

# Clarity and Comfort

*But we do not want you to be uninformed, brothers, about those who are asleep, that you may not grieve as others do who have no hope. (1 Thessalonians 4:13 ESV)*

*So then, brothers, stand firm and hold to the traditions that you were taught by us, either by our spoken word or by our letter. (2 Thessalonians 2:15 ESV)*

## **Final Instructions**

**October 18<sup>th</sup>, 2020**

**1 Thessalonians 5:12-28**

**Rev. Levi denBok**

## **Introduction:**

Good morning! Please turn with me in your Bibles to 1 Thessalonians 5.

This morning, we're going to be talking about the church, and I think it might be worth stopping to define what I mean by "church" before we go any further.

For example: Is it still "church" when I'm sitting at home in my jammies watching the service on my computer with my family?

Is it "church" when I walk down the grocery aisle with my brother in Christ and we discuss spiritual things?

What about the Bible study in my basement? That **MUST** be church, right?

We have heard time and time again that church is not a building. And amen to that. That's true, of course. The church is **NOT** the building.

But the church **IS** the gathering. The Greek word for church literally means *the gathering*<sup>1</sup>!

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<sup>1</sup> Ekklesia

And it's not just ANY gathering. The church is the gathering where God's prescribed church officers are present to provide spiritual leadership. The church is a gathering where accountability exists and where discipline is upheld. This is why we believe it is only in the context of the gathering that we observe the ordinances of baptism and the Lord's Table. The New Hampshire Confession of Faith defines a local church as follows:

A visible church of Christ is a congregation of baptized believers, associated by covenant in the faith and fellowship of the Gospel; observing the ordinances of Christ; governed by His laws; and exercising the gifts, rights, and privileges invested in them by His word; that its only scriptural officers are Bishops or Pastors, and Deacons, whose qualifications, claims, and duties are defined in the Epistles to Timothy and Titus.<sup>2</sup>

Perhaps you wondered why we cut the live feed before communion last Sunday. It wasn't because we were afraid to expose our safety protocols to the world wide web. No, we cut the feed because we didn't want to imply that people at home should participate along with us in the partaking of communion. We believe that communion is inherently COMMUNAL. It's not a private meal. It's a meal for the gathering. When you consider the warning in 1 Corinthians 11, you begin to understand why the Lord's Supper is enjoyed in a context where accountability can be maintained.

There are some of our people who are still stuck at home because of health concerns. We have made accommodations so that they could continue to learn with us even while they're apart, but make no mistake about it, they are NOT at church this morning. They wish they could be! Lord permitting, they will be again someday soon. But the church is the gathering.

Perhaps that felt like a strange introduction. Perhaps it was. But as I was preparing the sermon this week, I was reminded that our culture is so RADICALLY individualistic that it is going to be a real challenge for us to rightly hear and apply today's text. We need a reorientation. We are suspicious of the church and its leaders, and we are allergic to community and commitment, but that is a problem that is unique to our cultural moment. For example, the ancient church father Cyprian of Carthage is supposed to have said:

No one can have God for his father, who has not the church for his mother<sup>3</sup>

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<sup>2</sup> As cited in Mark Dever, *The Church: The Gospel Made Visible* (Nashville, TN: B&H Academic, 2012), xx.

<sup>3</sup> Cyprian of Carthage as quoted by Mark Dever, *The Church: The Gospel Made Visible* (Nashville, TN: B&H Publishing Group, 2012), x.

The final instructions we will unpack today are vital for the health of the church. We NEED to hear and apply these. However, they ONLY MAKE SENSE in the context of a COMMITTED, STRUCTURED, GATHERING of the people of God. A Christian who has no accountability to a local church – a Christian who comes and goes as she pleases and switches congregations with the seasons – will have no context in which to apply these commands. These are not general instructions on Christian living – they are instructions on how to live TOGETHER in the community of God’s gathered people.

Look with me to 1 Thessalonians 5:12-28. Hear now God’s holy, inspired, inerrant, living and active word to us today:

We ask you, brothers, to respect those who labor among you and are over you in the Lord and admonish you, <sup>13</sup> and to esteem them very highly in love because of their work. Be at peace among yourselves. <sup>14</sup> And we urge you, brothers, admonish the idle, encourage the fainthearted, help the weak, be patient with them all. <sup>15</sup> See that no one repays anyone evil for evil, but always seek to do good to one another and to everyone. <sup>16</sup> Rejoice always, <sup>17</sup> pray without ceasing, <sup>18</sup> give thanks in all circumstances; for this is the will of God in Christ Jesus for you. <sup>19</sup> Do not quench the Spirit. <sup>20</sup> Do not despise prophecies, <sup>21</sup> but test everything; hold fast what is good. <sup>22</sup> Abstain from every form of evil.

<sup>23</sup> Now may the God of peace himself sanctify you completely, and may your whole spirit and soul and body be kept blameless at the coming of our Lord Jesus Christ. <sup>24</sup> He who calls you is faithful; he will surely do it.

<sup>25</sup> Brothers, pray for us.

<sup>26</sup> Greet all the brothers with a holy kiss.

<sup>27</sup> I put you under oath before the Lord to have this letter read to all the brothers.

<sup>28</sup> The grace of our Lord Jesus Christ be with you. (1 Thessalonians 5:12-28 ESV)

This is the word of the Lord. Thanks be to God.

Can I briefly pull back the curtain and let you in on one of the secrets to sermon preparation? One of the things you look for as a preacher is the imperative in a text. An imperative is a command. In the Greek, these commands are easy to spot because they are spelled with a unique ending. In

typical sermon preparation, the job is to find those two or three commands. Then, you typically wordsmith those commands and turn them into the sermon points. Well, in today's passage, there are 17 imperatives<sup>4</sup>! So, STRAP IN for a 17-point sermon!

In all seriousness, Paul had a lot to say to this church before concluding his letter but I think we can summarize Paul's instructions. Before we do, let's make sure we understand the PURPOSE of these instruction. Why does Paul care whether or not we obey these commands? He lays out the desired outcome in verse 23. There, he writes:

Now may the God of peace himself sanctify you completely, and may your whole spirit and soul and body **be kept blameless at the coming of our Lord Jesus Christ.** (1 Thessalonians 5:23 ESV)

These verses provide us with instructions on how to live in such a way that we will be found blameless when Christ returns. That's what our text is all about. When Christ returns, we don't want to be embarrassed about the state he finds us in. We want him to catch us doing the things that a healthy church ought to be doing. So, what should we do if we want to be found blameless on that day? Lean in, take notes, and heed these final instructions.

## Final Instructions

First, Paul commands the church to:

### 1. Honour your spiritual leaders

We find that in verses 12-13:

We ask you, brothers, to **respect those** who labor among you and are over you in the Lord and admonish you,<sup>13</sup> and to **esteem them very highly in love** because of their work. Be at peace among yourselves. (1 Thessalonians 5:12-13 ESV)

Hear that: Respect, high esteem and love are the attitudes that a church ought to have toward its spiritual leaders. The spiritual leaders of a church are its overseers/presbyters/elders/pastors. All

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<sup>4</sup> And 2 infinitives that function as imperatives!

four of those titles describe the same office. We typically use the terms “elder” and “pastor” but they describe the same office.

We see some of the responsibilities of this office outlined in our text. Paul tells us that these are the men who “labour among you,” who are “over you in the Lord,” and who “admonish you.” Let’s unpack those responsibilities for a moment.

The elders of a church are called to work hard among the people. That’s an important note: Leadership in the church is not supposed to be easy. If you’ve been striving to become an elder because you want a chance to put your feet up for a while, you will be disappointed. Jesus has set the standard for Christian leadership. He is the bar that every Christian leader must strive towards. Jesus, who stooped down to wash his disciples’ feet; Jesus, who died for his rebellious people so that they could live; Jesus, who pointed to the power-hungry, position-seeking leadership style of the world and said to his disciples:

It shall not be so among you. But whoever would be great among you must be your servant (Matthew 20:26 ESV)

Church leaders are called to work hard, because they will give an account for the way that they represented Christ as under-shepherds in his flock. They also work hard because they are “over the church in the Lord.” Elders hold spiritual authority in the church and with that authority comes responsibility. And with that responsibility comes accountability. This is one of the reasons why, in 1 Timothy, Paul warns that a man who can’t lead his own family is disqualified from becoming an elder. Church leaders are going to stand before the judgement seat, and they are going to give an account for every person that is under their charge. If you don’t understand that to be a terrifying prospect, then you’re not ready to be an elder.

And because church leaders will ultimately give an account for the people they lead, they are called to admonish the church. Now, it’s interesting that Paul chose the word “admonish” rather than “teach” or “instruct”. Admonishing IS teaching, but it carries more of a corrective force. Listen: Paul is commanding the church to love and respect their elders EVEN WHEN they use their authority to speak words of CORRECTION. Have you ever had a spiritual leader pull you aside and tell you a truth that you didn’t want to hear? That was hard for you, wasn’t it? Well, let

me let you in on a secret: It was hard for him too! I haven't yet met the elder that rolls out of bed saying: "I hope I get to walk right into the middle of a marital crisis today!" or "I hope I can spend my evening trying to persuade a brother to stop teaching heresy in his small group."

Now, to be clear, those responsibilities are great PRIVILEGES and great HONOURS, and I think I can speak on behalf of the rest of our elders in saying that there is nothing else in the world that we would rather do than work and fight and strive for the purity of God's church here in Orillia.

But here, Paul is reminding us that the responsibility these men shoulder is a weighty one. It is a costly assignment. And they deserve your honour. And you should give them that honour not begrudgingly but with an attitude of love. The church that is NOT ready for the return of the Lord is the church that is constantly backbiting – constantly bucking against and questioning its leaders.

Ephesians 4 teaches us that spiritual leaders are God's GIFT to the church. They are one of the ordinary means by which He is going to bring us, blameless, to the finish line. So honour your spiritual leaders.

Next, Paul commands the church to:

## **2. Stir one another up to love and good deeds**

Lest you come away from point one saying: "Wow! I'm glad I don't have to speak into any of those messy situations!" Paul goes on to say:

And we urge you, brothers, admonish the idle, encourage the fainthearted, help the weak, be patient with them all. (1 Thessalonians 5:14 ESV)

Bible scholars generally agree that "brothers" here, is not referring to the elders specifically but to the congregation in general. This is a command for the whole assembly.

Many have noticed a concerning trend in North American Christianity. We've become "church tourists". We attend the church down the road and then we write a GOOGLE REVIEW: "The parking lot was well salted, and the smell of fresh coffee greeted me as I walked through the

doors. The music was above average. 8/10. They sang a few too many hymns for my liking, but you can't please everyone. The sermon was so-so. 6/10. A little too long, and he used the New King James Version (I prefer the NIV myself!). All in all, I think this church is better than the one I've been attending for the last year-and-a-half. I'm making the switch!"

John Piper wrote a great book for Pastors called "Brothers, we are not Professionals" to confront and challenge the CEO mentality that was creeping into the church. I wish someone would right a follow up for congregants entitled "Brothers and Sisters, we are not Consumers".

Paul says: Stop writing that Google review and look around at the people sitting next to you! You're not called to be a critic! You're called to be a minister of the Gospel and there is work to be done! Admonish the idle, encourage the fainthearted, help the weak, and show patience to all of them.

Let's get practical: Imagine that you notice that one of your Christian brothers or sisters is struggling. Perhaps they normally sit in the row in front of you, but you haven't seen them for months. Or maybe you overhear the way that one of the men in the church talks to his wife and you feel like he might need some correction.

What do you do in that moment?

Here's what the sinful part of us is tempted to do. We sit back and say to ourselves: "Wow! Our elders are dropping the ball on this one. Somebody ought to warn that brother or his marriage is going to implode."

You're right. Somebody should. And, Paul tells us here in the text, that that somebody is YOU.

Accountability and discipleship are not simply the responsibilities of the leadership. You are not a consumer. You are an integral part of God's plan to redeem and transform this city.

That's why we stress so often that you need to find a local church that you can call home and then you need to lock in. How are you going to be able to spot struggling people if you're not willing to

take the time to get to know them? How are they going to trust you enough to let you into the messy areas of their life if you're not committed to sticking around?

If you see someone who is struggling, please do let the elders know, but before you take that step, why don't you go to that brother? Why don't you muster up your courage and have that hard talk?

As one commentator summarizes:

Therefore, although congregational leaders in Thessalonica no doubt played a key role in the practice of pastoral care, such ministry to others is the responsibility of all the church's members.<sup>5</sup>

Do you believe that? The church that is ready for the return of the Lord will not be sitting back in their pews eating popcorn and enjoying the product that their church produces for them. That church will have her sleeves rolled up and every member will be loving and caring for the flock.

Third, Paul instructs the church to:

### **3. Learn to let it go**

He goes on to write in verse 15:

See that no one repays anyone evil for evil, but always seek to do good to one another and to everyone. (1 Thessalonians 5:15 ESV)

This command is not simply with regard to how the local church relates with one another. Paul calls upon the church to do good to one another *and to everyone*.

Contextually, we need to remember here that Thessalonica was becoming a difficult place for Christians to live. Paul had already been chased out of town by an angry mob and it is not a far stretch to imagine that those same opponents weren't particularly enamored with the church that remained. This was likely a church that suffered mistreatment on a weekly basis.

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<sup>5</sup> Jeffrey A.D. Weima, *1-2 Thessalonians*, Baker Exegetical Commentary on the New Testament, (Grand Rapids, MI: Baker Academic, 2014), 391.



We haven't faced much of that in our culture, but whenever we do catch a whiff of it – whenever someone writes a nasty article about the local churches in the paper or misinformation is shared on social media – do you find that your claws come out a little bit? I confess that mine do.

Injustice makes us angry! Being mistreated naturally leads to a desire for retaliation.

But we are not the retaliation people. We're the Spirit-filled, Jesus people so we do things differently. In fact, Paul commands us to respond in exactly the OPPOSITE way of our natural impulse. I like the way that one commentator summarizes it when he writes:

The proper Christian response to harmful treatment from others, regardless of its source or its nature, is not merely that of patience and non-retaliation but additionally **the aggressive pursuit of what is best for the offending person or party.**<sup>6</sup>

THAT is the Jesus way. That is exactly what he taught us in the sermon on the mount:

You have heard that it was said, 'You shall love your neighbor and hate your enemy.'<sup>44</sup> But I say to you, **Love your enemies and pray for those who persecute you** (Matthew 5:43-44 ESV)

A Christian understands that justice, vindication and the final word belong to the Lord. Therefore, as an expression of faith and as an outpouring of love, we don't hold grudges. We don't take matters into our own hands. We don't demand an eye for an eye. We bless those who persecute us, and we earnestly pursue their good. Don't let your sin bring division into the family of God. Don't let your unforgiveness tarnish our witness in this city. Learn to let it go.

Next, Paul commands the church to:

#### **4. Overflow with prayer and gratitude**

We find this in verse 16-18:

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<sup>6</sup> Jeffrey A.D. Weima, *1-2 Thessalonians*, Baker Exegetical Commentary on the New Testament, (Grand Rapids, MI: Baker Academic, 2014), 398.

Rejoice always,<sup>17</sup> pray without ceasing,<sup>18</sup> give thanks in all circumstances; for this is the will of God in Christ Jesus for you. (1 Thessalonians 5:16-18 ESV)

Isn't it interesting that these commands come directly after Paul's instructions about how to respond to those who mistreat us? Commentator G.K. Beale notes:

Paul attaches *always*, *continually* and *in all circumstances* to the three precepts in 5:16-18 in order to highlight that his readers are not only to rejoice, pray and give thanks for the "good things" but also for the "bad things" that confront this church.<sup>7</sup>

Now, I've chosen to deal with these three commands – rejoice, pray and give thanks – together because I believe they are closely related. What Paul is after in these commands is a CONTINUAL AWARENESS of God's power and presence.

The church that is mindful of God's presence will rejoice, even in the worst of conditions. She will resist the urge to grumble when things don't go her way because she knows that things ALWAYS go God's way. He directs our path, even when that path leads us through the valley of the shadow of death. We can rejoice, even in the valley, because He charts our course with perfect precision, and He knows exactly what we need.

The church that is mindful of God's presence prays incessantly because they know that they have absolutely no power in and of themselves to do anything of eternal value. We cannot transform hearts. We cannot force people (or ourselves for that matter) to grow in holiness. We cannot stand against the schemes of the enemy. We can't even draw breath into our lungs apart from the grace and provision of God! Therefore, the church that is mindful of God's presence prays, and prays without ceasing! At Charles Spurgeon's church, there was a team of people who prayed in a back room while he preached each week. He lovingly referred to that room as the boiler room and attributed all of the powerful results of his preaching ministry – humanly speaking – to the prayer that took place in that room.

The church that is mindful of God's presence gives thanks in all circumstances. Christian, you will ALWAYS have more reasons to give thanks than you will to complain. We literally have

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<sup>7</sup> G.K. Beale, *1-2 Thessalonians*, The IVP New Testament Commentary Series, (Downers Grove, IL: IVP Academic, 2003), 170.

MILLIONS of reasons to be thankful. And, most of all, we give thanks because no matter our circumstances we are loved by God because we have been redeemed through the death of His Son Jesus Christ. If that's all you have – forgiveness for your sins and a relationship with God through Jesus Christ – if that is the ONLY good thing in your life – it is still reason enough to be overwhelmingly thankful for the rest of your days. Amen?

Church, when Christ returns, I know we won't be perfect, but I am resolved in my spirit that, whatever our flaws might be, we won't be the grumbling, prayerless, ungrateful church. Let's make it our aim to OVERFLOW with prayer and gratitude. Amen?

Next, Paul instructs the church to:

## **5. Be sensitive to the Spirit**

We find this in verses 19-22:

Do not quench the Spirit. <sup>20</sup> Do not despise prophecies, <sup>21</sup> but test everything; hold fast what is good. <sup>22</sup> Abstain from every form of evil. (1 Thessalonians 5:19-22 ESV)

Before we go any further, we need to take a moment to define what we mean when we use the term prophecy. We are NOT talking here about the Old Testament prophets, nor are we talking about the Prophetic words of the Apostles that bore unquestioned authority and were written down for our instruction. We are talking about small “p” prophecy. To prophecy is to speak a word that one believes has been given from the Lord to God's people for His glory and for their upbuilding.

These words of prophecy should be held loosely, because they may be wrong. No one in this church can say: “Thus saith the Lord” unless they are reading from His Word. However, a person might say: “I really feel like God might be saying this...” Do you see how it's held with an open hand? In 1 Corinthians 14, Paul describes how the church should then weigh what has been said. Is it in alignment with Scripture? Does it build up the church? Is it coming from a person whose walk with the Lord is above reproach? If the answer to all of those questions is “yes”, then receive the encouragement.

If this seems completely foreign, you should know that I will often speak a word of prophecy in my preaching. As I am speaking from my prepared notes, I get the sense that God would have me say something different than what I prepared. I might even say something like, “I really feel God pressing it upon my heart that...” Now, I don’t expect you to write that down and start a new book of the Bible. I expect you to weigh it against the Scriptures, consider it carefully, take hold of it if it’s good and disregard it if it’s not.

Used appropriately, this gift has blessed and upbuilt the church throughout her history. Used poorly, it has caused many problems.

As we read 1 and 2 Thessalonians, it looks as if there were probably some folks in the church sharing some unhelpful “prophetic” words. For example, we’re going to read in 2 Thessalonians about some men in the church who refused to work, and the general opinion of commentators is that someone had “prophesied” in the church that Christ was going to return soon! These men believed the prophecy even though God’s Word tells us that we don’t know the day or the hour, and they quit their jobs. Eventually they ran out of money, so they started living off of the generosity of other people in the congregation. That got old fast.

When people claim to have a word from God, it can get messy quickly.

Part of the reason why Paul wrote 1 and 2 Thessalonians was to bring clarity into the confusing mess that had been made in the church. It’s interesting though that Paul doesn’t say: “No more prophetic words! Keep those thoughts to yourself! You’re making a mess of everything!” He actually says the opposite! He cleans up the mess but then he warns the church: “Now, do not quench the Spirit. Do not despise prophecies.”

Don’t do it. Don’t let the misuse of a thing scare you away from receiving its benefits. GOD gave the gift of prophecy to the church. If we didn’t need it, He wouldn’t have given it to us. But He did. So, we must. Don’t despise prophecies.

But Paul goes on to say, don’t be naïve either. Test EVERYTHING! Keep your Bible open as your pastor preaches and make sure that the word he shares is reflective of the only Word that will

never return void. If someone from the congregation comes to you claiming to have a message from God, lean in, listen closely, but be discerning. One commentator summarizes:

Paul did not wish the church to become so cynical that they treated with contempt those who came with a word of prophecy. Neither was the church to be so gullible that they accepted whatever a so-called prophet said without carefully weighing it and determining that it was indeed a true word of God.<sup>8</sup>

God has distributed these spiritual gifts in and amongst the church to equip us and to build us up. Would you be ready for the return of the Lord? Be wise. Be discerning. And be sensitive to the Spirit.

Finally, Paul closes this section and this letter with one final command.

## 6. Remember where your help comes from

Look with me at verses 23-24:

<sup>23</sup> Now may the God of peace **himself sanctify you completely**, and may your whole spirit and soul and body be kept blameless at the coming of our Lord Jesus Christ. <sup>24</sup> He who calls you is faithful; **he will surely do it.**

I want to make sure that you see what you are meant to see this morning. Even in a text with 17 commands, this is a message of grace! After giving these instructions to the church, Paul concludes by reminding them that GOD is the only one who can enable them to obey. And God WILL give them the strength to obey! Saint Augustine famously prayed:

Give me the grace to do as you command, and command me to do what you will<sup>9</sup>

My friend and mentor Tim Kerr often uses this helpful analogy:

A father sends his son to the store and he tells him to pick up some bread, some milk and some cheese. He gives him directions to the store, he explains where the items will be located in the

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<sup>8</sup> D. Martin as quoted by Jeffrey A.D. Weima, *1-2 Thessalonians*, Baker Exegetical Commentary on the New Testament, (Grand Rapids, MI: Baker Academic, 2014), 404.

<sup>9</sup> St. Augustine of Hippo as quoted by G.K. Beale, *1-2 Thessalonians*, The IVP New Testament Commentary Series, (Downers Grove, IL: IVP Academic, 2003), 176.

aisles and he walks him through what the cashier is going to say to him at the checkout. Then the father slides twenty dollars into his son's pocket. The boy then walks to the store, but he's nervous. He eventually finds the store right where his dad told him it would be, and he locates the items in the aisles right where his dad said they would be, and the cashier says to him all of the things that his dad told him she would say. But then, panic overcomes him: He considers the bill in his pocket and wonders, "Is it enough? Will she accept this? Can I really afford all of this?" With trembling hands, he slides the bill across the counter. She examines it, puts it into her till and gives the boy back a handful of change. It was enough! It was more than enough! Everything he needed his father had provided! Why did he ever doubt?

Sometimes, as we walk through texts like the one before us today, it can feel like a grocery list. You might even come away from a text like this saying, "How could I possibly do all of this? I don't have what it takes."

But, your Father has already given you everything you need. He won't ask you to do anything that He hasn't given you the grace and strength to accomplish. Paul reminds us here that the God of peace WILL SANCTIFY US COMPLETELY. HE will make us holy. He has promised to do that. He has already slid the bill into our pocket. We simply need to step forward in obedience and trust that he has given us all that we need. I love the way that one commentator puts this. He writes:

It is profoundly satisfying to the believer that in the last resort what matters is not his feeble hold on God, but God's strong grip on him.<sup>10</sup>

If you don't see that – if you don't BELIEVE that and REST in that and WORK OUT OF THAT – then you haven't yet understood the Gospel. Look again at verse 24:

He who calls you is faithful; **he will surely do it.** (1 Thessalonians 5:24 ESV)

YOU will respond in obedience. YOU will follow His instructions and lean into the community of faith. YOU will press forward in obedience and persevere through trials. But, at the end of the day, every step forward – every success – came from HIM. In faith, you were simply spending the

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<sup>10</sup> Morris as quoted by Jeffrey A.D. Weima, *1-2 Thessalonians*, Baker Exegetical Commentary on the New Testament, (Grand Rapids, MI: Baker Academic, 2014), 424.

money that He slipped into your pocket. And He's given you enough. He's given you MORE than enough! Has He called you, Christian?

He who calls you is faithful; he will surely do it. This is a promise. And this is the word of the Lord. Thanks be to God. Let's pray together.