

## X. Church Life and Worship

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1 Thessalonians 5:12-22

**Aim:** The Church is to show mutual care and respect for its members and leaders and demonstrate a continual attitude of joy, prayer, and thanksgiving in its worship with discernment for God's truth.

It would be tempting to make the mistaken assumption that this is nothing more than a tailpiece which contains a series of exhortations plucked out of the air at random. The unifying idea in these verses is that the Thessalonian Christians should learn increasingly what it means to be a church, a local expression of the body of Christ. If a particular fellowship of believers is to function as it should, each and every member has a part to play. It is a fatal error to suppose that the appointment of a minister absolves the membership at large of any responsibility for the success or failure of that fellowship to be the kind of church that the Lord would have it be.

What Paul has to say here about life within the congregation is contained in a series of short compressed appeals and commands. To what degree they reflect existing problems in the church is uncertain. In view of the brevity of these commands and the many similarities with Rom. 12:3-21, it is likely that the majority of these commands are more generic and would apply to most church situations. At the same time, the apostle might have been putting his pastoral finger on trouble spots in the life of the congregation.

### A. Church Life (1 Th. 5:12-15)

#### 1. Church Leaders (5:12-13)

*And we urge you, brethren...*

Paul first turns his attention to the way that his readers relate to their leaders. Although the apostle does not give title or official rank to those he has in mind, clearly they are the spiritual leaders of the young church.

Why did Paul feel it was necessary to encourage the 'brothers' (*ἀδελφοί, adelphoi*) and sisters to 'recognize' or appreciate those who were their leaders? Presumably because, among the other things that he had mentioned, Timothy had reported that the opposite was taking place. How had that arisen? We do know one element in the congregation was 'unruly' (5:14). A segment of the fellowship had developed the irresponsible habit of absenting themselves from work. It seems possible that the elders of the church had already attempted to deal with these people, who responded by making their resentment plain. To a great extent, the resolution of this conflict lay in the proper fulfillment of pastoral and congregational roles. Hence Paul admonished the Thessalonians about the relationship between shepherds and sheep.

##### *a) Three Responsibilities of Church Leaders (5:12)*

*...those who labor among you, and are over you in the Lord and admonish you...*

Paul makes three observations which, taken together, give us a portrait of spiritual leadership at its best. The elders as a group are described as those who 'labor,' 'rule,' and 'admonish.'

First, *good elders work hard*. They 'labor' among their brothers and sisters. 'Diligently labor' is from *kopiaō* (*κοπιαω*), which means to exhibit great effort and exertion, to the point of sweat and

## Thessalonians – Lesson 10

exhaustion. Faithful elders work hard among the people and minister to them as a shepherd cares for his sheep, or a father leads his family.

Second, *good elders have authority*. They are ‘over’ the people of God. ‘Rule’ or ‘have charge over’ (*προιστημι, proistēmi*) could be translated as ‘lead by showing concern for.’ It conveys the notion of authoritatively presiding, leading, or directing. The apostle Peter emphasized that elders are not to behave as ‘lords’ over those in their care (1 Pe. 5:3). The authority of the elders is that of the concerned parent. Christian rulers are to rule ‘in the Lord’ – that is, within the parameters set out by the Lord and with the heart motivations of those who are connected to the Lord. True shepherds are not self-appointed, and their authority does not derive from fallible human beings.

Third, *good elders are not spineless*. They have a duty to ‘admonish’ or ‘give instruction to’ those who require it. This term translates a strong Greek word (*νουθετεω, noutheteō*) which refers not merely to academic data imparted impersonally but to instruction for the purpose of correcting and changing people. It is teaching with an element of warning, designed to direct the sheep to holy living. Shepherds, then, are to be skilled instructors of the Word of God. Ultimately, elders may have to confront the fact that those who do not heed such warnings may well become liable to church discipline.

### *b) Three Responsibilities of Church Members (5:12-13)*

*...to recognize...and to esteem them very highly in love for their work's sake. Be at peace among yourselves.*

Given that the elders are all they should be, how should the members of the local church conduct themselves toward them? Paul makes three observations.

First, *good elders deserve recognition*. The brothers in the congregation are to show these people respect, or, as the word is often translated, they are to ‘know’ them. ‘Recognize’ or ‘appreciate’ translates *oida (οιδα)*, which means to know by experience. The connotation here is that believers are to know their shepherds deeply and respectfully and to value their service. Such knowledge is much more than the mere recall of their names or the general awareness of some facts about their personal lives. Instead, it entails a close, personal acquaintance that results in the caring appreciation of the Lord’s servants. The challenge to church members is to ask themselves, when they are blessed with conscientious leaders, whether or not they appreciate their efforts.

Second, *good elders deserve affection as well as appreciation*. The congregation of believers has the duty to ‘esteem’ (‘regard’) its elders ‘very highly’ (‘beyond all measure’). This phrase calls for limitless respect for church leaders. Paul argues here that the demanding nature of their work should evoke a high level of genuine love and gratitude. The congregation grows best spiritually when the members properly respect and esteem the leaders. By using ‘in love (*agapē, ἀγάπη*),’ Paul makes clear that congregations are not only to ‘esteem’ their leaders on an intellectual level, but are also to have some degree of emotional attachment, manifested in loving actions, towards them. They are to observe closely the quality of their personal lives and work, and to regard them with esteem and affection on account of these. He is not advocating a servile deference towards leaders, but an attitude of deep affection and appreciation.

Third, *good elders deserve loyalty*. Nothing holds the work of a local church back more than internal strife, which is why Paul insists that the believers in Thessalonica should be at peace

## Thessalonians – Lesson 10

among themselves. Some see this as referring to specific problems between the Thessalonian leadership and the congregation. However, it is better to see this instruction as having a more general application. The work of elders (cp. Heb. 13:17) is a difficult and often intensely painful task. Peace enables leaders to do their work well. Where they must toil in the face of quarrels and strife, resentment and rebellion, their work becomes almost unbearable.

God has called elders and set them apart for the important work of leading His church. Therefore, the people under them are to lovingly acknowledge their ministry labors, greatly respect them, overlook their non-sinful human frailties, speak well of them, encourage them, and give their best for them.

### 2. Church Members (5:14-15)

In verses 14 and 15, the apostle introduces another dimension of church life, the mutual care that members ought to have for one another. Who should shoulder the burden of warning the unruly, comforting the faint-hearted, and upholding the weak? These might well be called the problem children of the congregation. As far as Paul was concerned, these vital pastoral tasks were not the sole province of the top tier of church leadership. All of these commands are addressed to the congregation as a whole ('we encourage you, brethren'). Paul emphasized that these tasks were the responsibility of the membership at large.

Paul's approach to church growth was in sharp contrast to present day 'church growth' experts' concerns about cultural demographics and homogeneity, subtle schemes to make the church more 'seeker friendly,' sophisticated entertainment methodologies to make worship services 'more relevant,' and glib marketing techniques to attract new members. Rather than relying on such man-made strategies or concepts, the apostle focused on the sinful obstacles to the Thessalonian church's spiritual growth. The church's lack of spiritual progress is usually due to the sinful behavior of people, and Paul earnestly desired that the Thessalonians know how to deal adequately with them.

*Now we exhort you, brethren...*

Exhort' or 'urge' is from *parakaleō* (*παρακαλεω*), which literally means 'to come alongside' and carries the idea of providing help to someone. The apostle zealously and eagerly encouraged the 'brethren,' the spiritually healthy believers, to get more involved in helping the needy.

#### a) Wayward Sheep (5:14b)

*...warn those who are unruly...*

All agree that the command concerning the 'unruly' or 'idle' (*ἀτάκτος*, *ataktos*) is tied directly to the situation in the Thessalonian church. In extrabiblical Greek, this word often occurred in a military context and referred to a soldier who was out of rank and behaved in a disorderly, insubordinate manner, not maintaining proper order (*τάξις*, *taxis*). The word came to refer to anyone who did not perform his duty or follow through on his responsibility. *Ataktos* can refer to the idle, the indolent, or the apathetic as well as to those with a more actively rebellious attitude.

The 'unruly' believers had become so besotted with the thought of Christ's return that they had given up going to work (cp. 4:11-12; 2 Th. 3:6-15). They were out of step with the direction everyone else was headed. Such conduct brought the gospel into disrepute. These people, if not

## Thessalonians – Lesson 10

dealt with, tend to become bitter. They can become criticizing benchwarmers and eventually rebels who undermine church leadership to justify their insubordination.

Honest toil is a moral duty, which when carried out in the right spirit, brings glory to our Savior. But who should embrace the responsibility of taking the ‘unruly’ church members to one side in Thessalonica? The ‘brethren’ should! ‘Warn’ or ‘admonish’ (*νουθετεω, noutheteō*) connotes putting sense into someone’s head, or alerting him of the serious consequences of his actions. It does not mean being judgmental or critical in a superior manner.

### *b) Worried Sheep (5:14c)*

*...comfort the fainthearted...*

The ‘fainthearted’ or ‘timid’ are literally the ‘small-souled’ (*ὀλιγοψύχος, oligopsychos*). These were the worried sheep, huddled in the middle and afraid to get near the edge. The fainthearted lack the boldness to accept a challenging new ministry, fear change and the unknown, and want a risk-free ministry that is traditional, safe, and absolutely secure. The timid are those who lack courage in the face of persecution or other unknowns, such as events at the second coming of Christ.

Those who were fearful about their departed loved ones, or for that matter about their own prospects in the last day, needed not only the comfort and support of the church leadership, but that of the whole fellowship. ‘Comfort’ or ‘encourage’ (*παραμυθεομαι, paramutheomai*) literally means ‘to speak alongside’ someone, and in so doing, to offer comfort and consolation.

### *c) Weak Sheep (5:14d)*

*...uphold the weak...*

The weak are almost certainly those inclined to crumble when faced with moral temptations (4:3-8). They are fragile in faith, beset by doubts. They are certainly more susceptible to error, temptation, and sin than stronger believers. ‘Weak’ (*ἀσθενής, asthenēs*) focuses on susceptibility to sin and applies to believers who struggle with abandoning sin and obeying God’s will.

What of those believers who struggled to master strong temptation? Let the entire fellowship shoulder the burden of care! The Greek word *antechō* (*ἀντεχω, antechō*, ‘uphold’) means ‘to hold firmly, to cling to,’ to support,’ ‘to hold up.’ Paul commanded the stronger sheep to come alongside the weaker sheep, establish close personal relationships with them, and provide them doctrinal instruction and encouragement towards righteousness and away from sin.

### *d) Wearisome Sheep (5:14e)*

*...be patient with all.*

It is easy for healthy sheep to become frustrated, angry, or discouraged with some of the chronic problem sheep. The brothers are to respond to each in ways appropriate to their case. They are to warn the idle, to encourage the timid, and to help the weak. This is to be done showing patience to everyone. Paul encouraged his readers to ‘be patient’ (*μακροθυμεω, makrothumeō*) with everyone, whatever the nature of the problem in each case. ‘Patience’ (*μακροθυμία, makrothumia*) is a divine attribute of both God and Christ and also a Christian virtue. Patience is a virtue needed for those instructing or helping others, because results may not be immediate. This responsibility, it should be noted, is shared by the entire congregation and is not to be left to the ‘professionals.’

## Thessalonians – Lesson 10

Patience is encouraged on the part of those who minister to the ‘unruly,’ the ‘fainthearted,’ and the ‘weak.’ Patience is needed by those engaged in this ministry because those they are seeking to help are sometimes slow in improving their Christian walk. Those ministering within the covenant community need to remember that God is patient with them; hence, they are to be patient with others. Believers ought to extend patience and forgiveness unendingly to their brothers and sisters in Christ.

### *e) Wicked Sheep (5:15)*

*See that no one renders evil for evil to anyone, but always pursue what is good both for yourselves and for all.*

Sheep are definitely capable of harming other sheep, sinning against them in a variety of ways. The apostle Paul instructed the Thessalonians on how to respond to such wickedness from others in the church. At some point, disobedient sheep had done ‘evil’ (‘baseness, meanness, wickedness’) to the obedient ones. Paul’s response to those wronged was that no one should repay with evil. There is absolutely no place among Christians for retaliation or personal vengeance (cp. Rom 12:20-21). This is basic Christian teaching and goes back to the words of Jesus (Mt. 5:44-48). Paul wanted the Thessalonians to respond with genuine acts of love.

Verse 15 insists that the local church ought to be a place where kindness flourishes, and not a battleground for the settling of scores. Rather than retaliate when wronged, we must always try to be kind to each other and everyone else.

So a healthy flock is characterized by growth in faith, love, and purity, and progress toward the likeness of Christ. But spiritually needy and problem sheep within the flock can and do impede its growth. That means the healthy sheep must lovingly, patiently, but truthfully deal with the difficult sheep to remove sinful impediments and ensure real growth.

## **B. Church Worship (1 Th. 5:16-22)**

A particular theme unifies this section of the epistle, namely the corporate worship of the local church. The verbs are in the plural form. In other words, rejoicing, praying, thanksgiving, and so on are to be the actions of a group of people acting together. This use of plural verb forms suggests strongly that Paul was thinking of the conduct of a gathering of Christians. We have here a number of directives for the conduct of worship. When the Lord’s people meet together, each of these components should be present.

### **1. Worship Attitudes (5:16-18)**

These verses present a very God-oriented focus for the Christian life. Paul uses clear parallelism for the three commands. He puts the adverb (or adverbial phrase) first and then follows it with the imperative verb. This parallelism, the all-encompassing nature of the commands, and the fact that he gives similar commands in Romans 12:12 and Philippians 4:4-7 all point toward these commands not being aimed at any one specific problem in the Thessalonian church.

Joy, prayer, and thanksgiving should mark the life of the Christian community, both in its individual and in its corporate expression.

### *a) Joy (5:16)*

*Rejoice always (Πάντοτε χαίρετε, Pantote chairete)...*

## Thessalonians – Lesson 10

First, the worshiping church is a *joyful church* (cp. Ps. 95:1; 100:1). The reason is simple: as God's people have solid grounds for rejoicing, this note ought to characterize their worship. Joy is far more than momentary happiness. It is a lasting, deep-seated sense of well-being and pleasure produced by the Holy Spirit now living within Christians (Luke 10:21; Gal. 5:22). Truly joyful Christians will always have a deep-seated confidence in God's sovereign love and mighty power according to His perfect plan.

Spiritual joy is more than human happiness. Christian joy is a conscious attitude of rejoicing in the Lord and what He has done. This joy does not necessarily lead to an outwardly happy, effervescent personality. It does not depend ultimately on our feelings or circumstances. We may not always feel buoyant and cheerful, yet we can deliberately call to mind the Lord and rejoice in Him at all times (Phil. 4:4).

### b) Prayer (5:17)

*...pray without ceasing (ἀδιολείπτως προσεύχεσθε, adialeiptōs proseuchesthe)...*

Second, the worshiping church is a *praying church*. 'Pray' (προσεύχομαι, *proseuchomai*) is the general word for prayer and can convey a whole spectrum of meaning. It encompasses all the aspects of prayer: submission, confession, petition, intercession, praise, and thanksgiving. Prayer, like joy, is a spontaneous feature of true faith.

It is continual prayer that Paul is seeking; we are often to be actively engaged in prayer. 'Without ceasing' means 'constant' and defines prayer not as some perpetual activity of kneeling and interceding but as a way of life marked by a continual attitude of prayer. He wants his readers to be in a constant frame of dependence upon God, even when they are not engaged in specific acts of prayer.

The general context strongly suggests that the 'prayer' mentioned here was as much a corporate activity as listening to teaching or participating in the Lord's Supper. In the light of this, it would seem that believers ought to give as prominent a place to corporate prayer as they do to these other things.

### c) Thanksgiving (5:18a)

*...in everything give thanks (ἐν παντί ἐχαριστείτε, en panti eucharisteite)...*

Third, the worshiping church is a *grateful church*. Being unthankful is the very essence of the unregenerate heart. But when God regenerates an individual, He produces a new heart that longs to obey Paul's injunction here. 'In everything give thanks' reminds the Thessalonians of the providence of God in all aspects of our life. The background to this exhortation is the fact that the Christian always has good reason to be thankful, even when his outward circumstances are distressing. The Thessalonian Christians probably thought they had plenty of reasons to be miserable and self-pitying. Yet Paul insists that they should be thankful in all circumstances. Ingratitude is always a sign of unbelief. Faith recognizes that God is at work for our good and His glory in even the most seemingly adverse situations. It enables us to say thank you even through tears.

### d) The Will of God (5:18b)

*...for this is the will of God in Christ Jesus for you.*

These three things, then – joy, prayer, and thankfulness – are to be part of our everyday, all-day life. They are God's will for us in Christ Jesus; they are His prescribed and revealed

## Thessalonians – Lesson 10

requirements. This is the way those who are in Christ Jesus are to live. It is the way we are living?

### 2. Worship Actions (5:19-22)

#### a) *Regard for the Spirit (5:19)*

*Do not quench the Spirit.*

The metaphor ‘quench’ (*σβέννυτε, sbennute*) means ‘to extinguish, stifle, or retard’ the power or energy of something. Sometimes Scripture represents the presence of the Spirit as a fire (Acts 2:2-4; cp. Ex. 13:21; Mal. 3:2-3); thus the apostle warned the Thessalonians not to smother the Holy Spirit’s work within them, comparing such quenching to extinguishing a fire.

It is often supposed that Paul’s exhortation has something to do with the exercise of charismatic gifts. There is no need to restrict the meaning in this way. Paul has in mind especially the ministry of the Holy Spirit in the congregation. It is the process of progressive sanctification by the Spirit that Paul has in mind here. Anything that repressed His work might fittingly be described as quenching or putting out His fire. Failure to rejoice, pray, or be thankful would help to extinguish the fire of the Spirit.

Paul does not explain in detail how quenching the Spirit might be done. He may be thinking broadly of the way we can dishonor the Spirit by ignoring His presence or resisting His leading. He implies that Christians can hinder the Spirit’s influence by their attitudes and actions. And he warns strongly against that.

#### b) *Regard for the Word (5:20)*

*Do not despise prophecies.*

Most of all, the Lord’s people run the risk of quenching the Spirit of God when they refuse to give Him a hearing. One of the ways in which the Holy Spirit nourished the life of the early church was through the gift of prophecy. Here he tells the Thessalonian believers that they are not to treat prophecies with contempt. They were perhaps in danger of doing so. The people of God must listen to the Word of God.

Respect for the supremacy of the revelation of God in Scripture is what the apostle has in mind. ‘Despise’ (*ἐξουθενεω, exoutheneō*) carries the strong meaning, ‘to consider as absolutely nothing,’ ‘to treat with contempt,’ or ‘to look down on.’ In the New Testament, ‘prophecies’ (*προφητία, prophēteia*) can refer to direct divine revelation from New Testament prophets, a phenomenon which has ceased along with the gift of apostleship (Eph. 2:20; 3:5), or to written words. The Thessalonians were not to ‘quench’ or ‘despise’ direct revelation from God, whether it came from New Testament prophets, Paul, the Lord (4:15), other New Testament apostles, or the Old Testament.

Revelatory prophecies (1 Cor. 12:10) were limited to the apostolic era. But the non-revelatory gift of prophecy is permanent, as preachers are called to ‘preach the word’ (2 Tim. 4:2), that is, proclaim the divine record.

#### c) *Test All Things (5:21-22)*

*Test all things; hold fast what is good. Abstain from every form of evil.*

Paul recommended intelligent scrutiny. This explains the two balancing commands: ‘Do not despise prophecies’ and ‘test all things.’ ‘All things’ is of course referring here particularly to

## Thessalonians – Lesson 10

‘prophecies,’ but it also includes all aspects of the Christian’s world. They were to test everything, much in the same way that they might examine a metal or gemstone to test its purity. It is the Christian’s responsibility to evaluate his surroundings from a Christian perspective. Or, to use Calvin’s analogy, we are to look out upon the world through Bible-glasses that help to put our world into better focus. That which they found to be good, they were to hold on to, but everything that was evil, they were to avoid or stand aloof from. The gifts of the Spirit were to be valued but exercised with discernment.

Spiritual discernment is the ability to distinguish divine truth from error and half-truth and is essential to the Christian life. ‘Test’ or ‘Examine’ translates *dokimazō* (δοκιμάζω), a word that often refers to testing something for authenticity. It entails distinguishing between true and false, right and wrong, or good and bad. ‘Hold fast’ means to ‘embrace wholeheartedly,’ to take possession of.’ ‘Good’ (*καλος, kalos*) denotes what is inherently genuine true, noble, and right.

Paul gives the converse statement in verse 22. ‘Abstain’ (*ἀπέχω, apechō*) is a strong word that means ‘to hold oneself away from.’ The emphasis is on the believer’s complete avoidance of any evil teaching or behavior. ‘Evil’ refers to something that is actively harmful or malignant.

What kind of tests would be applied? First would be the *Scripture test*. Was there any conflict between what the prophet had said and what the Holy Spirit had previously said? The people of Berea compared Paul’s teachings with the written Word of God (Acts 17:11). This has obvious implications for modern Christians. The preacher who faithfully echoes the truths of the Bible, however modest his gifts as a communicator, deserves our earnest attention. Over against that, the preacher who is at odds with what God has said, however plausible his manner, has no claim on the attention of believers.

A second test concerns the *person of Christ*. Does the prophet in question accept the verdict of Scripture concerning the identity of the God-man? What kind of Jesus does he preach? In third place, we should also apply the *gospel test*. What does the prophet or teacher say about the way of salvation? Fourth and finally, we must apply the *test of character*. The character of the prophet would need to be in keeping with his message. The heralds of a holy God should themselves be holy.

The process of testing resembled the way that a man might check the coins in his pocket to see which were genuine and which were not. Having done so, he would then ‘hold fast’ to the good and reject the spurious. In the same way, Christians must actively and energetically pursue what they are taught when it comes from God and decisively shun it when it does not.

The church through the ages has been strong only when it has recognized that its life lies in God Himself. When it has done this, its emphasis has not been upon its activities, its buildings, or its organization. Rather, worship and prayer for mighty manifestations of the Holy Spirit have been the focus of its energies. This remains the path to spiritual strength today.

For next time: Read 1 Thessalonians 3:11-13, 5:23-28.