

## BODY LIFE



1 Thessalonians 5:12-28

Seventh Message

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## SERIES: FAITH, LOVE AND HOPE

Today is week 26 of our livestream Sunday services, so today we reach the six month mark. Few of us could have imagined that restrictions on public gatherings, church gatherings, even personal gatherings would last this long. For a half-year we have been unable to gather physically as a church. This has been hard because the church is a gathered community. We are fortunate that modern technology allows us to gather virtually, to livestream services, to hold Zoom sessions. But this is not the same as gathering in person. We look forward to the day when we can safely come together as a gathered community. Meanwhile we persevere, we seek to be safe and keep others safe, and we seek to maintain a sense of community.

I began this series on 1 Thessalonians on March 22, just a few days after the Shelter-in-Place order went into effect. Today we finish the series with restrictions still in place. Preaching this series has been very different from what I had anticipated. I have found this little letter remarkably relevant to our unusual situation in these last six months.

Paul wrote this letter “To the church of the Thessalonians in God the Father and the Lord Jesus Christ” (1:1). Some months earlier, on his second missionary journey, Paul had preached the gospel in Thessalonica. In the Jewish synagogue he proclaimed Jesus as Israel’s Messiah, that he was risen from the dead, and that he is now Lord, sharing an identity with God. To the Gentiles in the city he had proclaimed that there is another king, Jesus. Caesar is not king. Caesar is not lord. Some believed: Jews, God-fearing Gentiles who attended the synagogue, and Gentiles. Together they formed the church in Thessalonica. The Greek word *ekklesia* means “assembly.” Our English word “church” derives from the Greek word *kuriakos*, meaning “pertaining to the Lord (*kurios*).” The church is the gathering of the Lord’s people in a particular place, in this case Thessalonica.

Christians are not just individual followers of Jesus. We belong to a community. The NT focus is that we belong to a local community, a local gathering of Jesus people. The NT has no conception of a believer isolated from community. Being a Jesus follower entails being part of the local community of Jesus followers, and part of the family of God in Christ. In our individualistic age it is important to hear this. When we follow Jesus, giving him our allegiance, we join God’s family, God’s household. We also join the local assembly of God’s people.

We are Peninsula Bible Church Cupertino, an assembly of Christ-followers that normally gathers in this building on Blaney Avenue in Cupertino. It is indeed sad that we cannot gather physically, for gathering is foundational to being church. But we continue to seek to function as a community, gathering online as we are doing now.

Fourteen times in this short letter, Paul addresses the Thessalonian Christians as “brothers and sisters.” They don’t belong together naturally but now they are family. They are gathered into a new

family, a family that cuts across all previous dividing lines of ethnicity, gender, socio-economic status. A family of Jews and Gentiles, Greeks and Barbarians, men and women, slave and free, rich and poor, high status and low status. They are what Scot McKnight calls “a fellowship of different.”<sup>1</sup> These different people are learning how to be a family gathered together with one new common identity that binds them together. They are “in Christ.” A couple of years ago I spent some time with the pastors of Oakland City Church. This understanding of the church as “a fellowship of different” is well reflected in how that particular church perceives itself and presents itself: “We are people who don’t belong together gathered around Jesus for the sake of those who don’t belong.” We are learning how to belong together.

In the final section of his letter before the closing greetings, Paul addresses how the Thessalonian Christians function as an assembly, when they gather together as a church. He’s concerned about their Life Together, their Body Life. In 1 Thess 5:12-22 Paul gives four short words of instruction for the assembly.

### 1. Acknowledge leaders (5:12-13)

In the first section Paul writes about the leadership of the church.

**Now we ask you, brothers and sisters, to acknowledge those who work hard among you, who care for you in the Lord and who admonish you. Hold them in the highest regard in love because of their work. Live in peace with each other. (1 Thess 5:12-13 NIV)**

Paul urges the church to acknowledge and respect their leaders. Each church has some form of leadership. Elsewhere the NT mentions several types of leader: elder, overseer, deacon, shepherd (pastor), teacher. Over time several different leadership structures have emerged: episcopal, presbyterian, baptist, congregational, etc. PBCC has its own leadership structure with elders, deacons and pastors. But none of these positions is mentioned here. Instead, Paul lists what these leaders do, their function not their position.

He describes three functions: they work hard among you, they care for you in the Lord, and they admonish you. In admonishment the leaders of the church implement Paul’s corrections and admonishments contained within this letter. This is largely what chapters 4–5 are about. But they do so with care. Any admonishment is to be given with care and love and received with love. Church leadership isn’t about power or control. It’s not about leaders fulfilling their own agenda. This is about leaders caring for their people, shepherds tending the sheep, overseers working for the flourishing of those under their oversight. The leaders exercise this care in the Lord. They are mindful of their common identity in the Lord: the leaders and the led together. They are mindful that the Lord be exalted not self.

This is the attitude of our elders. As overseers their aim is to care for the body. They care deeply about your welfare during this pan-

demic. They care for the body by seeking to maintain unity in this difficult season: unity among those who have different opinions on reopening the church or on our current Conversation on Race. They seek to preserve the peace. We the people are to hold them in high regard in love. So, a big “Thank you” to our elders.

Paul exhorts the church, “Live in peace with each other.” He gives this command in several of his letters to different churches, suggesting how difficult it is for some churches to live in peace. This is what comes from being people who don’t naturally belong together learning how to belong together. It is a beautiful thing to live in community, but it is also challenging. It is challenging to be peaceable with people with whom we may disagree. This is particularly challenging these days with all of the tensions in our society: tensions over coronavirus restrictions and reopening, tensions over racial justice, tensions over the impending election. These tensions penetrate deeply into society and they penetrate deeply into churches. We are not immune to such tensions. We have tensions within our body on these matters. We have to strive to live in peace with one another, to be a “fellowship of differents,” disagreeing on some matters, but united in our common identity as being “in Christ,” a common identity that is stronger than all of our differences. The differences are real, but we are first and foremost Christians, united in Christ. This should bind us together more strongly than any difference separate us.

## 2. Life Together (5:14-15)

Caring can be difficult and draining. Next Paul addresses some difficult situations requiring care, some people we might perhaps not want to care for.

**And we urge you, brothers and sisters, warn those who are idle and disruptive, encourage the disheartened, help the weak, be patient with everyone. Make sure that nobody pays back wrong for wrong, but always strive to do what is good for each other and for everyone else. (5:14-15)**

Paul lists three categories of people and the appropriate way to care for them. The first group are the “idle and disruptive.” These two words represent just one Greek word, which means “disorderly.” Who are these disorderly or disruptive people? For a while they were viewed as being idle, and this is reflected in several translations (e.g. ESV). But the tide has swung away from that view. I think they are probably connected to Paul’s earlier admonishment to “make it your ambition to lead a quiet life: You should mind your own business and work with your hands” (4:11). The disorderly are failing to do this. They are not idle. Far from it! They seem to be disruptive busy-bodies who are not doing what they should be doing and are disrupting the lives of other people. These disorderly people were evidently such a problem in Thessalonica that Paul will have to address them again more fully in his second letter. Paul’s counsel is to admonish them (the verb translated “warn” is the same as “admonish” in v. 12).

The second category are the disheartened. This probably included those whose loved ones had been killed in the affliction being suffered by the church, those who have fallen asleep in death (4:13). The right way to care for them is to comfort or console them. This is what Jews from Jerusalem did when Lazarus died: they went out to Bethany to be a consoling presence with his sisters Mary and Martha (John 11:19,31). There are other reasons for people to be disheartened today, especially as the pandemic drags on and re-

strictions remain in place. When people are discouraged we draw alongside them in sympathy to provide comfort and encouragement. We can’t do that in person right now, but we can still care.

Our deacons are especially concerned about our older folk who are shut in at home. They have established a Circle of Care. They care by sending cards and by arranging for people to call to check in on them. Our Children’s Ministry is concerned about families whose children have started online classes. Many parents are overwhelmed and fainthearted, especially if the mother is trying to work while the kids are doing school at home. So Children’s Ministry has launched Adopt-a-Family, where those with time can cook meals for families stretched to the limit.

The third category are the weak. We don’t know whether these are physically weak through sickness or spiritually weak, perhaps because of their anxiety over the Day of the Lord (5:1-3). Here Paul’s counsel is to help them. The word means to have a strong attachment. What do we do with the weak? We stick with them. We don’t abandon them in their weakness to go and spend time with the strong. Simply remaining with them, sticking with them in their weakness, is itself a powerful help.

The disorderly, the disheartened and the weak. Leaders might wish that their church be full of successful people who are easy to work with, who are energizing—the beautiful people. But every congregation has such people: disruptive, disheartened, weak. These are the wounded sheep who need the care of a shepherd, the care of the whole body. These are the little people whom it’s easy to overlook. Part of pastoral care is caring for these people, recognizing which category they fall in and applying the appropriate care. The disheartened don’t need admonishment. The disorderly don’t need encouragement. Encouraging the disheartened and helping the weak are things we all can do. It’s part of caring for the weaker members. It’s part of the functioning of the Body.

Paul next urges, “Be patient with everyone.” To be patient means to remain tranquil while waiting or in the face of provocation. Paul had urged the Christians “to lead a quiet life” (4:11). A non-agitated life that is tranquil even in the face of provocation. Be patient with everyone in the church. Caring appropriately for the disorderly, the disheartened and the weak certainly requires patience. Living in peace with each other requires patience. Our present circumstances require great patience. Patience to endure the ongoing pandemic, which just goes on and on. Patience also in our current discourse about the pandemic, about racial justice and black lives matter, about the upcoming election. Christians are as deeply divided as the nation. It is so easy to be provoked, so easy to be agitated, even by one another within the church. We are called to be patient with one another in the church.

Paul’s exhortation to be patient with all includes also those outside the church. In the case of the Thessalonian Christians, those outside the church meant them harm. The church was suffering affliction and tribulation. Some had been martyred. Paul urges patience: “Make sure that nobody pays back wrong for wrong.” The hostile opponents were wronging the church, but the Christians were not to respond in kind. Instead Paul urges them to pursue good, to “strive to do what is good for each other and for everyone else.” Strive to do good to those in the church and to those outside the church. Paul has given thanks for their “endurance inspired by hope in our Lord Jesus Christ” (1:3). It is this hope in the return of Jesus, his *parousia*, that enables the Christians to persevere in their

ordeal, under tribulation from hostile neighbors. It is their faith, love and hope that enables them to pursue good rather than evil. Paul will later counsel the Christians in Rome, “Do not be overcome by evil, but overcome evil with good” (Rom 12:21). Overcome evil with good. Respond to hate with kindness, goodness, gentleness, even with forgiveness. In recent instances of racial injustice we have seen some Christian communities do this, extending forgiveness to those who extended hate to them, to those who killed their brothers and sisters. Seek to do good. Seek a win-win solution rather than a zero-sum, win-lose solution. Doing so disarms the hate.

In these first two sections Paul has exhorted the Christians in their horizontal relationships with one another, including those outside the church. He has written some challenging things: Live in peace with one another. Be patient with one another. Strive to do what is good for each other and for everyone else. How are we able to do this? How can we rise to this challenge? How can we rise to this challenge in this particular year when there are so many things that might provoke us to react differently? A good way forward is to first pay attention to our vertical relationship with God, not just as individuals but as a body, as a church. This is what Paul does in his next two sections.

### 3. Congregational worship (5:16-17)

**Rejoice always, pray continually, give thanks in all circumstances; for this is God’s will for you in Christ Jesus. (5:16-18)**

When Christians gathered together in their house churches, they paid attention to one another and they paid attention to God. They carried over some of the practices of the synagogue, but also adopted new practices. Rejoice, pray, give thanks, writes Paul. He would later write to the Ephesians,

**be filled with the Spirit, speaking to one another with psalms, hymns, and songs from the Spirit. Sing and make music from your heart to the Lord, always giving thanks to God the Father for everything, in the name of our Lord Jesus Christ. (Eph 5:18-20)**

Rejoice always. The Christians praised God, using the psalms, just like the Jews in the synagogue. They also praised the Lord Jesus, using songs of their own composition. It is possible that the NT itself contains a few of these songs. It is striking that the early church incorporated Jesus into its worship of God. Jesus was worthy of worship as Lord. Praising God and rejoicing over who he is, what he has done in Christ, and what he is doing through his Spirit, gets our eyes off ourselves and our problems. It sets our eyes on him, what he has done and what he yet might do in us and through us. The early Christians were a joyful people.

Pray continually. They petitioned God about all their circumstances. Here too they incorporated Jesus; they prayed in the name of Jesus, confident that, seated at the Father’s right hand, he had the ear of the Father. OT Israel prayed towards the temple which was a conduit to the open ear, eye and heart of God in heaven. We don’t pray towards a place; we pray towards the Lord Jesus Christ at the Father’s right hand. Being human he is able to sympathize with us in our weakness, in our present circumstances. God’s heart is open to him, and through him to us. In our difficult circumstances we can pray for God to be at work. We can pray for eyes to see the opportunities that God is creating. We can pray that we would be

able to overcome evil with good. We can pray for the grace to live in peace with each other and to be patient with all.

Give thanks in all circumstances. They gave thanks to God in all circumstances, which for the Thessalonian Christians included some pretty difficult circumstances: tribulation from hostile opponents, the martyrdom of their fellow Christians. A little earlier Paul and Silas themselves were praying and singing hymns to God in prison in Philippi (Acts 17:25). We are in some difficult circumstances. We give thanks *in* them but not necessarily *for* them. We can give thanks that even in these difficult circumstances God is at work, that he is creating opportunities for us to be of service.

Rejoice, pray, give thanks. The informal worship patterns of the early house churches were quickly shaped into a rich liturgy of praise, prayer and thanksgiving, a process well underway by the second century. Many elements of this early liturgy remain in liturgies of churches today.

Rejoice, pray, give thanks. This is a little more difficult for us today. We can’t gather in person to do this collectively. We miss the sound of us singing together. Even though we’re now allowed to gather outdoors in limited numbers, we can’t sing. But we have technology that previous generations did not have. We have easy access to a vast array of music: psalms, hymns and spiritual songs. We have wonderful musicians here at PBCC who have been recording songs for us during our shutdown. A big thanks to our musicians and technical crew. Listening to such music can focus us on God and lift our spirits.

Rejoice, pray, give thanks. This is God’s will for us in Christ Jesus. The Holy Spirit was also involved. As the Christians met they were to be filled with the Spirit. Paul’s next section concerns this.

### 4. Testing prophecy (5:19-22)

**Do not quench the Spirit. Do not treat prophecies with contempt but test them all; hold on to what is good, reject every kind of evil. (5:19-22)**

One of the spiritual gifts, given by God through his Spirit to the church body, was prophecy. Praise, prayer and thanksgiving are the church speaking to God. Prophecy was God speaking to the church. The Spirit revealed something to one with the gift of prophecy, who announced it to the assembly. It was then evaluated by those with the gift of evaluation. Here, Paul urges the church not to quench the work of the Spirit by being contemptuous of prophecy. Instead, evaluate the word of prophecy. If it is good, hold onto it. If it is not, then reject it. What were they to test it against? The standard of evaluation was the apostolic teaching which Paul had passed on to them, the tradition that he had received from the Lord and delivered to them, which they were to guard and deliver to the next generation. In time this apostolic teaching would be enshrined in the New Testament. Whether or not the gift of prophecy is still active today is a much debated question. If it is, then the standard for evaluation is the New Testament scriptures which encapsulate the apostolic witness and teaching.

After these final instructions concerning Body Life, concerning the life of the church in horizontal relationship to one another, and in vertical relationship to God in Christ through his Spirit, Paul now wraps up his letter.

## 5. Final Matters (5:23-28)

**May God himself, the God of peace, sanctify you through and through. May your whole spirit, soul and body be kept blameless at the coming of our Lord Jesus Christ. The one who calls you is faithful, and he will do it.**

**Brothers and sisters, pray for us. Greet all God's people with a holy kiss. I charge you before the Lord to have this letter read to all the brothers and sisters.**

**The grace of our Lord Jesus Christ be with you. (5:23-28)**

“Greet all God’s people with a holy kiss” (26). Most of Paul’s letters end with greetings. The Christians were a big family. There were interconnections between the various churches. These greetings connect the churches together. The greetings are part of Body Life. Several letters end with an exhortation to kiss one another with a holy kiss. This was the greeting between family members, especially between siblings. That’s what the Christians were: they were brothers and sisters together in one new family. To a non-Christian onlooker this would be very strange. They were used to the kiss between physical siblings; it was part of their culture. But in the church this might mean a master greeting his slave with a kiss, a Jew greeting a Gentile, a wealthy man greeting a poor man. It was a highly visible expression of the new family, of the “fellowship of differents.”

Paul solemnly charges “to have this letter read to all the brothers and sisters” (27). This letter, as all the letters to churches, was intended to be heard in a public reading to the gathered church. In English this short letter can be read aloud in just over 12 minutes. The first reader would have been Timothy. He almost certainly carried Paul’s letter to Thessalonica. Paul would have explained to him carefully everything that was in the letter and how to present it. The church would hear the physical voice of Timothy, but hear the written voice of Paul—this apostle who cared so deeply for them, who loved them so much, who described his love and care as

like that of a nursing mother for her infant and as a father for his children. It was as if Paul were present with them. I’m sure this letter was brought out and read again and again. Each time they heard Paul present with them. Over time the churches copied the letters they had received from Paul and exchanged them. These letters were then collected together to form our NT epistles. Here we are two thousand years later listening to Paul.

This letter conveyed Paul’s presence to the Thessalonians when he couldn’t be physically present with them. My series on this letter has been preached to a camera in an almost empty church auditorium. There’s only a small technical crew here, to whom I say a big “Thank you” for all your labor to make these livestream services possible over the past six months. You, our church family, are unable to be present with me here. Instead these sermons on 1 Thessalonians have been delivered to you by YouTube. We are physically separated but united in spirit, in our bonds of love, and in our common identity in Christ. Just as Paul wrote repeatedly to the Thessalonians, we are brothers and sisters together, even though we cannot be physically present with one another. I end this series the same way Paul ended his first letter to the Thessalonians: “The grace of our Lord Jesus Christ be with you” (28).

*May the Lord make your love increase and overflow for each other and for everyone else, just as ours does for you. May he strengthen your hearts so that you will be blameless and holy in the presence of our God and Father when our Lord Jesus comes with all his holy ones. (1 Thess 3:12-13)*

1. Scot McKnight, *A Fellowship of Differents: Showing the World God's Design for Life Together* (Grand Rapids: Zondervan, 2015).

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