

1 Thessalonians 5:12-28 – “Marks of a Church Ready for Christ’s Return”

As we enter into a new year, everybody focuses on change. What they would like to change for themselves. We call them New Years Resolutions. Mine this year is for my body to make less sound when I stand up. This is how most resolutions end up [show image]. Why do we even bother?

But we keep coming back to them because we all like to see improvements and change for the better. We want to do better, and we want to be better. But I believe the greatest motivator for better living is living with the expectation of Jesus’ return. And this isn’t about trying to be better to curry better favour with the Lord, this motivation centers around the fact that Jesus has brought us into favour with God through faith in Jesus’ finished work. Because of that, we get to live life for Him and in Him. Since we do, there should be some clear signs of this new life.

As we finish up 1 Thessalonians today, we’re going to see the marks of a Church that is living ready for Christ’s return and how it shapes believers to live a fruitful life for today.

Summary Statement:

Paul concludes this letter by giving some good instructions to the church centering around their behaviour toward one another and toward God. Living in light of Christ’s Return should indeed affect how we live today.

Outline:

1. A Ready Church Honors its Leaders – 5:12-13
2. A Ready Church Helps its People – 5:14-15
3. A Ready Church Cultivates a Godly Life – 5:16-22
4. A Ready Church Trusts God’s Faithfulness – 5:23-28

1. A Ready Church Honors its Leaders – 5:12-13

5:12-13 - *And we urge you, brethren, to recognize those who labor among you, and are over you in the Lord and admonish you, ¹³ and to esteem them very highly in love for their work’s sake. Be at peace among yourselves.*

Paul addresses the brethren with a request. Before we get into this request (urge), it’s important to see that Paul is speaking to the **brethren**, which is the believer, the church. This was a familiar term for Paul, he uses it 99 times in his letters (7x in this chapter alone). It’s important because it speaks of relationship – family. And the church is to be family. In a family you have brothers and/or

sisters, and in a family, there is that bond that runs very deep. You can't just walk away and say I'm not gonna be your friend anymore. You're stuck with family. You've got the same blood – that's a link that runs deep.

- So too as Christians, we have the blood of Christ bonding us together – we're family! That is a wonderful way to think of one another. And like any family there are responsibilities and roles. God given roles.
- Within the home God has called the husband/father to be the head of the home (1 Cor 11:3; Eph 5:23). He is to lead lovingly and graciously, not dictatorially.

So too within the church, God has called pastors and elders to lead the church. And Paul calls the brethren to **recognize** those who labor among you. This isn't just recognize who they are so you can know who to bring all your complaints to, it's to have understanding that God has called them to a specific role in the church. And you are not to ignore this but have right understanding of this.

Now let's look at the specific role they are to have, because Paul gives a two-fold responsibility of the church leader.

1. They are to be fellow-servants (**labor among you**).
2. They are to lead you and instruct you (**are over you in the Lord and admonish you**).

Now sadly we've seen this abused throughout church history on both sides. We've seen pastors take on too much authority, but we've also seen churches and congregants take away all the authority of the pastor or leader. Neither of these approaches are biblical.

God has appointed pastors and elders to lead the church. And they are to do so not with an air of superiority or dictatorship. They are called to serve; they're to labor among you. The word pastor in Ephesians 4:11 is the Greek word *poimen*, which is translated elsewhere as shepherd. That's what we're called to do, to be out in the field leading the flock. It's not glamourous work, it's messy work. We're stepping in sheep stuff and laboring among you. Driving away wolves, mending wounds.

And as church leaders, the Lord has put us over you to lead and teach. We're to **admonish you**, which is about instruction. And that instruction is simply from the word of God. It's not a pastor giving you some nice sounding feel good, realize

your full potential, type sermon that's focused on you. It's to be instruction from the Word of God. And notice, being **over you** is not something the pastor should ever feel is a position of superiority. It's simply the order God has given. The key is **in the Lord**. Just as God has a divine order for the husband and wife.

The church leader must recognize who is over him, and that is the Lord! And he must give an account one day for how he has handled his calling. That's huge!

- **Hebrews 13:17**, "*Obey those who rule over you, and be submissive, for they watch out for your souls, as those who must give account. Let them do so with joy and not with grief, for that would be unprofitable for you.*"
- **1 Timothy 5:17**, "*Let the elders who rule well be counted worthy of double honor, especially those who labor in the word and doctrine.*"

So church leaders are not to act above you, yet they are to be over you. That's a real fine line to walk.

- We've seen a rise of apostles and prophets among evangelical churches. These are often people who claim to hold special authority where they are above the church. This should not be. It's a rebranding of the shepherding movement that took place in the 70's where you couldn't do anything without getting approval from your pastor. This is wrong.

So this is not about ruling with some sort of dictatorial attitude. It's recognizing that God has placed people in specific positions to care for the church, to lead its congregants in the Word and to carry out the Lord's work.

This is seen in verse 13, "**... esteem them very highly in love for their work's sake. Be at peace among yourselves.**"

The church is to esteem those who are called to lead. You're to consider them highly in love, not because they're so wonderful, not because they're so much better, but simply because of the work they are doing. You may not even like your pastor, but you're to honor them as those who are doing the Lord's work.

Some people feel it's their personal mission to challenge the pastor or church leader and to question everything they do. And then get upset if they're not being listened to. But notice what Paul says, **be at peace among yourselves**. There's nothing wrong with voicing your opinions or concerns, but share it and give it to the Lord. Let Him lead. God doesn't need you to derail the pastor, He's got His ways. Trust the Lord and you'll be at peace, and you'll keep the church in peace.

2.A Ready Church Helps its People – 5:14-15

5:14 - Now we exhort you, brethren, warn those who are unruly, comfort the fainthearted, uphold the weak, be patient with all.

Now Paul shifts his focus to the responsibility that those in the church do have. It's not just the pastor who's to do all the work of ministry.

There're three groups of people here who are being referenced, and with it, instruction is given how the church is to minister to them.

1. The unruly.
2. The fainthearted.
3. The weak.

The **unruly** are those who are insubordinate; who didn't want to come under the leading of those God has called to lead. The word unruly speaks of being out of rank. These are those who try and pull rank over the church leaders. The brethren are to warn them. Warn them that they're not obeying what God has said.

- This word has also been used to speak of those who were lazy. It could be that Paul had in mind those that were so focused on the Lord's coming that they stopped being active in serving the Lord. Perhaps they thought, what's the point of being engaged in the church, Jesus is due anytime now.
- It's easy to think that but may the hope of the Lord's return never cause us to take our foot off the pedal in ministry and service, but rather propel us all the more to be active for Him in these remaining days we have.

The **fainthearted** was speaking of those who were ready to give up. They are perhaps new believers, and they are very timid. Troubles come and they don't understand why. They have not yet understood that the Lord is there to help them through each difficulty. So we're told to comfort them. We're not to scold them – we're to have compassion on them and comfort them. We're to speak tenderly to them to and build up their courage and resolve.

The **weak** is speaking of those who are spiritually weak, or have a weak conscience. They get tripped up over issues they think are sinful when they're not. Paul talks about them in Rom 14:1-3. They're weak because they don't clearly see the freedom and liberty they have in the Lord.

So we're to uphold them. Don't throw them aside thinking they should know better. Rather help and encourage them.

- This word for uphold (Gk-*antēchō*) is translated elsewhere as loyal. We're to be loyal to the weak because they're family – our brothers and sisters.

When we look out for one another and seek to help one another, guess what happens? We forge bonds of fellowship and connection that are not easily broken.

Now this fourth responsibility summarizes the prior three: ***be patient with all***. It's easy to get frustrated with people who don't act like us or do things the way we would. And our tendency can be to shelter ourselves from people who are different than us. And if we do, we begin to alienate much of the body of Christ – our family. We're all different, and the Lord has designed it that way. The world would be pretty boring if everyone was just like you. And so, we're all exhorted to be patient. It's a fruit of the Spirit. And I believe the Lord keeps putting us in situations where we need to practice and develop patience; where we can learn to walk in the Spirit.

- I realized when I got married, I needed to grow in patience. Not because my wife was difficult, but because she's not like me. When I thought I was mastering patience, the Lord gave me kids – 4 of them. And just when I began to think I had patience dialed in, He gave me grandkids – 4 of them.
- We must continue to grow in patience, because you will always need it when you're a part of family and relationships.
- I love how this word is translated in **1 Corinthians 13:4**, "*Love suffers long...*" We must continue to bear with one another in love.
- But remember, this is what God has shown us: **2 Peter 3:9**, "*The Lord is not slack concerning His promise, as some count slackness, but is longsuffering toward us, not willing that any should perish but that all should come to repentance.*"

5:15 - *See that no one renders evil for evil to anyone, but always pursue what is good both for yourselves and for all.*

You don't need to hurt those who may hurt you. As Christians we should not be living with a 'get even' mentality but a 'forgiveness' mentality. The church is full of flawed people, and guess what, you're one of them! I'm one of them! Because of

that, you can expect some difficulties, but don't seek to get even. Do what is good.

- **Proverbs 25:21–22**, "*If your enemy is hungry, give him bread to eat; And if he is thirsty, give him water to drink; ²² For so you will heap coals of fire on his head, And the Lord will reward you.*"
- Now you might be thinking, I'm going to do good to everyone, especially those who hurt me, then it will be like fire on their head. And you see this as actually getting back at them with your niceness. Like it's going to wreck them. But this is not what's happening here. When a person's fire went out in their home, they would seek to get coals from neighbours to rekindle their fire. When you do something good for even your enemy, you're supplying what they need in a beneficial way. You're being a blessing.

3. A Ready Church Cultivates a Godly Life – 5:16-22

5:16-17 - *Rejoice always, ¹⁷ pray without ceasing,*

Verse 16 is the shortest verse in the Greek in the Bible. But what an important truth is conveyed for us in this. **Rejoice always!** The Christian life should not be one of dreary toil. It's the exciting and exhilarating life because we get to live it for Jesus and in Jesus. That's the key.

- For the Christian, our joy is never dependent on our circumstances, it's linked to Jesus. And Jesus is never changing.
- "... *The joy of the Lord is your strength*" (Nehemiah 8:10)!

Living a life of joy is so beneficial for us.

They say being able to laugh has so many health benefits to it. You've heard it said that laughter is the best medicine, well there's some real truth to that:

- Laughter increases health-enhancing hormones and reduces stress hormone levels.
- Laughter boosts the immune system. T-cells are activated when laughing which immediately begin to help fight off sickness.
- Laughter is a natural exercise. Laughing 100x has the same effect of being on a rowing machine for 10 minutes or a stationary bike for 15 minutes. Cancel your gym membership and you'll laugh even more and get the exercise for free!
- Laughing at yourself lowers your blood pressure. Learn to laugh at your own mistakes and you'll be doing yourself a favour.

- The lesson is clear, even when you don't want to, laugh at my jokes and you'll be healthier as a result.

The average child laughs 400 times a day, and the average adult laughs 15 times a day. It seems as we get older we laugh less. Yet I believe that the more we mature in Christ, the more our joy will increase.

- Jesus said in **John 15:11**, “*These things I have spoken to you, that My joy may remain in you, and that your joy may be full.*”

May you learn to rejoice always and see your joy be made full.

Next, we're to **pray without ceasing**. You might wonder how you're ever supposed to do that? But this isn't about speaking non-stop prayers in a posture of stillness. This is about having an attitude of prayer where you're simply living with a constant awareness of the Lord and enjoying open communication with Him.

5:18 - *in everything give thanks; for this is the will of God in Christ Jesus for you.*

Notice it doesn't say to give thanks **for** everything. There are some things I'm not thankful for. When I get a speeding ticket or when I lick my ice cream too hard and it falls out of the cone to the ground. Not cool. I'm not giving thanks for these things, but I can always give thanks in these things. There's a lot to be thankful for when you're focused on the Lord. This has more to do with our perspective toward life than it does about our attitude toward our circumstances.

Believers should be thankful people. This is the will of God for you. Why would this be labeled as a specific will of God? Because thankful people are content people. And “*godliness with contentment is great gain*” (**1 Timothy 6:6**).

This should be a mark of the believer because thanklessness is a mark of the unbeliever, especially in latter days:

- **2 Timothy 3:1–5**, “*But know this, that in the last days perilous times will come:*² *For men will be lovers of themselves, lovers of money, boastful, proud, blasphemers, disobedient to parents, unthankful, unholiness,*³ *unloving, unforgiving, slanderers, without self-control, brutal, despisers of good,*⁴ *traitors, headstrong, haughty, lovers of pleasure rather than*

lovers of God,⁵ having a form of godliness but denying its power. And from such people turn away!"

- **Romans 1:21**, "because, although they knew God, they did not glorify Him as God, nor were thankful, but became futile in their thoughts, and their foolish hearts were darkened."

5:19-20 - *Do not quench the Spirit. ²⁰ Do not despise prophecies.*

Do not try to extinguish the Holy Spirit's work in your life. We do so whenever we carry out actions contrary to God.

"The fire of the Spirit is suppressed when He is rejected, when His convicting power, righteousness, and judgment (John 16:8–11) are ignored. We douse the Spirit's influence in our life through doubt, we drench Him with anger, we drown His power with immorality. The Holy Spirit Himself cannot be put out. He is God. We can, however, stifle His work in our life."¹

We're to be people of the Spirit, walking in the Spirit and being controlled by the Spirit. **Galatians 5:25**, "*If we live in the Spirit, let us also walk in the Spirit.*"

In other words, let us be led and governed by the Spirit.

In a similar way, ***do not despise prophecies.*** This may speak of the gift of prophecy, but most often it's used to speak of the revelation of God through the Holy Scriptures. Many today are dismissing the Word of God as authoritative and inerrant. It's not the standard by which people are holding their life up to. They're finding ways to despise it, finding loopholes as to why it's not to be obeyed today. But we're to adhere to the Word of God and live it out.

"We need a good balance of the work of the Spirit (gifts) and the Word of God. There's an old adage: 'A church with the Word of God but not the Spirit will dry up. A church with the Spirit but not the Word will blow up. But a church with the Spirit working through the Word will grow up.'" – Sandy Adams

5:21-22 - *Test all things; hold fast what is good. ²² Abstain from every form of evil.*

Now if there is someone coming to you saying, *I have a word from the Lord for you*, don't despise it, but please do test it. How so? By the word of God. Don't just take someone's word because they say it's from God. Usually that's going to

¹ Larson, K. (2000). *I & II Thessalonians, I & II Timothy, Titus, Philemon* (Vol. 9, p. 75). Broadman & Holman Publishers.

be something the Lord has already been speaking into your heart and it will be a confirmation of that.

But it must always line up with the Word of God. It will never contradict it.

And when you're holding fast to what is good, it's going to contribute to abstaining from evil.

This can be rendered, avoid every appearance of evil.

Are we involved in things that may be innocent to us but have an appearance of evil to others? It's better to abstain from it. It goes back to verse 15: pursue what is good both for yourselves and for all.

Now Paul has given us a bunch of rapid fire bullet points of things to put into practise. And it may seem like a daunting task where you wonder if you can ever live up to this. But notice what Paul reminds us of as he closes his letter...

4. A Ready Church Trusts God's Faithfulness – 5:23-28

5:23 - *Now may the God of peace Himself sanctify you completely; and may your whole spirit, soul, and body be preserved blameless at the coming of our Lord Jesus Christ.*

He's the God of peace. We're not to live a life frantically trying to do better. We're to live for God and enjoy peace with Him. He's the one sanctifying you. He sets you apart to Himself and pulls you up to a more fruitful and blessed life in Him.

And ultimately He's going to keep you and preserve you as blameless when He returns. This is not something we can do – it's fully of the Lord.

The next verse makes that clear.

5:24 - *He who calls you is faithful, who also will do it.*

Looking at the previous verse you may wonder, how in the world am I going to be blameless? There's no way! But God is not relying on you to sanctify yourself or make yourself blameless. Paul reveals the key, God, who is faithful, ***will do it!*** Those are great words, aren't they? There are times I'll try and step in to help with something at home, and my wife will say, don't worry, I'll do it. Those are sweet words.

- Now it could be that she just doesn't trust me to do a good job, but either way, I'm good.

- Jesus stepped in and did the work we couldn't do. And He will see it through to our completion in Him.
- **Philippians 1:6**, "*being confident of this very thing, that He who has begun a good work in you will complete it until the day of Jesus Christ;*"

5:25-28 - Brethren, pray for us. ²⁶ Greet all the brethren with a holy kiss. ²⁷ I charge you by the Lord that this epistle be read to all the holy brethren. ²⁸ The grace of our Lord Jesus Christ be with you. Amen.

Paul was a man that prayed much, but he also coveted prayer and wanted everything he did to be covered in prayer. He never outgrew this need.

A kiss on the cheek was a customary way to greet one another in this day, and still is in some cultures today.

Paul then charged them to have this letter read. The Word of God should truly be a central priority in our gatherings, I'm glad it is here.

Our lives in Christ begin with His grace, and it never changes. We must continue in His grace. May His grace be with you this coming year and supply all that you need as you live in Him and for Him.

Points to Ponder:

1. How am I responding to the people God has placed in my life?
2. What is shaping my daily attitude – circumstances or Christ?
3. Am I trying to maintain in my own strength, or am I resting in God's faithfulness?
4. In what ways do I need more grace in my life this year?