



LIFE IN THE FAMILY

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1 Thess 5:12-28

Eighth Message

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Soren Kierkegaard once told a tale of a make-believe country where the only inhabitants were ducks. One Sunday morning, all the ducks went to church. They waddled down the aisle, got into their pews, and squatted. The duck minister took his place behind the pulpit, opened the duck Bible and read, "Ducks! You have wings, and with wings you can fly like eagles. You can soar into the sky! Use your wings!" All the ducks yelled "Amen!", and they waddled home.

This story is a good reminder to me of why we study the Bible. Most of us are Biblically educated beyond our character. That is because we sometimes confuse the means with the end. The reason we study the Bible is not to become educated, however. Learning is not the goal. The purpose is not information, but transformation. The truth is supposed to make us more like Christ.

Non-Christians sometimes have a better grasp of this concept. They don't know much about theology, and they are unable to pinpoint what they think is wrong with it, but they are disappointed when Christians lie, fail to pay their bills, cheat on their taxes, don't keep their word, freeload shamelessly, and desert their mates. They recognize there is something wrong with that kind of Christianity. They know, sometimes better than Christians, that believers bear the image of Christ, so we ought to act as Christ acted.

That is why in almost every book in the Old and New Testaments alike there is a practical word pointing out how to make the truth part of our lives. The apostle Paul invariably utilizes the theology he develops in the earlier parts of his letters to demonstrate how it works out in life. Every one of his letters ends with pointed, practical applications of the truth.

That is certainly the case with the book of 1 Thessalonians. From 4:1 to 5:11, Paul deals with some of the practical concerns of the Thessalonian believers. In our final study this morning, verses 12-28 of chapter 5, the apostle helps the Thessalonians understand how the gospel affects every aspect of their lives. He begins with a word on Christian leadership. Verse 12:

But we request of you, brethren, that you appreciate [or know] those who diligently labor among you, and have charge over you in the Lord and give you instruction, and that you esteem them very highly in love because of their work. Live in peace with one another. (1 Thess 5:12-13, NASB)

The phrase, "have charge over you," from the NASB

version, literally is, "to stand in front of you." Thus it would be better rendered, "those who are in front," or "those who are up front." "Those who have charge over you," could give a false impression. Christian leadership has nothing to do with being "over" people, lording over them and telling them what to do. On the contrary, leadership in the church is a position of service. It is about loving and serving others and modeling truth.

Jesus made that quite clear to his disciples when James and John persuaded their mother to ask him if they could sit at his right and left hand in the coming kingdom. This request so angered the other disciples that Jesus was forced to remind them that in his kingdom, if they wanted to be first, they had to learn to be last. Leaders had to be slaves of all, he said, because "the Son of Man came not to be served, but to serve, and to give his life as a ransom for many."

So Jesus is our model for leadership. He did not go around bossing people and demanding they do what he said. His was a leadership of servanthood. He told the disciples that in the world, people think about leadership in terms of how many subordinates they have under them, but it was not to be so among them. They must think in terms of being under those they served. In fact, autocratic, self-centered leadership is condemned in the NT in the person of Diotrephes, of whom John said, "he loved to be first."

Paul uses a wonderful figure in 1 Corinthians 4 to describe how one should think of a pastor: "Let a man regard us as servants of Christ, and stewards of the mysteries of God." The word for servants there is not Paul's usual term. Literally, the word means under-rowers, i.e. the slaves who pulled the sweeps in the ancient seagoing vessels. Slave labor was the power that kept the galleys going. In Paul's metaphor, leaders who make the galleys go, so to speak, are merely under-rowers. They are part of the crew, seated below the decks in the lower seats, pulling on their oars just like everyone else. Christian leaders do not set either the course or the cadence. That is the Captain's job. It his task to determine the heading and call the stroke.

What a far cry from the usual picture of the pastor sitting on the poop deck, resplendent in full regalia, telescope in one hand and tiller in the other. He imagines he is the only one who knows where the church is going; everyone else is down below, sweating over the oars. But pastors do not call the shots and control the ship. That is the Lord's task. The direction a church

goes, the speed with which it develops, and the size to which it grows are his prerogatives. Our job is to fix our eyes on Christ, and row. According to Paul, that is the way leaders should regard themselves, as under-rowers.

Paul further instructs how believers should relate to their leaders. First, he says, get to know them. That word appreciate in verse 12 is really the verb “to know.” Get to know them. They are ordinary people, having the same flaws and problems as others. They have difficulties at times in their marriages; they struggle with their children; they get worried and anxious at times.

Secondly, the apostle says, we should “esteem them very highly in love because of their work.” I weary of the media’s dishonest portrayal of clergymen as wimps, bores and maniacs. They certainly don’t esteem those in ministry very highly. While it is true that at times leaders are reaping what they have sown, Paul says we should value them because of their work, which is to give instruction about how to live life.

In that same passage from 1 Corinthians 4, Paul used a second metaphor, that of a steward. The apostle was referring to a butler, whose job it was to rummage around the pantry and bring out bread and wine for family meals. A pastor’s job is to go into the pantry of God himself and bring out the goodies of his word on which others can feed. That is the pastor’s work—imparting truth. Ministers are to some extent like John the Baptist: they are voices in the wilderness. While a multitude of voices may claim to have what the world needs, the work of Christian leaders is to impart the truth of the word of God, instructing the flock on how to live lives that are pleasing to God.

That is hard work. The word that Paul uses to describe it referred to manual occupations. “Labor” means, “to toil, strive or struggle.” The picture is one of rippling muscles and dripping sweat. Someone has said that pastors are “six days are invisible and one day incomprehensible,” but that’s not true. The work of a pastor is hard. It takes a toll on his body and on his family life. We need to esteem them highly and encourage them in their task.

Finally, says Paul, “live in peace with one another.” Leaders are not perfect; they are going to make mistakes. At times they may exercise bad judgment. Leaders have different personalities and different spiritual gifts. Ministries and schedules differ from one pastor to another. And we should not be tempted to create division over individual leaders.

These then are Paul’s exhortations concerning how to relate to leadership in the church.

In the next two verses the apostle deals with our relationships with one another. You will note that these commands are addressed to everyone in the church, not just leaders. Everyone is involved in this ministry. Verse 14:

And we urge you, brethren, admonish the unruly, encourage the fainthearted, help the weak, be patient with all men. See that no one repays another with evil for evil, but always seek after that which is good for one another and for all men. (5:14-15)

The first command is to correct wrong: “admonish the unruly.” If you see someone violating Scripture, do something about it. Move in lovingly and graciously and help them get back in line. The “unruly” in Thessalonica probably referred to those who had quit their jobs and were sitting around waiting for Jesus to come back. When you see a brother who is out of line, don’t criticize him; move alongside and help him. Talk to him about his sin and gently reprove him.

Paul continues: “encourage the fainthearted”—those who are timid, anxious, intimidated or overwhelmed by what is going on in their lives. And, “help the weak,” those who are guilty, who feel the weight of their past sin, or feel insecure or inadequate to meet the demands of life. “Help them,” says Paul. Actually, the word is “cleave.” Hold on to them. Cling to them. Put your arm around them. Call them on the phone or encourage them with a note. Spend time with them. Don’t leave them in their loneliness. Pray with them. The Christian life is a battle, and people are being wounded. We need to bandage their wounds and get them on their feet and walking again. We are all weak. Any one of us can be unruly, fainthearted, or “small souled”; that is what that word literally means. We fail in our faith, we are crushed by the demands of life, we feel overwhelmed in our task of parenting or trying to make our marriages work. We need to help each other.

And finally, we need to be “patient with all men.” The word patient is the Greek word, *makrothumia*. *Makro* means “long,” *thumos* means “heat.” So the word literally means “long before we get heated.” At times we say someone has a “short fuse.” This is the opposite—“long-fused.” We should not give up on each other. A marriage need not necessarily be over even though the picture looks dark and dreary. By God’s grace, any situation can be turned around. So Paul exhorts us to be patient with each other.

“See that no one repays another with evil for evil, but always seek after that which is good for one another and for all men.” Don’t retaliate. Refuse to fight back. Arguments begin when someone says a harsh word and another person retaliates. Before long an ugly scene develops and a lot of damage is done. Sometimes we can’t even remember what started it all. Paul says we should avoid this, and the way to do it is by being patient with all.

Next, the apostle instructs on how to relate to our circumstances. Verse 16:

Rejoice always; pray without ceasing; in everything give thanks; for this is God’s will for you in Christ Jesus. (5:16-18)

“Rejoice always.” Be cheerful. Don’t let life get you

down. Don't be glum and sour about life. Don't get resentful and bitter because life has dealt you a blow. It is God who determines the events of our lives. There are people here this morning whose mates have deserted them, whose children have betrayed them, whose parents have wrongfully used them. God is the one who is behind all the circumstances of your lives, and he will use these hard things to make you what you long to be. The hurt and pain and tears are making you a more beautiful person, enabling you to face even harder things in life. You are going to be tougher and sweeter, because these are the things that enable you to grow.

That is why James says, "Consider it all joy...when you encounter various trials." Or as Philips paraphrases it: "When all kinds of trials and temptations crowd into your lives, don't resent them as intruders, but welcome them as friends." God is working to make you the kind of person he wants you to be. He is teaching you to give up what you desire, to lose your fear of losing, to make you easier to get along with, to make you like the Lord Jesus. Someone has said that God wants to squeeze us like grapes to make sweet wine. The pressure we experience is the fingers of God to effect that purpose. So rejoice. Let the process continue. Don't fight back and get resentful. Allow the suffering to complete its good work.

The words of the song "Be Ye Glad," are helpful here:

*Now from your dungeon a rumor is stirring,
though you've heard it again and again;
Ah, but this time your cell keys are turning;
And outside there are faces of friends.
Though your body is weary from wasting,
and your eyes show the sorrow you've had;
Oh, the love that your heart is now tasting,
has opened the gates, Be ye glad!
Be ye glad, Oh, Be ye glad;
Every debt that you've ever had,
Has been paid up in full
By the grace of the Lord;
Be ye glad, be ye glad, be ye glad.*

Or, as Paul puts it, "rejoice always."

And, "pray without ceasing." That is how we draw on these resources of God—by maintaining a worshipful relationship with him. Pray about everything. Pray wherever you go. We ought to have protracted times of prayer when we set aside times to be alone with God. From those times comes an attitude of praying wherever we go, in whatever circumstance we find ourselves.

Describing his understanding of this verse, Civil War General Stonewall Jackson said, "I never seal a letter without putting a word of prayer under the seal. I never receive a dispatch from the post without a brief sending of my thoughts upward. I never meet my troops without a moment's petition on those who go out and those who come in. Everything calls me to prayer."

Then, says the apostle, "in everything give thanks."

Don't dwell on the negatives, but center on what God is doing, and be thankful, "for this is God's will for you in Christ Jesus." We tend to think of God's will in terms of great activities that he has in mind for us, but Paul says that God's will involves that quiet response of thankfulness to every circumstance. Give thanks for God's adequacy. Give thanks for his presence. Give thanks for his love.

Next, in verses 19-22, the apostle talks about the Christian's attitude toward the word of God:

Do not quench the Spirit; do not despise prophetic utterances. But examine everything carefully; hold fast to that which is good; abstain from every form of evil. (5:19-22)

The New Testament was not yet written when Paul penned these words. Actually, 1 Thessalonians was the first or second book of the NT to be written. In the interim, there were prophets who received direct revelation from God. First Corinthians 14 describes this. People would be seated in a meeting like this, and a word of revelation would come to a prophet who would proclaim God's word to the congregation. Here Paul says, "Do not quench the Spirit." When the prophets are prophesying, listen to what they have to say. But don't be gullible or naive. Test the spirits to see if they are true. Examine the teaching to see if it is consistent with the OT revelation. In Corinth, others who had gifts of discernment could test a prophet's words. Today we have the written word, but Paul would still tell us not to quench the Spirit. When the Holy Spirit speaks to us about a passage or verse of Scripture, we should listen to him and not resist him.

I find that the prompting of the Spirit comes in two ways in my life: the Spirit tells me to stop doing something that is wrong, or he encourages me to do something that is right. At times when I am reading my Bible in my office the Spirit will gently but powerfully bring to mind something that I need to apologize for or confess to my wife or a brother. At other times I feel prompted to write a note of encouragement to someone. I think Paul is telling us to respond to those promptings.

Secondly, says Paul, we should test the spirits. When you hear someone preach the word, whether it is in this pulpit, or on radio or television, don't just take his word for it, check it out yourself. Examine the word to see if it is true. The pastor's task is to say what the apostles have said. If we are not doing that, if we are contradicting their teaching, then we are preaching heresy. You have the responsibility to make that judgment.

Paul concludes his letter with a beautiful benediction. Verse 23:

Now may the God of peace Himself sanctify you entirely; and may your spirit and soul and body be preserved complete, without blame at the coming of our Lord Jesus Christ. Faithful is He who calls you, and He also will bring it to pass. (5:23-24)

I am very thankful that it is not my responsibility to turn the crank so that you will obey what the apostle says. The Bible says that God is at work in us “both to will and to work for his good pleasure.” He who began the good work in you will complete it. There will be failures along the way, of course. We will struggle, we won’t get it right all the time, but God is at work performing this sanctification process of our whole person—and he will not stop until it is completed. When he comes back we will see him as he is and we will be like him.

Verse 25:

Brethren, pray for us. Greet all the brethren with a holy kiss. (5:25-26)

What a wonderful word! Paul says let your verbal greeting be made stronger with a physical gesture of love. By the middle of the second century, this had become a liturgical practice during communion.

Verse 27:

I adjure you by the Lord to have this letter read to all the brethren. (5:27)

We have obeyed this command over the past few months.

Verse 28:

The grace of our Lord Jesus Christ be with you. (5:28)

Paul concludes his letter in the same way he began it, praying that the grace of Jesus Christ be with the Thesalonians. This is not just a religious slogan. Grace is the heart of the gospel, and it is the heart of God.

That is my prayer too for all of us this morning as we conclude our studies in this very personal letter of the great apostle.

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