

Christian Living
1 Thessalonians 5:12—18

Paul closes out this book to the Thessalonians with some practical encouragement, admonition and instruction. These directives are related to those who were leaders, to each other and individually. These instructions are about edifying one another and ties in with Paul telling them to comfort one another with the knowledge that they will not be going through the wrath of God in the Tribulation.

Spiritual leaders

Paul first focuses on the spiritual leaders in Thessalonica. These people were laboring with the believers, not lording over the believers. Verse 11 generally puts all believers as a single group from which each member should edify the other. One is not above or below the other. Verse 12 then shifts the attention specifically to the leaders within their church. These are people who have been given special responsibility over those in the church to care for, encourage and admonish each person so they would grow in the faith. Those serving in this capacity are doing so in accordance to 1 Corinthians 16:15—16. They were to put themselves under the subjection of those acting as spiritual leaders, all for the glory of the Lord. As long as spiritual leaders adhere to Pauline doctrine we are to be obedient to them. This is why Paul makes sure to say in verse 16 that this applied only to those who were helping Paul and those with him. Hebrews 13:17 is also appropriate for today. We are to obey our leaders and submit to them. Again, we cannot blindly obey our leader if they are not making Pauline doctrine preminent.

The best way to show submission to these godly leaders is to take what is being taught, go home and study what had been taught then put that teaching into action. Too many people listen to some trusted teacher then take what is said as if it were God's Word. The next step must always turn to Scripture to verify that what is taught conforms to the Word of God. The highest form of praise for any pastor or teacher is to see people putting what is being taught into practical use.

When church leaders are faithfully preaching and teaching the Mystery doctrine and those they have been put over esteem them highly in love by obeying their teaching, the result is peace. The problem comes when doctrine is put aside, either by the leaders or the members of a church, causing antagonisms to arise and thus peace being swept away. If all are in agreement and well grounded in the Mystery doctrine then peace should characterize the church.

Fellow believers

Paul has much to say about getting along with other believers. I believe this is because people's personal wants and desires get in the way of obediently following the Lord. We are to live in peace with one another. 2 Corinthians 13:11 connects being like-minded with living in peace. Being like-minded does not mean we need to agree with everyone about everything in the Body. We did see that happening in early Acts when believing Israel were acting all in one accord (Acts 5:12). This is not a verse the Body of Christ should or can obey because it was the Holy Spirit who came upon them and controlled them supernaturally to able to be in full agreement, even to the point of selling all they had and giving it to the Apostles for distribution (Acts 4:35). In this Age of Grace, we should be in agreement (like-minded) on doctrine. There is nothing wrong in disagreeing with another believer about an issue but the arguments need to be supported with proper doctrine. Paul does realize it's not always possible to live in peace with another believer and thus in Romans 12:18 says that as much as it is up to you, live in peace with all men. He realizes that you may do everything possible to keep peace but the other person may do all they can to bring contention. This should not stop you from being a peacemaker.

Along with keeping the peace is an order to give a warning to those who are acting in an unruly manner or stepping out of line. They don't want to follow biblical advice or heed the rebuke of those who are over them but instead want to stir up trouble. We are also to comfort those who are fainthearted (not feeble-minded). These are people who are overtaken by fear. I'm sure there were a number of new believers who were afraid of what their unbelieving family members or friends would do to them because they turned from their idols. Today we are to comfort those who have fears with the comfort of God's Word (Romans 15:4; 2 Corinthians 1:3—4).

Paul then says to support the weak. These are not physically weak, but are those who are weaker spiritually and perhaps emotionally. We are to treat them with love and patience helping them to grow in Christ so they can stand strong on their own.

Rejoice, pray, give thanks

Can you imagine if all believers followed the three instructions to live a life rejoicing, praying and giving thanks? These are three things often missing in a believer causing a stunted spiritual life. When we rejoice in all situations (Philippians 4:4) we are looking beyond our problems unto God. All life's troubles should fade when we truly put our trust in Him. Rejoicing is possible because of our relationship with Jesus Christ. We can rejoice in the hope of the glory of God (Romans 5:2; Philippians 2:16), rejoice when others are rejoicing (Romans 12:15; 1 Corinthians 12:26), rejoice in suffering for Christ (Colossians 1:24) and rejoice in our position in Christ (Philippians 3:1—3; 4:10).

Happiness is often confused with rejoicing. Happiness is dependant upon external events. When good things happen to us we can be happy. When bad things happen we can be sad. Regardless of whether we are happy or sad we can still rejoice in the Lord because our relationship with Him does not change. We can only rejoice when in the Lord.

Prayer shows we are reliant upon God. When we pray, we acknowledge that we are weak and He is the only solution to our concerns. Prayer is complementary to study. When we study God's Word we are allowing God to speak to us, and when we pray we are speaking to God. Some people think it is more important to spend time talking to God but Paul says we need to do both. Studying Scripture changes our hearts to conform to what God wants. Interestingly, prayer does the same thing. We don't pray to change God's mind but as a means to conform us to His will. The only promise given to us concerning prayer is that we will have peace. When we take our worries, fears and concerns and place them on God, there is nothing left for us to worry about (Philippians 4:6). Our focus is changed from this earth to heaven, from temporal to eternal, from myself to God.

Having an attitude of thanksgiving is very important to God. Just like rejoicing, we are to always give thanks (Ephesians 5:20). We should be able to do this because of our unchangeable position in Christ. Thanksgiving, like rejoicing, comes out of looking beyond these earthly problems onto our final destination. When we see the bigger picture it's possible to transcend the day-to-day tribulations and revel in every spiritual blessing we have (Ephesians 1, 2). It's only possible to do this by studying and meditating on Scripture. When we study, we find out who we are in Christ and when we meditate, we fill our minds with things of the Lord. We will be so filled and overwhelmed with Him that there will be no room for thoughts that bring us down.

Paul closes these three admonishments stating that this is God's will for the believer. We can absolutely know what God's will for the believer's life is because he has told us in His Word (see Romans 12:1—2; Colossians 1:9—10; Ephesians 1:9).

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