

Thessalonians, Part 12: The Church in Real Life

1 Thessalonians 5:12 ESV (Pg. 574) We ask you, brothers, to respect those who labor among you and are over you in the Lord and admonish you, **13** and to esteem them very highly in love because of their work. Be at peace among yourselves. **14** And we urge you, brothers, admonish the idle, encourage the fainthearted, help the weak, be patient with them all. **15** See that no one repays anyone evil for evil, but always seek to do good to one another and to everyone. **16** Rejoice always, **17** pray without ceasing, **18** give thanks in all circumstances; for this is the will of God in Christ Jesus for you. **19** Do not quench the Spirit. **20** Do not despise prophecies, **21** but test everything; hold fast what is good. **22** Abstain from every form of evil.

- I. Paul has answered the questions about the return of Jesus, but instead of a benediction, like we find in Revelation, he ends with pastoral instructions. Why?
 - A. “concerning the times and the seasons, brothers, you have no need to have anything written to you...(1 Thessalonians 5:1)” Paul didn’t focus on theories about Jesus’ return. He focused on facts, reminding the Thessalonians simply that Christ is returning, and they are to keep their eye on the ball, remain spiritually sober; and occupy themselves with joyful, expectant urgency.
 - B. It is natural that he would now tell them **how** to live as the Body of Christ. They must survive and thrive in “enemy territory”. Paul points to 3 areas: their relationships with leaders, with each other, and with God.
- II. He begins with leaders. “**We ask you, brothers, to respect those who labor among you and are over you in the Lord and admonish you**” This related to how they were to regard leaders within the church. At some point in their history, Paul, or Timothy had ordained spiritual leadership to lead the Thessalonian church as elders.
 - A. “Setting in” eldership was always a high priority of Paul’s whenever he preached the gospel and planted a new church somewhere.
 1. After Paul’s first missionary journey we read... **Acts 14:23 ESV** **And when they had appointed elders for them in every church, with prayer and fasting they committed them to the Lord in whom they had believed.** Paul was moving on, so they would need local leadership to watch over them.
 2. **Titus 1:5 ESV** **This is why I left you in Crete, so that you might put what remained into order, and appoint elders in every town as I directed you.**
 - B. Paul is saying without elders things would be “disordered”. A lack of eldership is detrimental to order, instruction, discipline, and godly example in the church.
 - C. But don’t overlook the job description of the pastor and elder implied as Paul says elders **labor among**, are **over**, and **admonish the church**.
 1. To “labor among you” would mean that a church leader should be found working diligently. Church Leadership isn’t an exalted position over the “less spiritual” serfs who do their bidding. **Matthew 20:26b ESV** **But whoever would be great among you must be your servant.** A servant **works** for someone. They are not about self-exaltation, but self-exertion. The word translated “labor” means to work to the point of utter exhaustion.¹
 2. Being a servant doesn’t diminish their headship in the governing affairs of the church, God has placed them in charge; Paul says they are authoritatively “over you”. Let’s look at two additional clarifying passages...

- a) Peter says elders “shepherd the flock of God”². First, notice that it is **God’s flock**. Sheep follow the shepherd, but he is also the one who should willingly embrace peril for the sheep’s benefit, even if the sheep are oblivious to what the shepherd does for their protection and safety.
- b) So the Bible says: **Hebrews 13:17 ESV Obey your leaders and submit to them, for they are keeping watch over your souls, as those who will have to give an account.** Leaders will give an itemized accounting to the Chief Shepherd for how they cared for his sheep. **“Let them do this with joy and not with groaning, for that would be of no advantage to you.”**
- 3. Serving and being over the church as shepherd also involves “admonishing”. This word means “to warn”³. A leader’s job description includes confronting sinful habits and unbiblical beliefs. Pastors do not enjoy this part of ministry.
 - a) Admonishment is usually closely tied to preaching and teaching, but also involves one-on-one conversations with people they are caring for.
 - b) **Every Christian** faces admonishment, but we should remember it is actually a sign, both of God’s love⁴, and the love of the leader⁵.
- D. Though this isn’t fun, and does it make a pastor popular, Paul instructs the church **“to esteem (their leaders) very highly in love because of their work.”** Leaders have a tough job that holds forth very little by way of earthly reward. It can be fraught with discouragement, as people often fail to see the effort and love put forth and the emotional strain on them and their families. So Paul says to lavish “esteem” and “love” on those who faithfully labor among you.
 - 1. I admit I often have dark days when I am ready to throw in the towel. I fantasize about having a 9-5 job and just “clock out” at the end of the day.
 - 2. But I’m sustained by many of you who love and encourage me, even when you don’t know how appealing quitting would be! You won’t know until eternity how life-giving your faithful love has been to Ginger and I.
- III. It seems Paul switches gears to talk about how the church relates to each other. But in truth, these thoughts are closely connected to ones on relating to leadership. **“Be at peace among yourselves.”**
 - A. It is a huge win for any church leader when people in a congregation choose to “Be at peace...”. Nothing sucks the momentum out of a ministry faster than constantly settling disputes and addressing offenses that exist in the church. Paul urges the Thessalonians to intentionally work towards peace.
 - 1. The most effective way of maintaining peace is through love. Love in the church should be expressed by remembering that Christ has loved us when we were entirely unloveable⁶. We apply that knowledge to others by esteeming them highly⁷, forgiving them freely⁸, and overlooking offenses⁹.
 - 2. But interestingly, Paul is instructing the Thessalonians to share in the work of the leaders when he says to ensure love and peace prevail in the church.
 - B. **“And we urge you, brothers, admonish the idle, encourage the fainthearted, help the weak, be patient with them all.”** Note that the instruction is to the brothers (not the elders), but Paul is telling them to take ownership to ensure harmony! Admonish, encourage, help, be patient - usually people look to the elders to do this, excusing themselves from messy challenges and difficult conversations.

1. He says to admonish the idle (just like he said the leaders should!). If someone is spiritually disengaged, speak up! Don't call the pastor, you do it.
 - a) This would apply when someone is promoting false doctrine (so you need to know right doctrine!), or when someone is returning to worldly patterns of living. We don't do this in a harsh, judicial way; but gently and humbly, all the while praying for a heart of repentance¹⁰.
 - b) There are times when you should wisely involve a leader, but lots of stuff could be handled more quickly and effectively by brothers and sisters.
 2. He says to "encourage the fainthearted". Everyone needs encouragement. Let's all come to church focusing on who needs your gift, or your words.
 3. When he says "help the weak", he envisions a church that "sniffs out" the infirmed, distraught, or in need and rushes in to bear their burdens. Again, this is not only the domain of elders and deacons! We must all share in it!
 4. He says to "be patient with all". Do I really need to comment on this at all? How much less infighting would churches experience if we would just recognize our own weaknesses before executing others for theirs?
- C. "See that no one repays anyone evil for evil, but always seek to do good to one another and to everyone." We live in an "outrage culture", where we draw battle lines and choose sides. I am often guilty of this myself. I open Twitter so it can tell me what I'm supposed to be mad about! But our outrage often only results in many of us adopting an "eye for an eye" retaliatory posture with each other.
1. But remember Jesus calls us not just to love, but to bless our enemies¹¹! We may satisfy ourselves and others with our **words** of love, but to **bless** someone requires a willingness to demonstrate love by visible actions.
 2. This doesn't mean that some things aren't wrong, or that we should never speak out in a corrective, protesting way. But when we speak up, there ought to be clear evidence of God's love toward the vilest offenders, coupled with a genuine desire for their repentance and embracing of spiritual truth.
- IV. Paul adds to all of this an exhortation concerning the way we relate to God. "Rejoice always, pray without ceasing, give thanks in all circumstances; for this is the will of God in Christ Jesus for you." Though they are separated into 3 verses, these instructions should be joined; all summed up with the reminder that "this is the will of God in Christ Jesus for you" - rejoice, pray and be thankful.
- A. "Rejoice always". This boils down to acknowledging God's sovereignty. By choosing to rejoice instead of complain, or avoid unpleasantness, you declare God is in control. Rejoicing is innately connected to worship.
1. You can't properly give worship when your center of attention is the "goodness" or "badness" of your circumstances. Worship demands that you see by faith beyond where you find yourself to where God dwells.
 2. When Shadrach, Meshach and Abednego were told to bow before the king's golden image or be tossed into a burning furnace, their answer demonstrates rejoicing in the worst of possible situations.
 - a) **Daniel 3:17 ESV** If this be so, our God whom we serve is able to deliver us from the burning fiery furnace, and he will deliver us out of your hand, O king. **18** But if not, be it known to you, O king, that we will not serve your gods or worship the golden image that you have set up."

- b) They chose to trust in **both** God's worth **and** his power, no matter the rotten circumstance. To rely on his power alone would be to try to demand God's response. But to remember his infinite worth, meant that dying for him was a great honor, and not too much to ask.
- B. "Pray without ceasing" means to acknowledge total dependence on him. God is not a set of training wheels for a happy life that we eventually outgrow.
1. The church used to sing a hymn that said, "I need thee every hour in joy or pain. Come quickly and abide, or life is vain."¹² Today, however, it's more like we keep God as a retained lawyer on speed dial, we can get ahold of him if something suddenly comes up.
 2. But **constant** prayer reminds us that he is our life, and without his daily fellowship and care, we are hopeless and doomed beyond remedy.
- C. To "give thanks in all circumstances" is an acknowledgement that we are blessed people. What has God done for you? Has he saved you? Healed you? Forgiven you? Provided for you? Have you thanked him for all of this?
1. Do you remain in a state of perpetual thanksgiving? None of us do. And yet he "he makes his sun rise on the evil and on the good, and sends rain on the just and on the unjust"¹³. He always blesses us, even when we're ungrateful!
 2. Still, some circumstances stink! But notice the text doesn't say give thanks **for** all circumstances (sickness, loss, etc.); it says "give thanks **in** all circumstances". Thanksgiving looks beyond our days to our redemption.
 - a) This thought combines the principle of our joyful acknowledgment of God's sovereignty with our dependence on him through prayer.
 - b) When you look at all your success or failure, yet still choose to declare God is in charge, bringing all of your cares to him unceasingly, thankfulness will be the natural result.
- D. In rejoicing, praying and giving thanks, we fulfill God's will. People often ask how they can know God's will for their life. I think they really want to know what makes them unique and special. What makes you unique is that Jesus loved and died for you. Rejoicing, prayer and thanksgiving takes your eyes off of you and on the one who deserves all your attention and your adoring worship.
- V. **"Do not quench the Spirit"** Paul concludes by encouraging to live as people of the Spirit. This isn't some spooky charismatic instruction, but the life Jesus promised to all of us. We shouldn't neglect that greatest of all gifts.
- A. Jesus said it was better for him to go back to the Father in order to send the Holy Spirit to live in, empower, and testify of Jesus to his followers. This is the greatest advantage we have, yet sadly, most of us have little awareness of him.
1. So Paul says, "Don't put out the Spirit's fire". He is commanding the church not to engage in, or avoid any activity that might thwart the Spirit's work.
 2. Believers must cultivate an awareness of, and dependence on the Holy Spirit to guide, us protect us, and enable us if we are to be what Jesus desires.
- B. **"Do not despise prophecies"** One way the Spirit shows his power is through the gift of prophecy, when he discloses God's will through fellow Christians.
1. Many people imagine the gift of prophecy as being able to tell the future, or read people's minds, like a "Christian psychic"! But more than 2/3 of all the prophetic activity in the Bible is "forth-telling" rather than "foretelling"¹⁴. In

other words, most biblical prophecy is to tell people what God wants them to know, rather than what might happen, or to reveal some secret.

2. All preaching and teaching should have a “prophetic” element to it. This is why we don’t approach the pulpit casually. But God also sometimes reveals things to people through spiritual impressions for the whole church’s benefit.
 - a) The purpose of this gift is stated in 1 Corinthians¹⁵. It is to build people up, to encourage them, or to console them.
 - b) So Paul says, “Don’t despise this gift! It is for the benefit of the Body!”
 - C. But he isn’t suggesting that everything someone says that God gave them is from the Lord, in fact, he tells us “**but test everything**”. Does the purported prophecy exhort, encourage or console, or can bring them harm? Does it violate the written word, or the principles revealed in it? Does it elevate the “prophet” more than it does Jesus? All of this can disqualify a prophetic word. A lover of Jesus will rarely be offended by critical analysis of their prophetic word, because we all “prophecy in part”¹⁶; but a false prophet almost always will!
 1. If the word passes the test we are encouraged to “**hold fast to what is good**”. But if what was spoken doesn’t pass the test, we should reject it as misguided at the very least, and intentionally deceptive in the worst cases.
 2. Paul doesn’t intend that any person in our church be anointed as “the prophet”. In fact, he desired that all the Corinthians prophesy¹⁷!
 - VI. Lastly, Paul admonished the Thessalonians to “**Abstain from every form of evil**”. The people of God must fervently avoid anything that could pull them from close fellowship with God, or bring mockery and shame to the gospel; whether from inside or outside. They should pursue holiness, to the Glory of Jesus.
 - VII. **1 Corinthians 11:23 ESV** For I received from the Lord what I also delivered to you, that the Lord Jesus on the night when he was betrayed took bread, **24** and when he had given thanks, he broke it, and said, “This is my body, which is for you. Do this in remembrance of me.” **25** In the same way also he took the cup, after supper, saying, “This cup is the new covenant in my blood. Do this, as often as you drink it, in remembrance of me.” **26** For as often as you eat this bread and drink the cup, you proclaim the Lord's death until he comes.
- Benediction: “The Lord bless you and keep you; the Lord make his face to shine upon you and be gracious to you; the Lord lift up his countenance upon you and give you peace.” (Numbers 6:24-26)

¹ Greek: kopiaō. See <https://www.blueletterbible.org/lang/lexicon/lexicon.cfm?Strong=G2872&t=KJV> for more information.

² 1 Peter 5:2

³ Christ-Centered Exposition Commentary: Exalting Jesus in 1 & 2 Thessalonians; by Mark Howell; Pg. 151; © 2015 B&H Publishing Group, Nashville, TN

⁴ Hebrews 12:5-11

⁵ The entire book of Galatians is an admonishment of those believers, and yet Paul says, “my little children, for whom I am again in the anguish of childbirth until Christ is formed in you!” (Galatians 4:19)

⁶ Romans 5:8

⁷ Philippians 2:3

⁸ Ephesians 4:32

⁹ Matthew 5:38-48

¹⁰ 2 Timothy 2:24-26; Galatians 6:1-5

¹¹ Matthew 5:44; Luke 9:27-28

¹² “*I Need Thee Every Hour*”; by Annie S. Hawks & Robert Lowry; 1883; Public Domain

¹³ Matthew 5:45

¹⁴ Christ-Centered Exposition Commentary: Exalting Jesus in 1 & 2 Thessalonians; by Mark Howell; Pg. 164; © 2015 B&H Publishing Group, Nashville, TN

¹⁵ 1 Corinthians 14:3

¹⁶ 1 Corinthians 13:9

¹⁷ 1 Corinthians 14:5