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Encouraging the Imperfect - 1 Thess 5:12-24

Steve Christian

○ I'd like to begin by sharing a poem with you by Mavis Williams entitled "The Perfect Church."

If you should find the perfect church Without one fault or smear,
 For goodness sake! Don't join that church; You'd spoil the atmosphere.
 If you should find the perfect church Where all anxieties cease
 Then pass it by, lest joining it You'd mar the masterpiece.
 If you should find the perfect church Then don't you ever dare,
 To tread upon such holy ground; You'd be a misfit there.
 But since no perfect church exists Made of imperfect men,
 Then let's cease looking for that church And love the church we're in.

It's easy in our world where we are taught to be critical thinkers, to look for what's wrong, rather than appreciate all the positives. We are also infused with a right to entitlement that assumes that our demands and expectations should be met. Paul, in closing this letter has praised the folk in a number of ways, and now seeks to encourage them to keep moving forward to even greater respect and love for one another; to love the church in spite of the failings of imperfect people that make up the church. ○

I think that, here at Toowoomba North we are so blessed, and as Christians we are so blessed; and as we are obedient to the leading of the Holy Spirit, that leads us to holiness, a life set-apart to honour God. And I believe that is the heart's desire of each one of us. Our lives; our hearts; our behaviour has been changed, and we long to become even more like Christ. C.S. Lewis observed: "There is no excess of goodness. You cannot go too far in the right direction." And this is what Paul is asking for; keep growing toward being like Christ. So, we'll come to our passage...

○ Twitter is a social network platform where people post messages with a limit of 140 characters per post; and so people are forced to get straight to the point. No fluff! When we look at our passage today it reminds me of Twitter; Paul packs quite a bit into this final paragraph with at least 12 different commands or requests – all to those who make up the imperfect church.

And he begins with a request rather than a command. ○ V.12, "**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.**"

I recently revisited a message that I gave late last year and I included a paragraph within that message that was not expressed very well. I stated that God values mercy over justice, and from our human sinful perspective we are so grateful for the mercy of God. However, His qualities are all equally balanced and I should have worded things differently. God's mercy and justice met at

the Cross – neither cancelling out the other, but rather working together to bring about our salvation: God’s mercy fully satisfied God’s Justice.

I mention this because, this highlights that your pastors and elders are just normal human beings and make their mistakes too – imperfect leaders. And to those in this new church in Thessalonica, their leaders were young and immature, perhaps lacking wisdom, and so Paul asks the people to respect them as they try, to the best of their ability, to care for the flock.

And to respect them too, because from time-to-time leaders are required to admonish others in the church and this is never an easy task. To admonish another is to caution, reprimand, or rebuke them, and this is often not received well. Hence Paul concludes v13 with, **“Live in peace with each other.”** It’s not easy when being corrected, but we do need to step back; take some time; and think things through to evaluate whether there is need for further change; and seek to be at peace with one another.

But Paul says that this responsibility of admonishing one another is not just for the leaders. ○ V.14-15, **“And we urge you, brothers and sisters, admonish those who are idle, 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.”**

Brothers and sisters, admonish, caution those who are idle. And we might immediately think of those without a job, because “Idle hands are the devil’s workshop.” (Prov 16:27) But the Greek word for “idle” referred to someone who was unruly or had little discipline (undisciplined). And it was most commonly used of soldiers who were disorderly and drifting off to do their own thing. They were a danger to themselves and to the effectiveness and moral of the regiment. Warn those who are lacking discipline. This is not about reprimanding the lazy.

And in the army an officer could bark out a command, but within the church admonishing one another must always be done out of care and concern – not from a position of pride, or anger or frustration or domination.

Paul says, “Admonish the wayward; caution the undisciplined. Encourage the disheartened, help the weak, be patient with everyone.”

Encourage the disheartened or timid; the ones who are lacking courage to go on. As you chat with one another you soon pick up when someone is struggling in their workplace, or with the lure of their non-Christian friends, or with the temptation of sin. Encourage one another to stand firm; to keep going; to press on; to persevere.

Help the weak! We all know people who are struggling. They may be spiritually weak, mentally weak, or physically weak. Our job is not to overpower them, but to empower them, to undergird or support them; to help them.

Be patient with one another. Neither should you seek to get back at someone else, but rather bless them. As the Apostle Peter wrote, **“Do not repay evil with evil or insult with insult, but with blessing, because to this you were called.”** (1 Peter 3:9) The problem with “an eye for an eye, and a tooth for a tooth” is that everyone ends up blind and toothless. Rather, we are called to always strive to do what is good for each other; to be friendly, even in the face of hostility.

Caution those who are drifting or lacking discipline. Encourage those who lack courage to stand firm. Support the weak. Be patient, and always strive to do good for one another. ○

Paul then says, **“Rejoice always,”** even when your brother or sister is making no progress. **“Rejoice always, pray continually, give thanks in all circumstances; for this is God’s will for you in Christ Jesus.”** This is one sentence broken into three verses, and should be treated as a whole. Paul says that it is God’s will for us to rejoice, pray and give thanks, constantly! Rejoice always, pray continually, give thanks in all circumstances. That’s God’s will for us!

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. Happiness comes, on the basis of our happenings, but joy on the other hand is the disposition of our heart regardless of our circumstances. We can experience joy in our hearts during times of suffering pain and grief. Why? Because joy is one of the fruit of the Spirit and is founded in our hope and assurance; of our salvation and eternal glory.

Remembering that Paul is writing to believers in a Roman culture where being a Christian is not safe. In your relationships within the church; as you continue to grow in your understanding of what it means to be a Jesus follower; as you suffer persecution and may be afraid at times; rejoice always, pray continually, giving thanks in all circumstances.

What Paul is calling for here in prayer refers to our disposition before God. Our attitude as we come to God should always be one of rejoicing and giving thanks, regardless of our circumstances. So often we come to God heavily burdened, and its as though we need to let God know just how bad everything is, and then keep badgering Him till he fixes it all – our way. But Paul says, rejoice always and give thanks in all circumstances. This is the attitude we bring in prayer.

The second aspect to our disposition in prayer is in regard to knowing that He is ever present - with us. So, praying continually does not mean constantly speaking with Him, verbally. Praying continually involves a constant awareness of His presence, and our constant dependence upon Him. It’s like having an open Wi-Fi connection. We can launch into conversation at any moment, just as Jesus did, and as we often find that Paul does in his writings.

But we’re aware that the connection is open; we’re aware of God’s presence, we’re open to being led in our thinking by Him; we’re led to think about others and pray for them; and we’re often more thankful and joyful as we recognise God’s constant presence. We start to move beyond asking God for things, to asking God for more of Him.

Thus, Paul then says, ○ **“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.”** Again, three verses but in the original Greek, just one sentence – therefore a connected thought. Do not quench the Spirit. As you are prompted, don’t put out the fire; don’t reject the prompting, for it is God who is speaking to you. Mal and Margie Chaffey – their recent baptisms were in obedience to the prompting of the Holy Spirit.

And as Paul has already mentioned their need to stand firm against sexual immorality; about some being lazy and unproductive as they await Jesus return; about living in order to please God; he then advises them not to quench the prompting of the Spirit. We too must not put out the fire of the Spirit, ignoring His promptings as we spend time with the Lord in prayer and in His Word. We believe that God speaks through His Word, and so we preach directly from His Word; each week we speak using this text (the Bible).

And a part of the ministry of the Holy Spirit is to speak through those who forth tell God's Word, and those who fore tell future events; those with the gift of prophecy. And here Paul understands that there needs to be balance. It would appear that some were over zealous regarding Jesus return and may have often prophesied about this, whilst others either resented their gift, or rejected their persistent and recurring message. Paul says, "Don't treat prophecies with contempt but do test them all; hold on to that which is good, whilst you reject those that don't stack up against the Word of God." He is concerned that they don't quench the Spirit, and that they foster peace within the camp.

And so these words contain some wonderful advise for us. Finally, Paul closes in typical fashion with a benediction seeking God blessing for them; but also drawing them back to their continued forward momentum in becoming more like Christ.

In Chapter 1 and 3, Paul speaks of the sanctifying work of God – how they were saved and became a model for other Christians to follow. Chapter 2 Paul urges them to live sanctified lives – worthy of the Lords calling. In Chapter 4 to sanctify themselves by avoiding sexual immorality; nor grieving as the world grieves. And now following his final instructions he prays that God will continue His work of transformation within them.

○ **"May God himself, the God of peace, sanctify you through and through. May your whole spirit, soul and body be kept blameless at the coming of our Lord Jesus Christ. The one who calls you is faithful, and he will do it."**

What a positive thought to leave with them. God will do His part. He is faithful. As you cooperate with God He will bring about your continued transformation into greater holiness – living for God in difficult times, and pleasing to Him. We, imperfect people who make up an imperfect church, are becoming more like Christ, as we follow and serve our perfect God. May He sanctify us through and through, that we may be blameless at the coming of our Lord and Saviour. And He will come again!

Please be encouraged to always strive to do good for one another; to seek the Lord in prayer and in His Word; and obediently follow His prompting.

Song: TN