

An Encouraging Church 1 Thessalonians 5:12-28

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For the past several weeks, we've explored the book of 1 Thessalonians.

As I said in the beginning of this series, since every church is made up of sinners, saved by God's grace, there's no such thing as a perfect church.

But I do think some churches are closer than others. The church at Thessalonica was in that category.

Throughout his first letter to the Thessalonians, Paul praises the church for their faithful work, their loving deeds, and their commitment to Christ.

Now, as Paul brings this letter to a close, he offers some final thoughts that describe a few more marks of a mighty church.

1 Thessalonians 5:12-22, "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. 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. Rejoice always, pray continually, give thanks in all circumstances; for this is God's will for you in Christ Jesus. 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."

Paul packs quite a bit into this final paragraph. It almost wears you out just hopping from verb to verb—no less than 17 in just 10 verses.

In fact, this pint-sized passage is packed with at least 12 different commands or instructions—each one representing another mark of a mighty church.

Rather than hitting the highlights or grouping them into broader categories, I'd like to touch briefly on all twelve of these instructions; each of them codified in a single word.

The first set is Respect/Reprimand/Reassure/Relieve.

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In verses 12-13, Paul reminds the Thessalonians 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.”*

Then, in verse 14, he tells them to reprimand those who're not living right. 1 Thessalonians 5:14a, *“And we urge you, brothers and sisters, warn those who are idle and disruptive.”*

Where this verse says, *“warn those who are idle,”* the NASB translates it this way: *“admonish the unruly.”*

The word *“disruptive”* can also have a variety of meanings including idle, lazy, irresponsible, etc.

Whatever meaning Paul had in mind, it's clear that he wanted the Christians in Thessalonica to correct each other whenever one of them wasn't living right.

Sometimes Christians need a swift kick because we lose focus, our priorities get out of whack, we make bad decisions, or just act like jerks.

At those times, we need our brothers and sisters in Christ to lovingly reprimand us. To tell us who we're supposed to be and how we're supposed to live.

Then Paul tells them to *“encourage the disheartened.”*

Jackie Robinson was the first black person to play major league baseball. Breaking baseball's color barrier, he faced jeering crowds in every stadium.

Players would stomp on his feet and kick him. While playing one day in his home stadium in Brooklyn, he made an error.

The fans began to ridicule him. He stood at second base, humiliated, while the fans jeered. Then, the shortstop, Pee Wee Reese, came over and stood next to him.

He put his arm around Jackie and faced the crowd. The fans grew quiet. Robinson later said that arm around his shoulder saved his career.

We all get discouraged and disheartened at times. We need someone to stand beside us and put an arm around our shoulder. That's why God gave us the church.

As Paul continues in verse 14, he tells them to relieve one another's burdens by helping the weak. In fact, several times, throughout the New Testament, believers are told to help the weak.

This can mean physically, spiritually, financially, etc. Jesus's mission on earth was to save souls, but in the process, He helped those in need.

He fed the hungry and healed the sick; He listened, and He cared. Following in His footsteps, we need to relieve each other's burdens and help one another, especially those who can't help themselves.

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Paul ends verse 14 by telling them to chill out: "*be patient with everyone.*" Church families—like natural families—have their share of conflicts.

The Greek word used here for patience is a descriptive one. It figuratively means "*taking a long time to boil.*"

Think about a pot of boiling water. The water boils quickly when the flame's high and slows when the flame's reduced.

Patience keeps the burner low, but patience isn't naïve. It doesn't ignore misbehavior; it just keeps the flame low. It waits. It listens.

So, the next time someone tries your patience, just relax and keep the burner low. Which leads into Paul's next instruction, don't repay evil for evil.

1 Thessalonians 5:15, "*Make sure that nobody pays back wrong for wrong, but always strive to do what is good for each other and for everyone else.*"

The desire to "get even" seems to be a part of the human psyche. It's like the story of the mother who heard her seven-year-old son screaming.

She runs into the next room to see what's wrong and discovers her one-year-old daughter is pulling her brother's hair.

The mother gets the baby's hand unclenched and says, *"I'm sorry, honey. Your sister doesn't know what it feels like to have her hair pulled."*

The mother goes back into the kitchen when she hears the daughter screaming. She runs back into the room and says, *"What happened?"* The boy answered, *"She knows what it feels like now."*

As Christians we can't succumb to the desire to get even. The problem with an eye for an eye is that everybody ends up blind.

That's why we ought to repay evil with good. We need to be kind even when others aren't kind to us.

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Which is why Paul's next instruction in 1 Thessalonians 5:16 is so important. He tells them to, *"Rejoice always."* Not just on good days, but they were to Rejoice all the time!

God wants us to be happy! Joy is meant to be a hallmark of the Christian life. It's a fruit of the Holy Spirit and a gift of God.

All too often though, we let our circumstances dictate our happiness. Statistically, the average adult laughs about 15 times a day, while the average four-year-old laughs about 400 times a day.

You know what that tells me? That tells me that when God made us, He made us happy.

The hearts of little children are filled with joy, but as we get older, we let the worries and concerns of life choke the joy out of us.

When bills pile up, or when the kids act crazy, or when the car breaks down it's difficult to feel joyful. If we're going to "*rejoice always*," as Paul says, then we need to look beyond our circumstances.

True joy comes from an ever-growing awareness of God's presence and experiencing His love and grace, even in the midst of our struggles and stress.

But if we're going to be able to do this, we have to habitually reconnect with God.

That's why Paul follows his command to rejoice always with the stipulation in 1 Thessalonians 5:17-18, "*Pray continually, give thanks in all circumstances; for this is God's will for you in Christ Jesus.*"

Paul is instructing us to never stop praying. For example: A little boy was kneeling by his bed with his mother to say his bedtime prayers.

About halfway through, he began to shout to the top of his lungs, "*Dear God, I've been real good this year so please let me get a new bicycle for my birthday.*"

His mom said, "*Son, God's not deaf; you don't need to yell.*" He said, "*God's not deaf, but Grandma is and she's in the next room.*" Now, there's a little boy who knew how to get his prayers heard!

Mature Christians know, however, that prayer is about more than just getting things from God.

If that's all prayer's about, Paul would've said, "*Pray whenever you need something*," rather than "*Pray continually.*"

Prayer is—at its heart—about deepening our relationship with the God Who made us. That's why Paul says to "*give thanks in all circumstances.*"

When our most passionate prayer isn't for things, or a favor, but God Himself, that's when we know we've crossed a threshold. That's the kind of prayer God wants to answer.

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Which brings us to Paul's next instruction. 1 Thessalonians 5:19, "*Do not quench the Spirit.*"

There's a God-shaped hole in our lives and when we pray, God fills that inner vacuum with His Holy Spirit. Unfortunately, we're sometimes guilty of quenching or repressing the Holy Spirit's influence in our lives.

When we're filled with the Holy Spirit, He helps us to understand spiritual truths.

He empowers us with special gifts, talents, and abilities, and He produces the fruit of the Spirit—love, joy, peace, patience, kindness, goodness, etc.—in our lives.

But when we ignore what the Holy Spirit is trying to teach us, or fail to use the gifts He's given us, or squash the fruit He produces, then we repress the Holy Spirit and prevent Him from doing what God wants done in our lives.

So rather than repress God's Spirit, let's release His Spirit. Let's be sensitive to the Spirit's prompting and soften our hearts so the Spirit is free to work within us.

Then Paul offers a warning in verse 20 against ridiculing God's Word, "*Do not scoff at prophecies.*" Believers in Paul's day didn't have Bibles like we do.

Much of the New Testament hadn't been written, and it wouldn't be collected into a single volume, like we have today, for another 300 years.

Instead, they had prophets through whom God spoke. They revealed His Word in bits rather than books.

By telling the Thessalonians not to ridicule the prophecies, he's reminding them to take God's Word seriously!

God speaks to us personally through His Word. If we'll listen to what He's saying and take it to heart, it'll transform our lives.

Going right along with this thought, Paul tells them in verse 21 to review what they hear or *“test everything that is said. Hold on to what is good.”*

In other words, be discerning. Don't accept something as true just because the person who said it stands behind a pulpit or has their face on the cover of a book.

Check their teachings against the Bible. If what they say doesn't line up with Scripture, toss it out. But if it does, then hold on to it.

Lastly, Paul cautions the Thessalonians in verse 22 to *“reject every kind of evil.”*

The word translated *“reject”* here means *“shrink from or keep aloof from.”* In other words, we shouldn't be hanging around evil influences.

Several decades ago, around the turn of the century, musicians noticed that all the errand boys in a certain part of London all whistled out of tune as they rode around on their bicycles making their deliveries.

After a while, they discovered that the reason for their poor pitch was that the bells of Westminster were out of tune. The errand boys had unconsciously copied their pitch.

In the same way, we tend to copy the people with whom we associate. Our worldview is constantly being shaped by the books we read, the music to which we listen, and the TV shows we watch, often without us even noticing it.

If we want to keep joyfully walking with the Lord, then we need to be careful about the company we keep and influences we allow into our lives.

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Conclusion

Paul's words of advice and encouragement to the church in Thessalonica comprise the marks of a mighty church.

He didn't write 1 Thessalonians to stir up a debate. His desire was that this letter bless lives and churches.

No church today is identical to the church in Thessalonica, each is different. However, Paul emphasized some outstanding behaviors which all churches should imitate it.

Every church should be an example to others. Every church should have evangelistic zeal in reaching the lost and be energetic in service.

Churches come to have these vital characteristics only as the members of the church have them. The character of a church is a reflection of the behavior of its members.

Like the church in Thessalonica, Grace Fellowship may never be a perfect church—at least not on this side of eternity.

But I think our church, like theirs, is more than capable of being a mighty church when we practice and employ all the marks of a mighty church that we've discovered here 1 Thessalonians.

I want to encourage you, if you've never been born again into God's family, you can do that today.

On the other hand, maybe you're already a born-again believer and you've visited Grace Fellowship to test the waters, so to speak. Then I want to invite you to become a part of our church family.

We're looking for mighty members that will help us continue to be a mighty church.