

Sunday 11th December 2022. Inspired by Hope - A community of wholeness

1 Thessalonians 5:12-28 Final Instructions

¹² 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. ¹³ Hold them in the highest regard in love because of their work. Live in peace with each other. ¹⁴ And we urge you, brothers and sisters, warn those who are idle and disruptive, encourage the disheartened, help the weak, be patient with everyone. ¹⁵ Make sure that nobody pays back wrong for wrong, but always strive to do what is good for each other and for everyone else.

¹⁶ Rejoice always, ¹⁷ pray continually, ¹⁸ give thanks in all circumstances; for this is God's will for you in Christ Jesus.

¹⁹ Do not quench the Spirit. ²⁰ Do not treat prophecies with contempt ²¹ but test them all; hold on to what is good, ²² reject every kind of evil.

²³ 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. ²⁴ The one who calls you is faithful, and he will do it.

²⁵ Brothers and sisters, pray for us. ²⁶ Greet all God's people with a holy kiss. ²⁷ I charge you before the Lord to have this letter read to all the brothers and sisters.

²⁸ The grace of our Lord Jesus Christ be with you.

Today is the last in our sermon series *Inspired by Hope* looking at Paul's letter to the Thessalonians. Where have the last 2 months gone! It only seems like yesterday I was introducing the series and this letter which was written by Paul and his companions Timothy and Silas to encourage and affirm the church in Thessalonica. The church had been doing so well, growing in faith, hope and love and Paul wanted to bless them and encourage them to keep going, despite growing opposition and the temptations that can so easily knock believers off course.

In earlier chapters Paul spent a lot of time in the letter reminding the church to keep an eternal perspective – keeping in mind that the Lord will return one day to call us home to be with him. I was surprised to note how many people came up to me after I preached on the Second coming and said how rare it was to hear anyone preach on the subject! But I think that is because we prefer everything in neat boxes and struggle to pin down some of the more mysterious aspects of time and eternity.

But in this last section Paul does return to focussing on life in the here and now. He starts off: *But now, brothers and sisters we ask you...*

Followers of Jesus always keep one eye fixed on eternity but their feet planted firmly in the present. It is just another balance we need to maintain in our discipleship. Jesus talked and prophesied about the future on many occasions, but with the result that we need to keep a check on our attitudes and way of life in the present. What we do does indeed echo in eternity but our attitudes and our way of life do make a difference right now too both for good or for ill. Sometimes it comes as rather a surprise to realise just how much the little things we do and say shape and mould the whole culture around us. We have a little quote

on our wall by Mother Teresa which says 'Small things done with great love will change the world.' At this time of year, watching 'It's a wonderful life' is a helpful reminder that little things all add up!

In our passage today it feels like Paul has just a few sentences to draw his letter to a close and say all he wants to say to the Thessalonian church before the post goes. It feels like he writes a bit of a bullet point list of top tips. But there are three distinct sections I want to focus on these for a few minutes this morning because I think they are important for us at All Saints as 2022 concludes and we head towards the New Year ahead.

Paul encourages the church to focus on three areas:

- A Culture of Honour
- A Culture of Prayer and Positivity
- A Culture of Holiness

So what do I mean by a culture of honour? Well verses 12-15 pretty much sums it up:

¹² 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. ¹³ Hold them in the highest regard in love because of their work. Live in peace with each other. ¹⁴ And we urge you, brothers and sisters, warn those who are idle and disruptive, encourage the disheartened, help the weak, be patient with everyone. ¹⁵ Make sure that nobody pays back wrong for wrong, but always strive to do what is good for each other and for everyone else.

In other words, honour your leaders, honour each other and be patient with those who are struggling.

As a church leader I find verse 12 hilarious. Where Paul says to 'acknowledge those who work hard among you' it can be literally translated 'be mindful of those who grow weary with effort toiling among you...'. It makes it sound like Church leadership can be tiring!

But the next bit is even more fascinating – how do we honour those who lead us? Paul says it is by living in peace with each other. Verse 13 says 'Hold them in the highest regard in love because of their work. Live in peace with each other.' You see the connection there? If you want to bless me and the other leaders here at All Saints, love each other.

A church with a culture of honour is a pleasure to lead. The best legacy a church leader can leave is not slick systems and mega projects but simply a people who love one another and get that living in peace with each other is sometimes costly.

Paul writes in Romans 12 'Be devoted to one another in love. Honour one another above yourselves.'

Danny Silk, the author of an excellent book on this subject called 'a culture of honour' wrote this: 'In order to begin training yourself to respond in love, the first thing you need to accept is this truth: You cannot control other people. The only person you can control – on a good day – is yourself.'

So here are some more pointers for developing a culture of honour:

- 1) Remember we are all on the same team.
We may have different approaches and priorities, but God may have given someone a different perspective from you simply to sharpen you up. They may well be right! Even if we feel passionately about something a culture of honour avoids implying that you have a direct hotline to God. Perhaps rephrase it 'I wonder if God might be saying...' or sometimes just keep quiet and pray trusting that if it is God's will it will happen!
- 2) Refuse to assassinate character.
Behaviour can be called out. But it is up to God to change character so just pray for those who approach life differently from you.
- 3) People over task.
If a project, task or ministry starts to leave corpses of hurt people in its wake it may well have turned into an idol. There are no bad people in the Kingdom, just misplaced people. It just may need patience while the pieces of the puzzle are rearranged.
- 4) Be ready to apologise even if sometimes it isn't your fault. Jesus was crucified for everything that wasn't his fault so we need to be ready to suck it up on occasion too. John Bevere wrote a brilliant book describing how easy it is to take offense in church life that can mutate into a destructive schism. He calls it 'The bait of Satan'. A culture of honour refuses to be baited by offense. As far as it depends on you to remain at peace with everyone.
- 5) Finally another one from Danny Silk: 'In a culture of honour, we courageously treat people according to the names God gives them and not according to the aliases they receive from people.'

As I am saying these things of course I am preaching to myself. So if you ever find me treating anyone dishonourably, please let me know. I might need some course correction!

Ok so the next area of exhortation that Paul focusses on is developing a culture of Prayer and Positivity:

¹⁶ Rejoice always, ¹⁷ pray continually, ¹⁸ give thanks in all circumstances; for this is God's will for you in Christ Jesus.

¹⁹ Do not quench the Spirit. ²⁰ Do not treat prophecies with contempt ²¹ but test them all; hold on to what is good, ²² reject every kind of evil.

Christians should be the most thankful people on the planet! What a challenge Paul lays down for us. Give thanks in *all circumstances* for this is Gods will for you. Woah that is not very British. We have perfected the art of cynical moaning. When we say how are you today? 'Mustn't grumble...'

I asked someone the other morning whether they wanted a cup of tea and they replied: 'no thanks... makes the alcohol taste funny'!

It isn't easy to stay positive and authentic so sometimes the only way we can rejoice in all circumstances is to do what Paul suggests- to pray continually. So what does that mean? It

means being mindful that God is with you and for you at all times. Jesus said 'surely I am with you to the very end of the age'. If God is for us then who can be against us?

If we sense that God is distant then we may have to remind ourselves that Jesus dealt with all our sin when he died on the cross for us. If we ask the Holy Spirit and our conscience is clear then we need to choose to re-clothe ourselves with Christ. Put him on like a warm cloak to shut out the cold air and get rid of the insecurity, shame and fear of punishment that come from the enemy.

Then Paul says do not quench the Spirit - σβέννυμι [spay-no-mee] in other words don't pour cold water on heartfelt prayers and do not treat prophecies with contempt. A culture of prayer welcomes people to share God's heart. As long as words are encouraging and uplifting, then do please share them. Just remember no dates, mates or debates. No dates about the second coming or other apocalyptic events, no mates eg. 'God has told me you are going to marry me' (especially as you are hot...) and no debates: 'God's Angel told me that Hebrews was written by Paul' etc (I've actually heard a preacher say that). But prophecy is welcome here – it just needs to be weighed and tested by those receiving it. As I was taught through the Vineyard movement's teaching: *Eat the fish and spit out the bones.*

Finally Paul exhorts the Thessalonians to develop a culture of holiness.

²³ 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. ²⁴ The one who calls you is faithful, and he will do it.

As soon as you pray a prayer to the Lord Jesus inviting him to be Lord of your life you are saved for eternity. But the journey of sanctification and living a life of holiness has only just begun. Sometimes we drift or wander off course but holiness is also synonymous with a sense of inner peace which is what we all really need for our own well being.

Instead of our Spirit, Soul and Body being at war with each other over conflicting desires, emotions and cravings, the sanctified person is a whole person. Holiness is wholeness. And Paul reassures us that holiness is not just our bag: 'The one who calls you is faithful and he will do it'.

The life of a disciple is a continual opening up of ourselves for the Holy Spirit to work on. There is an expert cleaner in the house, we just need to unlock the doors. Repentance means turning but it is also about being transformed. It is both active and passive. Doing and receiving.

So in conclusion to this letter and this series, let's develop a culture of honour, a culture of prayer and positivity and a culture of holiness. That way All Saints will become a community of wholeness, holding out the hope of the gospel of Jesus with authenticity and love. In other words this place could be a little bit of heaven here in Weston. Let's ask the Holy Spirit to help us.