us when we decide that we are going to follow God’s principles for the normal Christian life. One comes from the world around us. The world system, with its anti-God mentality, its arrogance, rebellion, and continual bent toward wickedness, is constantly trying to squeeze us into conformity with its values, goals, and behaviors. This is what Paul addresses in Romans 12:1 (“Be not conformed to this world”). Christians must understand the relentless weight of the world system bearing down on our souls to cause us to conform. The world, in the last couple of decades (in western culture) has touted “diversity” and “tolerance” as noble watchwords. This is a smoke screen: what they really mean is that the culture will tolerate various kinds of expressions of sin and godlessness, various ideologies that elevate the rebel and the maverick against authority; but they will never tolerate loyalty to Jesus Christ and His Word.

The other kind of pressure that works against the Christian trying to live a normal life is our own tendency to make excuses. We quite frequently excuse our own sins, failings, and character flaws as if they were only personal points of view, preferences, harmless quirks, or creative ways of doing things. “That may be how you do it,” we say, “but I do it differently.” This mentality is fine for making banana splits or constructing a toolshed, but God defines what normal is for thinking, motivations, communication and behavior.

So let’s look at I Thessalonians 4:1-12 as a “refresher course” on the normal Christian life.

I Thessalonians 4:1-12

- 1 Finally then, brethren, we request and exhort you in the Lord Jesus, that as you received from us instruction as to how you ought to walk and please God (just as you actually do walk), that you excel still more.*
- 2 For you know what commandments we gave you by the authority of the Lord Jesus.*
- 3 For this is the will of God, your sanctification; that is, that you abstain from sexual immorality;*
- 4 that each of you know how to possess his own vessel in sanctification and honor,*
- 5 not in lustful passion, like the Gentiles who do not know God;*
- 6 and that no man transgress and defraud his brother in the matter because the Lord is the avenger in all these things, just as we also told you before and solemnly warned you.*
- 7 For God has not called us for the purpose of impurity, but in sanctification.*
- 8 So, he who rejects this is not rejecting man but the God who gives His Holy Spirit to you.*
- 9 Now as to the love of the brethren, you have no need for anyone to write to you, for you yourselves are taught by God to love one another;*
- 10 for indeed you do practice it toward all the brethren who are in all Macedonia. But we urge you, brethren, to excel still more,*
- 11 and to make it your ambition to lead a quiet life and attend to your own business and work with your hands, just as we commanded you,*
- 12 so that you will behave properly toward outsiders and not be in any need.*

There are five key principles highlighted here:

1. The normal Christian life is a life of purpose.
2. The normal Christian life is a life of excellence.
3. The normal Christian life is a life of holiness.
4. The normal Christian life is a life of love.
5. The normal Christian life is a quiet life.

1. The normal Christian life is a life of purpose.

Notice Paul's wording in the first verse: "Finally then, brethren, we request and exhort you in the Lord Jesus, that as you received from us instruction as to how to walk and please God (just as you actually do walk), that you excel still more."

In English grammar, the wording, "to walk and (to) please God" is called an infinitive phrase. An infinitive often indicates a statement of purpose, and that is what this concept is here as well. Paul is reminding the Thessalonian believers of the teaching he had previously given them concerning a manner of life that has as its focus to please God. The same word "please" is found in I Thessalonians 2:4; with the addition of a prefix (translated in English as "well" or "good") the same word is also found in II Corinthians 5:9.

It is a sad fact that many people – including many Christians – do not really understand their purpose in life. A lot of individuals seem to be wandering through life without any genuine discernible direction or goal. Is it to be happy? Is it to make your kids happy? Is it to see how much wealth or stuff you can accumulate before you die? To make the world a better place?

When I was attending the University of Michigan – Dearborn in the early 1980s, there was an academic track that had recently been developed and made available to incoming freshmen and first semester sophomores. It was called the "undeclared major," and it allowed students to take many

classes without having decided what discipline they wanted to focus on. No doubt this could be a good idea for many people, but it struck me as symptomatic of a lack of purpose. These students seemed to be happy to spend their parents' money, go to school, have friends, and wait a while to figure out what they were going to study and where they thought their life's effort should go.

The normal Christian understands that there is a purpose to life: we have been created for a reason. I Thessalonians 4:1 tells us what this purpose is: to please God.

It is important that we recognize that we are not supposed to be living to please ourselves (selfishness, self-centeredness), nor are we commanded to please other people (giving in to peer pressure, fear of man). Rather, our great goal – the reason God has created us – is to please Him! In fact, Paul, in II Corinthians 5:9 speaks of it in these terms: “Therefore also we have as our driving ambition, whether at home or absent, to be pleasing to Him” (my translation).

Do you understand your purpose? If you want to be normal, then grasp the fact that God's plan and goal for you is to live your life focused on being, doing, and thinking what makes Him smile. Any other purpose, or to live without any purpose, is abnormal in God's eyes.

2. The normal Christian life is a life of excellence.

As we continue to look at I Thessalonians 4:1, we see Paul's note at the end of the verse, “that you excel still more.”

The normal existence for a child of God is that of pressing ahead for excellence in every area of life. While the world around us may be satisfied with “good enough” or, “if nobody notices, why bother?” or, “the average,” the believer who is focused on Jesus Christ wants to be holier, serve more

intensively, love better, be more committed, fight the good fight with more dedication.

Let's face it, the pressure of the world is often to just get by with the bare minimum effort. And, our own souls often succumb to the innate laziness that is built into the sin nature. It can be easy – and often highly desirable – to simply coast and go with the flow spiritually.

This idea might be what John the Elder is writing about in I John 2:12-14:

¹² *I am writing to you, little children, because your sins have been forgiven you for His name's sake.*

¹³ *I am writing to you, fathers, because you know Him who has been from the beginning.*

I am writing to you, young men, because you have overcome the evil one.

I have written to you, children, because you know the Father.

¹⁴ *I have written to you, fathers, because you know Him who has been from the beginning.*

I have written to you, young men, because you are strong, and the word of God abides in you, and you have overcome the evil one.

You might observe that the order in which he lists the stages of Christian maturity does not follow the expected progression: we anticipate that he would list children, young men and fathers. However, he inverts the second and third categories: children, fathers, young men. Furthermore, while there is a change and distinction between the first and second cycle for the children and the young men, the wording for the fathers is identical. It is almost as if John were illustrating what a spiritual plateau looks like: having reached a level of stability and knowledge in the Christian life, it can be

tempting to just stay there. But Christians should do more than just live the same day over and over. We should be striving to excel!

Here's what Paul said in Philippians 3:7-14:

- ⁷ *But whatever things were gain to me, those things I have counted as loss for the sake of Christ.*
- ⁸ *More than that, I count all things to be loss in view of the surpassing value of knowing Christ Jesus my Lord, for whom I have suffered the loss of all things, and count them but rubbish so that I may gain Christ,*
- ⁹ *and may be found in Him, not having a righteousness of my own derived from the Law, but that which is through faith in Christ, the righteousness which comes from God on the basis of faith,*
- ¹⁰ *that I may know Him and the power of His resurrection and the fellowship of His sufferings, being conformed to His death;*
- ¹¹ *in order that I may attain to the resurrection from the dead.*
- ¹² *Not that I have already obtained it or have already become perfect, but I press on so that I may lay hold of that for which also I was laid hold of by Christ Jesus.*
- ¹³ *Brethren, I do not regard myself as having laid hold of it yet; but one thing I do: forgetting what lies behind and reaching forward to what lies ahead,*
- ¹⁴ *I press on toward the goal for the prize of the upward call of God in Christ Jesus.*

What would motivate us to press ahead, to excel, to be more and do more for Jesus Christ? Actually, it is Christ Himself who is the motivation and the example. Do you remember what John said about Jesus as He was approaching the final hours of His eons-long mission to fully accomplish

the plan of salvation for us? John 13:1 says, “Now before the Feast of the Passover, Jesus knowing that His hour had come that He would depart out of this world to the Father, having loved His own who were in the world, He loved them to the end.” Jesus loved them – and us – to the very end, sealing the transaction of justification and adoption with His blood. If Jesus gave everything He had and was to purchase my salvation from hell, how can I give anything less than my all for Him?

While the world says, “chill out,” “take it easy,” and “don’t be such a fanatic,” the attitude expressed in those phrases is abnormal! It is weird and bizarre to respond to the incredible love and power of Jesus Christ with a laissez-faire, “Whatever.” Our response should mirror our Savior’s: love Him all the way to the end. It should mimic Paul’s: press ahead! The normal Christian is always asking himself, “What can I do to excel in my walk with the Lord?” How can I get better at loving people? The normal Christian wants to excel.

3. The normal Christian life is a life of holiness.

We find this concept in I Thessalonians 4:3-8. Here is what it says:

- 3 For this is the will of God, your sanctification; that is, that you abstain from sexual immorality;*
- 4 that each of you know how to possess his own vessel in sanctification and honor,*
- 5 not in lustful passion, like the Gentiles who do not know God;*
- 6 and that no man transgress and defraud his brother in the matter because the Lord is the avenger in all these things, just as we also told you before and solemnly warned you.*

⁷ *For God has not called us for the purpose of impurity, but in sanctification.*

⁸ *So, he who rejects this is not rejecting man but the God who gives His Holy Spirit to you.*

These verses specifically note that this is God's will. There are a number of places where God reveals what He wants. Christians sometimes get tangled up in trying to figure out what God's will is for their lives without doing what He has already said is His will. (See, for example, II Corinthians 8:5; Ephesians 6:6; I Peter 2:15; 4:19 .)

The normal Christian life stands in stark contrast to the sexual profligacy of our society. Everywhere you look today, you'll find deviant sexual behavior – from immodest clothing to homosexuality and bisexuality – not only accepted as normal but applauded and glorified. Sexuality within marriage is a God-given, beautiful gift and is to be extolled as wonderful (see the Song of Solomon), but twisted, abused, magnified and mutated it is yet another area where man has taken God's goodness and turned it to evil. In this context, Paul's words to the believers in Thessalonica are arresting. The culture surrounding them, too, was one of sensuality and immorality, full of paganism and largely viewing sex outside of marriage as normal,.

But we serve a holy God! God is not amused with man's twisting of His good gifts into immorality. Paul commands that the believer not behave like the unsaved world ("the Gentiles"); even in the area of sex – what the Lord says is normal, is normal. It is not up for "redefinition" or "evolution." Homosexuality, transgenderism, fornication, adultery, pornography – these may be mainstream ideas and practices in the world, but they are sinful and abnormal in God's eyes. Don't let the world define your morality!

Probably what Paul means by "no man transgress and defraud his brother" is adultery within the church: imagine

the devastation of a case of an adulterous affair within a local body of believers! This should never be.

In the verse 7 of I Thessalonians 4, there is a further generalization – and explanatory principle – that sheds light on the whole passage. The reason that Christians are to avoid sexual impurity of any kind is that “God has not called us for the purpose of impurity, but in sanctification.” God’s holiness, and His desire for our growth in holiness, is of primary importance for all believers. This is not a secondary issue, but a paramount characteristic. God is very much interested in our coming to resemble Him more and more (Ephesians 5:1), especially in hatred for sin and love of righteousness (Hebrews 1:9).

There is one last concept in this section that calls for our understanding. In verse 8, the apostle tells us that the believer who rejects this teaching (on sexual purity – but the principle certainly applies to all of the teaching of the Word) is actually rejecting God Himself (the One who gave us the indwelling Holy Spirit). This warning reminds us that we may very much like to chart our own course, decide what is normal, set the boundaries for our lives, our behavior, our relationships; however, when we do that, we are actually rejecting the teaching of the Father who has sent the Holy Spirit to indwell us. God has the right to tell us how to live, what our goals should be, who are friends should be, and what our priorities ought to be. It is normal to accept God’s leadership, authority, and, indeed, His ownership of us. To try to get out from underneath this either in a mild way or in outright rebellion is abnormal! The normal Christian says, “God is my Boss, my Friend, and my King: He tells me what to do and I do it – and I like it that way!”

4. The normal Christian life is a life of love.

The most important word in the Bible-obeying believer's dictionary could well be love. Understanding the love of God, loving God with all of one's heart, soul, mind, and strength, and loving others as one's self might well be the ultimate summary of the Christian life. Paul commends the Thessalonian believers for their love of one another and notes that they are already doing well in this category.

We need to remind ourselves that the biblical definition of love is very much distinct from what the world calls "love." The world's idea of love is infatuation, physical attraction, making one's self feel good by drawing from the attentions and actions of another. In fact, the world's actual practice of "love" is largely self-centeredness. The Bible's definition (see I Corinthians 13) is about determining to do what is best for the object of love, even at the cost of one's own comfort, resources or life.

One of the first things that is supposed to happen in a person's heart after trusting Christ as Savior is the development of a fervent desire to be a blessing, to help, to equip, and to sacrifice for the benefit of other people. This determination to do good for others – to love them – is supposed to be a defining characteristic of the children of God (John 13:35). There is a great deal of material in the Scriptures about what this looks like, including in the Gospel of John, the book of First John, Ephesians 4 and 5, Colossians 1 and 3, II Thessalonians 1, I Timothy 1, and many other places.

If a Christian is not evidencing love for brothers and sisters in Christ, and for all people, then he is doing a poor job of demonstrating the character of God. The Lord Jesus, in His "sermon on the mount" (Matthew chapters 5, 6, and 7), had quite a bit to say on the topic of love. Instead of loving your good friends with a mighty love and hating those who

have harmed you with a great hatred, Jesus pointed out that God the Father actually loves and does good to both nice people and nasty people. He said that if His disciples truly wanted to imitate the character of God, we would love our enemies and pray for those who harm us (Matthew 5:44).

The Word of God also tells us that love is more than just a theory or abstract concept. John says that if a child of God has money, or food, or some other physical resource, and sees another child of God struggling, and yet withholds his generosity – “how does the love of God abide in him?” (I John 3:17). Furthermore, godly love is willing to take the short end of the stick, is willing to patiently endure hardship and lack of appreciation; it is willing to confront sin, even if it means enduring hurt (I Corinthians 13:4-7). Love is supposed to be an active thing, not merely a passive feeling.

It is certainly true that in loving relationships – such as are supposed to exist in families, churches and among believers – we often receive benefit from others as well as giving benefit to them. It is not that when a loving husband buys a nice gift for his wife, she refuses to accept it on the grounds that love never legitimately “gets” anything. The normal course of a loving Christian relationship is a lifelong contest to try to out-love the other person. However, the objective of loving is to give rather than to receive.

Paul commends the Thessalonian Christians for their love of the brethren and says that they are doing well in loving one another and all the fellow-Christians of Macedonia. But then he goes on to say, “But we urge you, brethren, to excel still more” (I Thessalonians 4:10). You see, there is always room for improvement. The word Paul uses for “excel” is the same word he used back in verse 1 in regards to the Christian walk and the Thessalonian’s purpose of pleasing God. Certainly the general tone of this paragraph is one of pressing ahead, not resting on past accomplishments or the

commendations of the apostle Paul, but moving forward in excellence for Christ.

In the immediate context of verses 9 and 10, the “excellence” in view has to do with their love. They are doing well; they are loving the brethren both in their own congregation and throughout the region. However, there is always room for improvement. With God’s help we can excel in our love for one another, and we should. The more that we meditate on the incredible love of God for us, the more incentivized we will be to sacrificially, persistently, and deeply love others.

The normal Christian life is not only a life of love, it is a life of excellent love!

5. The normal Christian life is a quiet life.

The final principle of Christian normality found in I Thessalonians 4:1-12 is that of quietness. The concept is: “And to make it your ambition to lead a quiet life and attend to your own business and work with your own hands, just as we commanded you, so that you will behave properly toward outsiders and not be in any need” (vv. 11,12).

The instruction in I Thessalonians 4:11 that we lead a quiet life employs a Greek word that Paul uses four other times (II Thessalonians 3:12; I Timothy 2:2,11,12) to encourage believers not to be loud, disruptive or chaotic. This is not to say that the Christian life is supposed to be lethargic, joyless or apathetic. Paul himself, as evidenced in his letters and in his actions recorded in the book of Acts, was a man of great energy, enthusiasm, and passion.

However, there should be an order, a calmness, and a settled quality to the believer’s lifestyle. If a Christian’s life is essentially a series of chaotic crises resulting from a lack of planning, preparation, or maturity, or if he has no real idea of

where he is going or what is happening in his life, how does he glorify God, influence others for Christ or serve the Lord effectively? This command, “make it your ambition to lead a quiet life,” would suggest that Christians are most effective when they think ahead, plan, prepare, and organize.

Have you ever been to a sports event – say, a baseball game or a soccer game – where there was a really loud, obnoxious fan? Someone in the stands near you who kept shouting at the umpire or slinging insults at the opposing team or dumping his popcorn all over because he kept jumping up out of his seat every few seconds? Not only is this sort of behavior distracting and annoying, it also causes this guy to become the focal point, when it is actually supposed to be the team on the field.

A “loud” Christian is one who distracts others from following and knowing Jesus, who forces those around him to pay attention to him, instead of the Lord. This reflects poorly on Christians and on Christ. Don’t be a distraction from others’ view of Jesus Christ!

Associated with the quiet lifestyle that Paul is discussing in I Thessalonians 4:11 and 12 are some other characteristics. Christians should attend to their own business – they should not be busybodies or gossips. Furthermore, we should work with our own hands: believers are supposed to be hard workers, not free-loaders or lazy.

These characteristics have the purpose not only of being Christ-like and honoring the Lord, but also of portraying a good testimony towards those who do not know Christ. These qualities will also serve well in keeping believers from being in financial difficulty. (This is not a promise of prosperity to all hard-working Christians; the Bible acknowledges that poverty, illness and distress do occur, and indeed are sometimes part of God’s will. See, for example, Mark 14:7; II Corinthians 8 and 9; I Timothy 5:3-10; James 2:2ff; 2:15,16; I John 3:17.) The believer who is a hard worker and a careful

steward of what God has given him to manage will both labor diligently and seek to plan ahead for unforeseen events.

The quiet lifestyle of the believer is stable, pointed in a positive direction, and seeks to exemplify the character of Jesus Christ by thoughtfully applying the Word to the circumstances of life.

What does the “normal” Christian look like?

(Re-align your thinking to acknowledge that God’s perspective is **normal** and any other viewpoint is **abnormal**.)

The following table is a summary of what we have looked at in I Thessalonians 4:1-12. The table is based on the five principles we saw in this paragraph, with the addition of the item of “obedience to God’s authority” which was discussed under the heading of “holiness” (point #3) above.

PURPOSE	
It is abnormal to lack purpose and direction – to just drift through life.	It is normal to have a driving passion – a great compelling purpose – to please God.
It is abnormal to have as your main goal to please yourself, to simply want to make yourself happy.	
It is abnormal to seek to please humans instead of God.	

EXCELLENCE	
It is abnormal to be complacent, to be okay with just good enough or with the status quo in your life.	It is normal to keep pressing ahead, to strive to excel for Jesus Christ.
It is abnormal to compare your spiritual condition with others and conclude that you don't need to grow, that you can "coast" for a while in your walk with the Lord or your service for Christ.	
It is abnormal to "plateau" as a Christian.	

OBEDIENCE	
It is abnormal to reject the authority of God in His Word.	It is normal to willingly, cheerfully and joyfully accept and obey what God tells you.
It is abnormal to either disregard or to outright rebel against God.	
It is abnormal to try to set your own course, apart from God's ownership and lordship over you.	

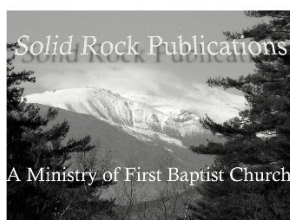
LOVE	
It is abnormal to not have a concern for the blessing, growth and well-being of others.	It is normal to deeply, consistently, and sacrificially love others, especially brothers & sisters in Christ – and to want to excel still more in loving others.
It is abnormal to put one's self above others' needs.	
It is abnormal to not respond to the love of God by loving Him supremely, and loving others as you love yourself.	

QUIET	
It is abnormal to be obnoxious, lazy and chaotic in our personal lives.	It is normal to lead a quiet, diligent, organized life.
It is abnormal to constantly be moving from one crisis to another, without planning, organization or forethought in your daily existence.	

Are you willing to submit your ideas of “normality” to God’s statements about what is normal? Is there some area of your life that is abnormal in comparison with what the Lord has said? Has the Holy Spirit drawn your attention to some aspect of your Christian walk that needs to become normal – according to God’s pattern? Are you willing to change and grow to obey Him?

The Normal Christian Life

A brief study of I Thessalonians 4:1-12, seen as a template or pattern for what God views as “normal” in His children.



First Baptist Church
P.O. Box 600
North Conway, NH 03860, USA
Tel. 603.356.6066
firstbaptistnorthconway.org
YouTube Channel: FBCNorthConway

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