

WHAT GOD WANTS FROM US

Reading: 1Thessalonians 5:12-28

Our reading today takes us to the end of Paul's first letter to the Thessalonians and so to the end of our sermon series on this letter. It's quite a long reading in terms of verses – 17 verses in all – but it's quite a short reading in terms of words, because as Paul brings his letter to a close he packs this last part full of instructions and meaning expressed in short phrases. Indeed our reading is so full of meaning that we'll only be able to look at some of the main points Paul expresses this morning. So let's study it together, and, as we do so, the relevant verses will be displayed on the screen, or you can find the main passage on page [***] of the church Bibles – and as we study this let's remember that although Paul is writing to believers in Thessalonica, what he's saying applies to us here in Cannes today.

The key concept here seems to be that the church is to be the family of God whose members recognise and treat each other as brothers and sisters. Paul uses the word “brothers” (which includes sisters) five times in verses 12, 13, 25, 26 and 27. That's because if we're children of God (which we are) and God is our Father (which He is) then our fellow believers must be our brothers and sisters. In chapter 4 Paul had already urged the Thessalonians to love one another with brotherly love and to comfort one another and in the first part of chapter 5 Paul urges them to encourage one another and build each other up. Now in this second part of chapter 5 Paul is completing his vision of the church family. Paul obviously thought this teaching was very appropriate and important because he largely repeated it in his letter to the Romans (Romans 12: 3-17)

Paul takes four elements which are important aspects of the life of any local church and gives apostolic instruction about them. Firstly, in verses 12 and 13, Paul addresses himself to the leadership of the church and tells us how this leadership and the rest of the flock should relate to one another. Secondly, in verses 14 and 15, Paul writes about the fellowship of the local church and tells us about the

responsibilities of church members to care for one another. Thirdly, in verses 16 to 22 and verse 27, Paul deals with how the believers are to worship God and relate to Him. Finally, in verses 23 to 26 and verse 28 Paul draws his letter to a conclusion.

Let's start with leadership and verses 12 and 13:

“Now we ask you, brothers, to respect those who work hard among you, who are over 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.” (verses 12-13)

So the apostle Paul is asking the body of believers to respect those who have been designated as their leaders and indeed to hold this leadership in the highest regard. This is the earliest reference to church leadership in the New Testament. We don't really know how these leaders were chosen and we don't really know what prompted Paul to write these two verses, although we do know from the Book of Acts that the church in Thessalonica seems to have had responsible leaders, since Luke mentions Aristarchus and Secundus of Thessalonica by name (Acts 20:4) as travelling companions of Paul. Probably some of the church members had been behaving disrespectfully towards their leaders, but we don't really know.

Paul tells us that the leadership works hard for the flock. Giles works hard here in our church; pastoring a flock is a difficult and demanding vocation. Paul also tells us that our leaders have been given authority over their flock by Christ. It's true that Christian leadership is humble, gentle servant leadership, but Christian leadership still carries an element of authority as the Book of Hebrews tells us (Hebrews 13:17). The real model for Christian leadership is parental leadership, that's why Paul said “If anyone does not know how to manage his own family, how can he take care of God's church?” (1 Timothy 3:5). Paul tells us in verse 12 that part of the leadership's task is to admonish church members. Our leaders have to warn us when we're in danger of falling into error; they have to reprove us when we go wrong and if necessary discipline us. As Leon Morris put it in his commentary on Thessalonians, whilst the theme of this letter is

brotherly, here it's big brotherly. This is not a popular idea in the church today, but as we see it's completely scriptural.

Let's move on to look at the fellowship of the church in verses 14 and 15:

“And we urge you, brothers, warn those who are idle, encourage the timid, help the weak, be patient with everyone. Make sure that nobody pays back wrong for wrong, but always try to be kind to each other and to everyone else.” (verses 14-15)

So in verses 12 and 13 Paul was “asking” the Thessalonians, now in verses 14 and 15 he's “urging” them. He's urging the ordinary members of the congregation, not especially the leaders, to encourage and help their fellows. The verb Paul uses (*antechomai*) which is translated as help, means to cling onto, to put your arms around – a graphic picture of the kind of support that's needed. Paul also asks these ordinary believers not to repay evil with evil (which was contrary to the normal revengeful behaviour of the times), but instead to display the positive virtues of patience and kindness – and this not just to their fellow believers but to everyone. Paul's also telling them to warn the idle, who are probably those who've disregarded Paul's example and instruction and won't work to support themselves. In his second letter to the Thessalonians Paul addresses such people again at some length (2 Thessalonians 3:6-7, 11), so this was obviously an ongoing problem. We see that the existence of leaders doesn't absolve the ordinary members of the congregation from their responsibilities to look after each other. All of us members of this church need to remember that and act on it. Here Paul presents a beautiful vision of the local church as a community not only of mutual comfort and encouragement but of mutual forbearance and service as well.

Now we turn to how believers are to worship God and relate to him in verses 16 to 22 and verse 27:

“Be joyful always; pray continually; give thanks in all circumstances, for this is God's will for you in Christ Jesus. Do not put out the Spirit's fire; do not treat prophecies with contempt. Test everything. Hold on to the good. Avoid every kind of evil.” (verses 16-22)

“I charge you before the Lord to have this letter read to all the brothers.” (verse 27)

At first sight it doesn't seem that these verses refer to public worship, but I think it's clear that this is what Paul is thinking of here. Firstly, all the verbs are in the plural so Paul seems to be talking about collective rather than private devotions. The reference to prophecy in verse 20 is obviously prophecy in public and the reading in verse 27 is again obviously in public.

Paul issues five main instructions. Firstly he says “be joyful always” (verse 16) as the NIV puts it, but I think that Paul is really saying “rejoice in the Lord always” which is more like the RSV rendering of verse 16. Paul isn't issuing an instruction to be happy, but an invitation to joyful worship. Secondly Paul is telling them to “pray continually” (verse 17) or really to pray persistently. Remember this is not private prayer Paul is talking about – we need to do that as well – but Paul is referring to the need to regularly engage in serious intercession both during our Sunday services and also at frequent prayer meetings. As well as just praying for our church members and our local church we need a wider focus. We need to pray for our nation, its government, and for a just, free, compassionate society. We need to pray for world mission, especially for places and peoples resistant to the gospel. We need to pray for peace, justice and environmental stewardship. We need to pray for the poor, the oppressed, the hungry, the homeless and the sick. If we don't pray and entreat God persistently we shouldn't be surprised when God doesn't intervene. As Jesus' brother James said, “you do not have because you do not ask.” (James 4:2). Thirdly Paul tells the Thessalonians to give thanks in all circumstances (verse 18). Thanksgiving should be a part of our public worship alongside rejoicing and praying. We need to give God thanks not only for our material blessings, but for God's infinite love in redeeming the world through Jesus Christ. Our thanks can be expressed through our participation in Holy Communion – the word Eucharist means ‘thanksgiving’ – but we need to give thanks more generally. We need to give thanks not only when we're feeling joyful but also – indeed especially so – when we're feeling oppressed or afflicted. We must

give thanks to God in all circumstances. We must do this because it's God's will for us in Christ Jesus as the last part of verse 18 says. Fourthly, we need to listen to the word of God. That's why I like to read scripture aloud – because God's words are far more powerful than my words and there's something about them being read aloud that is especially powerful. Paul commands this directly in verse 27 and also indirectly in verse 20 when we're told to accept 'genuine' prophecies as God's words to us. Of course, there are no prophets today comparable to the Old Testament prophets or the Apostles, so Paul tells us in verse 21 that we are to test prophecies. Verse 21 begins with a 'but' in the Greek which the NIV omits clearly linking the testing to the prophecies. So how should we test prophecies which are not directly received from scripture? We must test them as Luke tells us (Acts 17:11) against the supreme revelation of the Bible and also as John tells us (1 John 4:1-3) against the character and conduct of the person delivering the prophecy. We have to sift the wheat from the chaff because not all purportedly prophetic utterances are actually from God. God's revelation to us through the Bible is both sufficient and supreme and is the primary measure for the testing of any prophecies. Nevertheless the second part of verse 21 tells us to hold on to the good, so we need to take any genuine prophecies that pass thorough testing seriously. Verses 20 and 21 are the earliest reference to 'prophecy' in the New Testament, so we need to listen carefully to what Paul says here.

Now Paul often commanded that his letters be read publicly. This is really the origin of our Old and New Testaments as early Christian assemblies already read from the OT scriptures having taken over this practice from Jewish synagogues. The strength of Paul's command to read his letter publicly in verse 27 – the "I charge you" (put you on oath really) of verse 27 – may mean that Paul feared that he feared his letter might be suppressed. We need to fear and firmly resist the suppression and perversion of God's word, the Bible, by special interest groups both inside and outside the church today.

Finally, in verse 19, Paul gives one very important instruction – "Do not put out the Spirit's fire." or "Do not quench the Spirit." as the

RSV puts it. So, Paul is saying both ‘Let the Holy Spirit speak to you through his word, and listen to his voice; do not quench him’, and also ‘Let the Holy Spirit move you to respond to the word in praise, prayer and thanksgiving; do not quench him.’

Let’s now turn to the conclusion to Paul’s letter in verses 23 to 26 and verse 28:

“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. Brothers, pray for us. Greet all the brothers with a holy kiss.” (verses 23-26)

“The grace of our Lord Jesus Christ be with you.” (verse 28)

Paul has given us an idyllic picture of the local church. In dealing with the leadership, the fellowship and the worship he’s covered the three main relationships of church members. He tells them and us that our pastors are to be treated with love and respect, that they and we must give mutual care and support to each other and that they and we must both listen and respond to God. All these are to be seen in the context of a ‘brotherhood’ of believers a fellowship of the children of God.

Yet all this is only possible by the gracious work of God. That’s why Paul prays for the sanctification of the Thessalonians (verse 23) and that they will be kept blameless in body, soul and spirit at the second coming of Christ (verse 23). The believers are to be sanctified and kept blameless in their whole tripartite nature – body, soul and spirit. Paul prays these things in full confidence that God will do this (verse 24). Three times in this letter, Paul has told the Thessalonians of his prayers for them, in chapter 1 and verse 2 he said they were continually in his prayers. Now he asks for their prayers for him (verse 25). This is how the reciprocity of Christian fellowship is to work. Paul also tells the believers to greet each other with a holy kiss (verse 26). So when we greet each other as Christians we should make our greeting warmer than a simply verbal greeting by means of an appropriate physical sign. Paul finally concludes by wishing the Thessalonians the grace of Christ in verse 28. To become the kind of

church that Paul is exhorting them to be; a church which has received the gospel and passes it on; a church which embodies the gospel in a framework of mutual brotherhood and fellowship, of community life and mutual love – the grace of God is absolutely essential. Nothing but the grace of our Lord Jesus Christ can accomplish Paul's vision of and for the Thessalonian church.

So, as I said at the beginning, everything Paul has been saying to the Thessalonian church applies to this church here in Cannes today. Our church is to be the family of God, brothers and sisters who love, cherish and comfort each other. We're to love and respect our chaplain and others in leadership. We're to live in peace with one another. We're to worship God joyfully; we're to pray continually and to give thanks to God in all circumstances; we're to accept the leading and guiding of the Holy Spirit always listening to and conforming to the supreme authority of scripture. We're to greet our fellow believers warmly; to work towards our sanctification and finally we need to pray that the grace of Our Lord Jesus Christ may be with us to accomplish all these things in we believers and in our church.

So let's close with a few words of prayer. Father we see that we need to humbly depend on your grace so that we may become the kind of believers that you want and to build the church that you want. We pray that your Holy Spirit may move powerfully in each one of us and amongst us as a body to sanctify us through and through and that your magnificent grace will be with us transform both we and our church into the ideal which you've set before us as we've studied Paul's letter to the church in Thessalonica.

We ask this in the name of Jesus and for his greater glory. Amen