

Bangalore Conference, 1 Thess Exposition

Study 6 – 1 Thess 5:12-28

Introduction

We are at the end of our studies in 1 Thess. We have listened as Paul has spoken about the church, his dear brothers in the Lord and how he commended them for their living faith. We have listened as Paul has spoken about his own ministry and how it is a challenging model for us. We have listened as he has spoken about the fellowship that exists in a church and how it is to God's glory and to our benefit that we foster that fellowship. We have listened as Paul has dealt with issues in the church, the way Christians are to live and interact with each other in love, the fears and anxieties that face us especially in issues of distress like death. We have listened as Paul has repeatedly brought his friends back to the certainty of that final day when Christ will return and how every part of our lives is to be changed by that truth.

As we come to the last part, it seems as if Paul has abbreviated his closing remarks. Maybe like we do, when time is short or we run out of space, we miss unimportant things out and concentrate on what is crucial. So Paul here fires off instructions like machine gun bullets. This is compressed teaching. It is like an OXO cube. Can't swallow it as it is, it needs to be mixed in, stewed over to get full benefit.

However, these are not random commands and there is some thought and order to them. Their focus is the believers in the setting of their local church. That has been the whole context of the letter, but is especially clear here. The church is the most blessed institution on earth. It is the only one built by the Lord Jesus Christ and the only one he has promised to bless. It is the only one he has said that he will continue to build and that the enemy will not overpower. It is precious because bought with the blood, the death of Christ.

Ac 20:28 *"Keep watch over yourselves and all the flock of which the Holy Spirit has made you overseers. Be shepherds of the church of God, which he bought with his own blood."*

So it is not difficult to see why Paul is concerned for the church. It always comes back to the church for Paul. Look how he refers to the church writing to Tim:

1 Ti 3:15 *"If I am delayed, you will know how people ought to conduct themselves in God's household, which is the church of the living God, the pillar and foundation of the truth."*

But that doesn't mean that the church is automatically perfect or that there aren't problems. So Paul writes to this church about their church life and how they are to behave and act in a way that will bring glory to God. I want to divide up what I am going to say into four sections, all questions about different aspects of our local church life.

How do you look after your leaders?

You can read in the book of Acts how Paul went about planting churches and what his plan was. He would preach the gospel, gather those who responded to the message in faith, teach them the basics and then appoint elders over them. There are several terms for church leaders in the NT. They highlight different aspects of the job of leading but they are all speaking about the same kind of person. There is the term elder (e.g. Titus 1:5, 1 Peter 5:1,5) which points to the maturity and wisdom of the man. Then there is overseer (Acts 20:28, 1 Tim 3:1) which describes the spiritual oversight and authority of the role. Then there is pastor (Eph 4:11, Mark 6:34) which has shepherd and flock image in mind. Finally the term leader (Heb 13:7, 17) which shows how the man must provide discernment and guidance for flock.

Although he doesn't use any of those terms here, these are the people who are "over you in the Lord" in the church. We won't look at it now, but Paul elsewhere in the NT has taught about the kind of men who should be elders in the church (1 Tim 3:1-7 and Titus 1:5-9, and cf. 1 Pet 5:1-4).

It was Paul's pattern to appoint such men and to instruct his fellow workers to do the same:

Tit 1:5 *"The reason I left you in Crete was that you might straighten out what was left unfinished and appoint elders in every town, as I directed you."*

God has a pattern for his church and while there might be some freedom on some things, anyone reading the NT carefully can see that it is God's pattern for the church to be ruled by elders after this pattern. How do you look after your leaders? Paul is appealing to brothers here, to the gathered church. He asks for respect and for them to be held in highest regard and that the members of the church live in peace. It is not the main point, but is clearly implied here that these leaders, these elders are men who work hard, who labour. Part of their work is admonishing which is a strong word and a negative one. The respect they are owed is not because they hold power or a position of importance. It is because they are over you "in the Lord". They watch over the spiritual welfare of the church and must give account to him:

Heb 13:17 *"Obey your leaders and submit to their authority. They keep watch over you as men who must give an account. Obey them so that their work will be a joy, not a burden, for that would be of no advantage to you."*

APP: How do you look after your leaders? If you are a leader yourself, you work hard, you love your people and you teach them the word of God to the best of your ability. You remember that you are about the Lord's work among HIS people and that he watches what you do.

Illust – in a normal job, you work hardest when your boss is looking over your shoulder. You work hard to gain his favour. But the Lord sees all you do, and you don't need to work hard to gain his favour, but because he has already shown his love to you. You work not to gain his love, but as a loving response to all he has done for you.

How does the church look after leaders? Respect for them, submission to them, high regard for them in love, living at peace to make their job easier. Leaders are often on a yo-yo of opinion, either respected or hated, admired or criticised. No leader is perfect, but then neither is any church. So we all need God's grace to put his word into practice.

What – respect leaders.

How – respond to their rule, listen to, submit to teaching, accept being admonished, love them.

Why – because they serve as under-shepherds, under the Lord Jesus Christ. If we reject them, we reject him.

How do you look after each other?

Now it is important that you remember that this next group of instructions is NOT given to the elders, the leaders of the church, but to all the brothers, all the Christians that this letter was to be read to. So already we have one answer to our second question - how do you look after each other? This is something the whole church is to be involved with IN SOME WAY. We all have different gifts and God has put us together that we might complement each other. But there will be some who cause problems in the church or some who are in difficulty. Who will help them? YOU WILL as members of God's church.

There are always popular people in any church, those that everyone gets on with, everyone likes. And then there are others! Someone called them "the problem children".

Illust – I visit a number of schools and if you sit in the staffroom, you hear teachers talk about the difficult children. They share stories about them, they hope they won't have to teach them for too long.

Paul picks out three problem children, the idle, the timid, the weak and he shows us how to look after them. Notice it is different in each case.

Illust – when you need medicine, you first of all need a diagnosis. There isn't a universal medicine that will cure all ills. So Paul tells us how to handle these problem children in an appropriate way.

Idle people are those who won't work. They are those who stand out from the rest of the church because of their lack of work. This must have been a problem in Thess, because Paul has already talked about this in 4:11. Maybe those who thought that Christ's return made all work futile. Paul also talks about this in 2 Thess 3:6ff at some length. These people relied on others generosity. Such people are to be warned. Warned of what? That what they are doing is clearly sinful and displeasing to God.

Timid people are those who lack courage as Christians. Perhaps they have doubts and fears. Maybe they worry about persecution and would rather play it safe and stay quiet. They don't need warning, but encouraging. They need to be given courage to stand, to speak, to trust. This was Paul's remedy in ch 4 and 5 with regards to the uncertainty about Christ's return.

Weak people are those who perhaps crumble when tempted and give way. Or they might be people whose faith is weak and who look on things as sin that are not at all. Paul speaks about such people in Rom 14. The weak are those whose consciences see something (e.g. eating "unclean" food) as sin. The strong realise that all food is clean. How do you look after weak people? You help them. You hold them up, you support them, you help them resist temptation, you help them to be stronger.

Aren't people frustrating? Is OK, you can be honest! We are all frustrating at times and how is it that these problem children don't learn right away? Well that's how sin is, it is monotonous and repeats itself. So we look after each other by being patient to all. Then there is one more issue that needs to be pointed out – revenge. So tempting when wronged to want to do the same to them. Augustine (4th cent Christian) is credited with the following:

"Good for good, evil for evil: that is natural. Evil for good: that is devilish. Good for evil: that is divine."

Paul's teaching here is same as in Rom 12 where the reason for not taking revenge is given – that it is God's place to judge and punish. The Christian is not to just passively accept suffering and persecution, but to actively show kindness instead.

APP: How do you look after each other? By recognising that this isn't the job of the professionals, the pastors alone. It is the responsibility of each member of Christ's church to care for one another (look through NT to see how often that phrase comes up). By dealing with people in the right way, maybe warning for some, maybe encouraging for others, maybe help and support for others and all the time remembering to be patient with everyone.

What – care for one another. How – careful handling, patient. Why – Because we recognise that we have been put together to share with each other. Because we admit that we may be these people at different times in need of help.

How do you look after yourself?

The attention now turns from leaders and how you relate to each other, to your own behaviour as a Christian. Here are commands like bullets, but each one vitally important for our spiritual health. These are not one-off commands but apply as long as we are here. They are open-ended. Joyful, prayerful, thankful. If you asked someone to describe you, I wonder what they would say? Would any of those three feature? They should!

Is it possible to be joyful always? Christian joy is not the same as feeling happy. Might sometimes feel miserable. But joyful always MUST be possible.

Illust – ever seen film of the Okavango delta in Southern Africa? It is part of the Kalahari desert but every year, this desert turns into a lush, life-filled swamp area that is hundreds of miles across. 11 cubic km of water make this possible. Where does this come from? It doesn't rain in the desert. This water comes from rainfall in the Angola highlands thousands of miles away.

What is the source of our joy? Like that water that fills the Okavango, the source of our joy is something higher and greater than our immediate situation. We might feel like we are in the desert, but our joy comes from the gospel of Christ, the good news that God in his sovereignty has saved us and forgiven us and washed us. Our life is now united to Christ's. Think of all the things that might spoil our joy, fear, worry, sin. None are greater than Jesus.

Php 4:4-5 *"Rejoice in the Lord always. I will say it again: Rejoice! Let your gentleness be evident to all. The Lord is near."*

What about praying continually? Can't mean hands together and eyes closed. It does mean to be walking with God, to be in that atmosphere of intimacy with God all the time.

Giving thanks in ALL circumstances? What about when you are persecuted for being a Christian? What about those times when tragedy strikes your family, maybe the death of a loved one? What about times of illness or times of trial? Can you give thanks at THOSE times? Only if you have something of God's view of the world. If you believe his word that he is ruling all things, all the time, that he has a purpose in even the sin and trouble in life, then YES you can. We know we are safe in his hands and that he will always do what is right. It then becomes a response of faith to thank God for everything that he gives.

This is God's will for you, this is how God wants you to live if you are a Christian. How do you look after yourself? By listening to God's commands for your life and putting into practice.

But there's more here. Not only are you to be joyful, prayerful, thankful but also spiritual. The Holy Spirit is a person, the third person of the godhead. He can be grieved (by our sin), he can be resisted, and he can be quenched. Spiritual means to listen to God's Spirit. These few verses have a careful balance. The Holy Spirit is likened in the bible to light and fire. We must be careful not to put out light, douse fire. Does this have something to do with charismatic gifts? Not sure we need to be that narrow. What about the things Paul has just mentioned? Turning your back on those commands is to quench the work of the Spirit in Christ's church. Fruit of the Spirit is clear from Gal 5:22ff. Putting out his fire is to work against that fruit.

There is balance here. You are to test everything. Prophecies in this context was God's word to church. Before scripture was written, church relied on prophetic word. We could apply this to teaching and preaching the truth of God's word in the church.

Illust – Babies swallow anything and immature Christians are like babies. But just as we shouldn't swallow everything, we mustn't reject everything. Both extremes are hazardous. Instead, you use God-given discernment. Hold on to good, avoid evil.

APP: How do you look after yourself? By being what God wants you to be. You have been saved but God's purposes didn't stop there. For your own good and for the sake of his church, he wants you to be joyful, prayerful, thankful and spiritual. He wants you to be teachable and honourable.

A church with no problems is a church with no people! We will never be perfect this side of heaven, but here we have the medicine for so many of the problems in our churches. It begins with your inner spiritual life, your walk with God. Here in 7 short verses is strong medicine that you need to take YOURSELF. Here is a foundation for Christian living that will bring glory to our Saviour, and bring benefit to his church.

Where do you get the strength to do this?

Last point, I want to look briefly at Paul's closing prayer and his final remarks. This prayer is like the prayer at the end of ch 3. It is Paul's wish for this church but not just a wish, it is also a prayer to God. If you had to put v23-24 in your own words, I wonder what you would say? May God sanctify you, make you blameless and ready for Christ's return. You can trust him.

Paul began his teaching on issues in the church with mention of sanctification (4:3) and it is not surprising that he rounds off this section with a prayer that they should be sanctified. What does this mean? There is a sanctification that takes place when God saves someone and makes them altogether new. They are "set apart" for God. But it also refers to a process that takes place throughout the life of the Christian. They grow and mature in their faith and become more holy. This is what Paul is praying for here. That they would be holy, through and through. That every part of their being (spirit, soul, body) might be kept blameless.

This transformation is not something you can do alone. You are commanded to be holy, there is a human dimension. But it is never your work alone. It is only by God's Spirit working in your life that you can make any progress at all.

Php 2:13 *"for it is God who works in you to will and to act according to his good purpose."*

V24 says the same thing, that this is God's work and we can trust him to do as he has promised.

APP: Final question – where do you get the strength to look after your leaders, to look after each other, to look after yourself as God wants you to? Only by growing in him, only by God himself working in your life to make you more holy.

Paul's final words reveal again the importance of prayer, the importance of fellowship and the importance of heeding God's word. And over all of these things, grace is needed. Praise God it is the grace of our Lord Jesus Christ that he has shown to us supremely in saving us from all our sin. It is that grace that he will give us daily, to help us to live as he wants us to, to be prepared and ready for his return.

Look after your leaders, look after each other, look after yourselves and do all of this in God's strength, looking to his Holy Spirit to sanctify you, and being ready all the time for the return of our saviour, the Lord Jesus Christ, for his glory, Amen.