

Jesus Be With You
1 Thessalonians 5:12-28
3/17/19
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Good morning. We are continuing our series called An Advent People. And to be an advent people, we do what we just heard. We wait for the Lord. That is what we do in this tension, this time of space. We wait for the Lord.

If you're visiting with us at this time, we do allow children to be gathered together, ages 4 through 1st grade, for an age appropriate Bible lesson and a way to practice worshiping God together with them but also as a way of helping them grow in understanding of how we come together as the corporate church to worship Him when they are of age.

Please turn in your Bible to 1 Thessalonians 5. We are continuing the series An Advent People, but we are concluding our look at 1 Thessalonians today. Next week, Randy Lovelace will begin looking at various passages in 2 Thessalonians continuing a treatment of, what does it look like to wait? It's perfect, it's beautiful, it's very fitting and right for us to be meditating on those themes even as we prepare for Easter, the grand celebration of Christ's church as we look to Jesus in His resurrection.

As we look at this passage, 5:12-28, we sometimes breeze over the end of a letter, don't we? Maybe we know what it's getting at, we get the gist. Maybe they're shorter sentences, so it's okay, we can grab a hold of that and move on. Maybe we're just tired. We spend a lot of time thinking and pondering what Paul's actually saying now that we're at the end, and it's like, thanks Paul. And we move on. But sometimes we move on through these verses because we actually understand the implications, but we don't know how, or maybe we don't know where or when to live these out. Because a lot of times in Paul's letters, he spends a lot of ink in the beginning to talk about the relationship that we have in Christ, the truth, the reality of the gospel. And then he pivots to, how do we live that out? What do we do with that reality? How do we live out our relationship in our union with Christ?

And so, we see it's very common in the conclusion of a letter that what seems like a piling on of commands like, I'm running out of time, what else do I need to say? It's like a grocery list, we're out of apples, we're out of bananas. And so, it's maybe a rush, or it feels unrelated. But the reality is that Paul is always purposeful, and they're always connected to what he has been saying throughout the whole letter and what he leaves as a final encouragement and a final exhortation to the church.

So, let's look together at this passage and see God's role in salvation as well as His presence in His community, the church. Follow along as I read.

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

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. He who calls you is faithful; he will surely do it. Brothers, pray for us. Greet all the brothers with a holy kiss. I put you under oath before the Lord to have this letter read to all the brothers. The grace of our Lord Jesus Christ be with you. [ESV]

This is the word of the Lord. Let us pray.

Open our minds, O Lord, open our hearts. And may you open our clenched fists, our fears, our anxieties. Would you grow us to not only understand these things, but to stretch us and to use us for your glory that we might live these things out in our own community and to the watching world. Help us in these things by your Spirit we pray. Amen.

Have you heard a child ask this question, will you sit with me? Perhaps you've said something like that to a friend or to a loved one, something like, will you be with me? That phrase "be with me" carries important weight and power in our relationships, does it not? Similar words are found throughout all of the Scriptures. Just as some examples, let's do a quick survey and let's skim through a lot of the Scriptures.

Genesis 17, to Abraham the Lord said, "Behold, my covenant is with you and you shall be the father of a multitude of nations." To Isaac later on in chapter 26, the Lord faithfully confirmed His oath saying, "I will be with you and bless you, for to you and to your offspring, I will give all these lands and I will establish the oath that I swore to Abraham, your father." Still later on in chapter 48 to Isaac's son Jacob, who was later renamed Israel, Israel says to his son Joseph, "Behold, I am about to die. But God will be with you." To Moses in Exodus, God said, "I will be with you." In her grief, Naomi attempted to part ways with her daughters in law for her to go back to her land, and for her daughters to stay with her family. But what does Ruth say? "No, I will return with you to your people." In making His covenant with David, the Lord said, "I have been with you." The psalmists sing again and again of the Lord's presence with His people. The prophets, also. Just to name one, the Lord says through Isaiah, "Fear not, for I am with you. Be not dismayed, for I am your God. I will strengthen you. I will help you. I will uphold you with my righteous hand." Later on, as Israel is in exile, the other prophets continue that message, "I am with you." We jump ahead to the end of the gospel of Matthew, and Jesus Himself assures His disciples the very same thing. He says, "Behold, I am with you always to the end of the age."

We engage our hearts, we risk exposing our longings when we say to another person, will you be with me? Because in that question, we want an answer back, don't we? We find comfort, we find encouragement when we hear that reply, I'm here, I'm with you. Jesus prays that His church will be one marked by His love, reflecting His peace. And because Jesus is with us, we see in that context these commands that Paul's giving to the church in Thessalonica and certainly churches throughout time and throughout the world. That the church must cultivate healthy relationships. If Jesus is with us as He's promised, and even now as we wait for His return, He's with me and He's with you. He's with us. Paul is encouraging this corporate presence that we have with the Lord.

And the reality of Jesus with us necessarily impacts our experience of our relationships with others. So, as we kind of unpack this passage, we can't cover everything. And I'll get to the reason for that in a moment, one of it just being time. But a more important reason will come to fruition in a moment. But let's first be reminded that these relationships are with the church. Just quickly draw your attention to the last few verses, 25-28. We see Paul, Silas, and Timothy writing this letter to the church. And here they are at the end of the letter, and they are asking the church to pray for them, a corporate reality. He's encouraging them to greet all the brothers with a holy kiss. Now, I'm going to extend your sensibilities, your comfort zones. Just kidding. Some cultures still practice a holy kiss. It certainly is a cultural sensibility of how you extend hospitality, how you extend welcome, how you extend unity. We might do it with a handshake, we might do it with an embrace. Some of us, we're good if we can smile and maybe wave, right? To greet one another is to demonstrate that we have unity and peace among us. How intimate is a kiss but to have unity and to be one.

And then he implies likewise that this whole letter should be read to the whole congregation. And again, just to stress that all of these verbs and all these pronouns of "you" are plural. So, we have to understand, certainly, what this text might mean to me as an individual, but first I have to place myself in

the story of who we are as the people of God and what the church is instructed to be and what the church has instructed to do.

So, let's look at verses 12-13 as we see the relationship with the leaders in the church. Paul says, "We ask you, brothers, to respect those who labor among you and are over you in the Lord and admonish you, and to esteem them very highly in love because of their work. Be at peace among yourselves." Perhaps, you've gone from your home to run an errand, and maybe you have a teenager and some younger children. And maybe you've spoken to your kids, and maybe you've said this: while I'm gone, listen to your sister. How does that usually go? When we say it, we certainly mean it as a general piece of advice. Generally, life goes better if we listen to our sisters, right? But Paul is saying it because, let's be real, if you have to say it, it's because it doesn't go well. No one naturally wants to listen to their sister especially if what she says might be at odds with what you actually want to do.

Now, we don't know anything specific about the conflict or the friction that might be happening here in Thessalonica at the time. But it is reasonable to think about the dynamics that play out in any group of people that's larger than two. You got two, and you might have friction. Now, I have my ideas, you have your ideas, and things might go well if we share those ideas. Now, if they clash, we'll have to wait and see. Paul is encouraging them in this way knowing that they will navigate friction and conflict. He uses two key words here, respect and esteem. Some translations use words like "honor," or "hold in high regard." He's first saying that the members must properly acknowledge and consider who their leaders are. They must be acquainted with them, personally connected and recognize their role in the community. And likewise, the members must esteem, consider them highly in love. Paul is encouraging their attitudes toward their leaders. Paul's request to the members guards the temptation for the members to be apathetic, to be indifferent, to be bitter, to even be aversive or hostile to those who the Lord places over you for your care.

But it is very important to remember why they are to be considered such. Leaders are not just owed respect and high esteem because they are the leaders. No, they are recognized as leaders because they are laboring among the people. This is the safeguard against the temptation that leaders might be lazy. Leaders can be abusive. Jesus calls it, lording it over the people. And He was very clear to His disciples that the leaders in His church, the shepherds of His people are not to be as the Gentiles who lorded over them, but rather serve. He says in Mark 10, "Whoever would be great among you must be your servant." Such is the economy in the people of God.

Together, these two dynamics, members and leaders, point to the third encouragement which is to be at peace among yourselves. For the body to be experiencing and enjoying the fruit of our unity together in Christ, let us have peace. There might be disagreement. There might be error. There might be anger. There might be resentment, but to pursue peace that reflects the peace of Christ. John 14:27, Jesus says this, "Peace I leave with you, my peace I give to you." Paul's exhorting the church to exemplify to live out that peace.

So, how do we walk in that peace with one another? Well, this gets to the point that I alluded to, that we walk in community. We can't cover all these verses in depth because these have to be lived out in community as we move into relationships with one another in the church.

Now, there are a couple different types of relationships with other people that he references. Verse 14, Paul says, "And we urge you, brothers, admonish the idle, encourage the fainthearted, and help the weak." He kind of briefly sketches out three possible groups of people that might be in the body of Christ there in Thessalonica and it's a great brief summary of people everywhere. First, the idle. This is referencing people in the church who are being disorderly, undisciplined, and even disruptive. The word that Paul uses for "admonish" means "to warn, to instruct, to stop it." Paul could be warning that this group of people is refusing to work. We've looked at that elsewhere in the letter. He makes reference to it also in the second letter to the Thessalonians. There were some people who might have been looking at

the idea of Christ's return and saying, Jesus is coming back, eat, drink, and be merry. Or, let's just wait and ride it out. There's no need to work.

Now, that's possible. But it's also possible that here, Paul's being a little bit more forceful and more specific by suggesting that they are out of line for depending on the others to take care of them. So, not maybe a refusal, but an actual unhealthy dependence on those who have wealth or provision that's providing for the community, those who are patrons to the community that's there.

The second group, the fainthearted, this group is discouraged. Perhaps they've lost heart to continue whether it's due to their own doubts, struggles, perhaps confusion about when the Lord is going to return. We don't know specifically their reason for being fainthearted, but we hear Paul's call to console, to comfort, to encourage.

The third group could be either physically weak, but also spiritually weak. Paul is perhaps being more forceful, like I mentioned with those who are refusing to work. But here, he's tender. He's ensuring care and provision for anyone who might be unable to work. It's referring to those who might be weak in their faith as well. Some scholars propose that Paul's referencing the people that he's speaking about in chapter 4, those who are succumbing to impurity versus holiness. It's possible. Paul also, in Romans 14 for example, speaks about those who are weak in the faith, the weaker brother. The strong are obligated to be mindful of them.

Regardless of which one, Paul exhorts the church to show concern and to give aid to those who have such need. And he wraps those three groups with another command, "Be patient with them all." This is his last imperative in this section. It's a reminder to calmly and patiently bear with one another. Just think about those three groups and how you would need to show and demonstrate patience again and again. It would be different for each one, I'm sure. Life with life community can be taxing. It can be exhausting for the one who's trying to change and isn't. It's exhausting for the one who's attempting to help that person change.

Life with life community can be stressful. There are frustrations, there are irritations. We have fears, anxieties. We even have embarrassment that might inhibit us from walking with one another. And those are just a few of the many emotions that we experience while interacting with each other. But the church is called to care for one another in these ways. We must endure, we must bear up one another again and again despite it not going the way or the speed that we would prefer. This patience cannot come from us. This is a beautiful picture of God's patience again and again with us. Even just those few selections of passages that I referenced in the beginning, from the beginning in the garden to where you're sitting today, how persistently patient our Lord is.

Verse 15 goes into a broader category, "See that no one repays anyone evil for evil, but always seek to do good to one another and to everyone." He said something similar in Romans 12. Peter has written it also in his letter. We see Jesus teaching in Matthew 5 in the sermon on the mount. The Christian must not pursue justice on our own terms or in our own sense of what justice is by retaliating. What does Jesus say? To turn the other cheek, to endure another insult, to be struck again. That's hard, is it not? But it's certainly something that is dear to the heart of the Lord of what that action represents. That action, that moment, is unconditional love for the one who is hurting you despite what they're doing. We see Jesus doing it perfectly on our behalf.

So, Paul doesn't just leave it at what not to do, don't repay, don't retaliate. He extends the law of love to seek the good of one another meaning within the church. So, it's not just that I don't pay you back with what you've done to me. I'm going to actually go the extra mile and do what is good for you. Paul extends it even further. He extends it outside of the church to include the people outside. Not only do we do what is good for us, the people of God, the church, but we must do good for others, for all.

Taken together, as one writer stated, "These exhortations are intended to encourage the cohesion of the community. Only within a stable community could the plausibility of people's faith and

commitment be maintained.” You have to have a support structure. You have to walk with people. You have to be in community. Because the one who calls you calls you to Himself and He’s building His church. He’s cultivating a people who know Him, know His voice, and who follow Him. So, by listening to Jesus’s voice, we’re called into this family, this community.

Christianity is to be embodied by the one who converts, but it’s also to be lived out in this community. There are propositions of truth to believe about Jesus Christ. Yes, there are things to believe. There’s content to the gospel of salvation. But propositions must be linked with patterns of our lives that reflect the work of His salvation in us and through us. If we believe the content of the gospel but lack those patterns, we run the risk of becoming cold and stale and noisy gongs. If we attempt the patterns without the content of the gospel, we run the risk of becoming puffed up, arrogant according to our own sensibilities, judging others for not loving the way we love.

Whereas, the community is different. We, the body of Christ, the community of faith is to be warm, to be vibrant, to be humble, and to be loving. These exhortations are not to be the only word, of course, and certainly not the final word on how we should live out our faith together. But they certainly give us light on the path toward cultivating healthy discipleship. Our own relationship with the Lord as an individual, but how we cultivate healthy relationships in the church. And these relationships in the church certainly play out in our practices in the church.

I’ve got two brief practices to discuss here. Verses 16-18, looking at the devotional practices in the church. “We rejoice always. Pray without ceasing, giving thanks in all circumstances for this is the will of God and Christ Jesus for you.” Rejoice always. Remember that this is the state of being for the church. It does not mean putting on a happy face, but rather our corporate worship remains glad and joyful as we look to Christ. One writer says this, “To rejoice always is to see the hand of God in whatever is happening, and to remain certain of God’s future salvation. Without such conviction, joy would not be possible in the face of affliction, suffering, and of death.”

Flowing from our rejoicing, our celebration in Christ, it flows very naturally that we would pray without ceasing. We bring our requests to Him. As the needs in our lives are abundant, so must the practice of prayer be constant. We trust that Jesus is interceding on our behalf, so then we can go to Him with our intercession on behalf of others. We pray for daily provision. We pray for justice. We pray for peace. We pray for healing. We pray for renewal. And those things don’t happen just because we say it. We have to act in that as well, but we pray again. We pray for peace, we pray for justice, we pray for provision, we pray for healing, we pray for renewal. We long for those things to be static experiences, but they’re not. They’re momentary, they’re fleeting, but they do tap in to what we long for and what we expect to be in the end of all things. They won’t be static, but they will be complete, they will be full, they will be finished.

We pray for family members. We pray for the church family. We pray for the church throughout the world, our brothers and sisters in Peru as one example. We pray for government officials to govern rightly and justly, wisely. We pray for peace between nations. There’s so much to pray. We come before the Father who holds all of it together in His hands, and we come to Him. He is abundant. He never grows tired. He never ceases. Let us continue to pray constantly as well.

All of these things then flow into giving thanks in all circumstances. Thanksgiving flows from our praise of God and our prayers to God. And those things, rejoicing, praying, thanksgiving, all fit under that phrase, “for this is the will of God in Christ Jesus for you.” These are our devotional practices in the church, just to name a few.

And one writer says it better than I could ever write it. He says,

“The real challenge in these verses comes out, however, not when times or circumstances are good and it’s easy to rejoice and easy to give thanks, but when, as in Thessalonica, our material circumstances may not seem so good.

Do we truly believe that God's salvation is of more value than the cost of persecution that comes as a result of accepting the gospel? Then let us demonstrate that conviction by rejoicing in the midst of it. Are we really persuaded that God will indeed deliver His people and bring justice on their behalf? Then let us pray with persistence and patience, waiting and watching expectantly for God to act. Are we genuinely convinced that in all things, God works for the good of those who love Him? Then let us demonstrate that conviction by giving thanks in all circumstances."

This is where those plurals are helpful because I can't do that by myself. My circumstances tell me to cry. So, how do we cry, but as the people we are to rejoice? Well, we look to Christ. We give praise and thanksgiving for all that He has done and all that He is doing.

Paul moves from devotional practices in the church to discernment. He mentions in verse 19, "Do not quench the spirit," verse 20, "Do not despise prophecies." That image of quenching the spirit, think of it like a garden hose that you're watering your plants and you tie a knot in it. You're restricting the flow of that water. You're extinguishing it, you're stifling it, you're suppressing it. That command, "Do not quench the spirit," could be connected very directly to what he says next in verse 20, "Do not despise prophecies," implying, don't quench the spirit by disdaining prophecies. That's certainly true. By despising them, they're exhibiting an attitude of disdain, that these prophecies have no merit in the life of the church.

Now, what I find helpful is something that John Calvin wrote, "By the term 'prophecy,' however, I do not understand the gift of foretelling." Sometimes we think about it that way, right? Prophecy is predicting something in the future. There's a component of that, especially as we think about the prophets of the Old Testament. But it's the science of interpreting Scripture so that a prophet is an interpreter of the will of God. It's something to be done in the community of God together as we understand, what is the will of God? Discerning what is good, what is right, what is true.

How do we then move into verse 21 and 22? "We must test everything, holding fast to what is good, abstaining from every evil." This requires discernment. This requires wisdom, not of our own making or doing, but of the ministry of the Holy Spirit in our midst.

To test, there's multiple things we could say, but I'll briefly say, too, testing everything, we do so according to the source. We test it according to the Scriptures. The Holy Spirit would never lead in a way that would undermine or contradict His revealed will from Scripture already. We test those interpretations of the will of God, those prophecies, according to the word of God. Likewise, we test such prophecies according to the fruit or the results of those prophecies. It's for the building up of the body. It's not for its tearing down. It's for the encouragement of the church, not for the benefit of a single individual. So, we test, what is someone saying? Does it accord with the word of God? Is it for the benefit of the people of God? We discern those things. And, of course, we abstain from every form of evil. The Holy Spirit, not only would He not contradict His word, He would not lead us into any form of evil.

Which moves us into the crux of the passage, the benediction, if you will. Maybe you've heard it used by pastors at the end of the service. I'm going to use it today. But it's a beautiful transition, also, as we celebrate the table together because what we are to do in the church, the people of God in our relationships with one another, it is completely anchored and dependent upon our relationship with God, His salvation to us, Jesus with us. Verses 23-24, "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. He who calls you is faithful. He will surely do it." We cannot do all that Paul exhorts us to do and to be without the God who works in us. We cannot do it without the God who is working through us. Being sanctified holy, to be sanctified completely is this work of His salvation of carrying out to completion that which He starts. To hear the gospel, to believe and trust on Jesus, to be forgiven of our sins is beautiful. It's absolutely necessary.

But there's more to our salvation than just that. We're forgiven of our sins to walk in righteousness. We're pardoned of our unrighteousness so that we can walk in His holiness. And the Lord is going to work that out fully, completely. Paul uses this threefold description, whole spirit, soul, and body. Some people have taken that to be a taxonomy for three parts of the personality. That's not what Paul's saying. He's talking about the totality of our being.

All was lost. All fell in Adam. Our brains, our wills, our emotions, our desires, our actions, all of these things have been impacted from the rebellion of my heart to the brokenness of my condition in this fallen state. But thanks be to God, He does not leave us in that state. Paul is saying, the Lord does not leave you where you are. He does not say, you are forgiven; that's the end of the story. He is making you what He intended you to be. We see glimpses of that, we see progress in that. But the beauty of God's sanctifying work is that it is definitive, it's finished. We can rest on that just as sure as we can rest on our pardon. God will finish it. He says in verse 24, He "is faithful; he will surely do it."

But it's also progressive. We see this in stages. We might take two steps forward, and we may take 50 steps backwards. But two steps forward make no difference if that merits that salvation from Christ, and those 50 steps backwards do not take it away. God will surely do it. It's dependent upon His character. He's faithful. It's dependent upon His promise and His accomplished work. His life, Jesus lived it out perfectly. All that was lost in Adam has all been redeemed in Christ. Your brains, your depression, your failure to act in self-control, your broken relationships, all will be redeemed wholly and completely to be kept blameless at the coming of the Lord. He is faithful, He will do it, and He holds you in His hand. Your sin shakes you, but this is a saying of God's love that will never be shattered. Sometimes we are indifferent, but God remains persistent. We feel distant, but God remains close.

In the book *The Celtic Way of Evangelism*, George Hunter explores the missional practices of Christians in Ireland around the 5th to 6th century beginning with St. Patrick. Patrick's way of Christian mission was setting up communities where care, teaching, and hospitality took place. In essence, as Christians lived out their faith together, they welcomed the non-Christian in their midst, made them feel a sense of belonging before they required them to believe.

Sometimes, this way of mission, the Celtic way it's sometimes called, is contrasted with what's sometimes called the Roman way. Both are true, both are good, both are right. But the Roman way can sometimes be reduced or stifled by just mere propositions of truth, to believe before you can be invited to belong. The thing that we've discussed from beginning to end in this passage, being with someone is powerful. You can say something is true to a person, but it may not carry any weight with them if you do not love them. And if you love someone, you will desire what is good, what is true, what is beautiful in their life.

Paul's words to the Thessalonians are a powerful encouragement to Christians anywhere to be an advent people while we wait for the coming of the Lord. We wait with hope, we wait with faith, we wait in love. Just as the Thessalonians, so to us. Our waiting is marked by peaceful relationships amongst the community of Christians and to likewise be graciously extended to those outside the Christian community. As the body of Christ, we are to love one another, care for one another, pursue the good of one another. As we seek to follow Christ, we live in such a way as to extend the same to not only ourselves, but to all. And while we do that, our relationships are cultivated, celebratory worship happens here on Sundays and in our daily lives with our families in our own mind's eye, our own spaces when we're by ourselves. And it also takes place in wise discernment.

And the best part, we can't do this on our own. We can't succeed in this endeavor out of our own wisdom, our own strength, our own wealth. Our community can only prosper and flourish as we look to the one who's faithful, the one who will carry to completion that which He starts in us. And so, we rejoice, and so we pray, and so we give thanks. And all because Jesus is with you. Let us pray.

We give thanks indeed, Jesus, that you are with us to the end of the age. And you do this mysteriously by the power of your Holy Spirit that to have you is to have the Father. And to have you is to

be reborn in the Spirit. To be reborn with you is to be in fellowship with one another. Help us, O Lord, to walk in these ways. Help us to be marked by love. Help us to be marked by patience. Help us to be marked by celebration even as we celebrate your supper in a few moments. We pray these things to your glory and for our good because you are with us. In Jesus's name. Amen.