

This quote by writer and NPR commentator... Heather King... caught my attention this week...

Nothing shatters our egos like worshipping with people we did not hand-pick The humiliation of discovering that we are thrown in with extremely unpromising people! — people who are broken, misguided, wishy-washy, out for themselves. People who are ... us.

But we don't come to church to be with people who are like us in the way we want them to be. We come because we have staked our souls on the fact that Christ is the Way, the Truth, and the Life, and the church is the best place, the only place, to be while we all struggle to figure out what that means. We come because we'd be hard pressed to say which is the bigger of the two scandals of God: that he loves us — or that he loves everyone else.

Sometimes churches can seem like dysfunctional families... can't they...? And a dysfunctional family is a difficult thing to watch. ... When people do not get along... when marriages crumble... and when kids are on drugs or involved in all kinds of vices... it becomes clear that the family is on the verge of collapse. In the same way... a church family can be in sinful dysfunction as well. ... Throughout church history there have been church splits over major and minor issues... which always damage the testimony of Jesus Christ to their community. ... You probably know of some churches... as I do... where disunity seems to be the rule... rather than the exception.

When pressures come and people are squeezed... what comes out... is whatever is on the inside. ... Now... Paul understood that the pressures the church at Thessalonica faced... would cause them to be tempted to fight among themselves. Therefore he gives them... the important instruction on

how to be a church family... in the passage that we come to this morning.

... What are the essentials for a happy... thriving church family? ... How can we make our church more spiritual to the glory of God? ... As Paul closes his first letter to the Thessalonians... he discussed these matters. ... Here is a preview of what we will be studying in today's passage:

Church Family Leadership (1 Thes. 5:12-13)

Accept them.

Appreciate them.

Love them.

Obey them.

Church Family Partnership (1 Thes. 5:14-16)

The unruly (v. 14a).

The febleminded (v. 14b).

The weak (v. 14c).

Be patient (v. 14d).

Watch your motives (v. 15).

Be joyful (v. 16).

Church Family Worship (1 Thes. 5:17-28)

Prayer (v. 17).

Praise (v. 18).

The Word of God (vv. 19-21).

Godly living (vv. 22-24).

Christian fellowship (vv. 25-28).

1 Thessalonians 5:12-28

The apostle begins this section teaching on the proper relationship church members should have to their church leaders. He makes a "request" (*erōtaō*) of the Thessalonians, pleading with them to have the right attitude. Unlike in 4:1, Paul appears to use the word to make a simple request without emphasizing his own authority.

1 Thessalonians 5:12

When Paul wrote this... he was speaking to the local situation in Thessalonica. ... He had been with them less than a month. ... He had won them to Christ and had taught them. ... A church had been started... virtually "from scratch." ... There wasn't a believer there before Paul had arrived and presented the gospel to them (see Acts 17:2-3). ... Now stop and think. ... This would mean... then... that all the Thessalonian believers had come to know Christ at about the same time. ... And among them... certain ones would have been given the gift of teaching. ... Some would have the gift of preaching and some of helping. ... Every believer receives a gift when he is saved... and that gift is to be exercised in the body of believers to build up the body of believers.

But is it beyond anyone's imagination that they very well could have been among the believers in Thessalonica... this attitude: *So-and-so and I were saved at the same time. I knew him before he was a believer. Where did he get the idea that he could teach me? ... or exhort me? ...* So Paul is telling them that certain men and women had been given certain gifts of leadership, and they should respect them. They should accept their admonitions.

These new leaders were (no doubt) giving sacrificially to the body... in order that the members might be taught... nurtured... and given direction from the Lord... while suffering persecution from their community. ... Paul is saying to the Thessalonians, "*You need to honor these people, and understand the sacrifice they're making in order for the church to grow up as the body of Christ, and for you as individuals to grow in your own spiritual journey.*"

We don't know what kind of structure that early church had... but if we try to apply this to our own church... perhaps it's obvious that the objects of such appreciation would be the elders and pastors. ... But it goes beyond that. ... We have deacons... deaconesses... AWANA workers... KIDs church workers... Bible study leaders...and the list goes on and on. ... God has called some people into leadership... and allowed them to build into other people's lives... as mentors... instructors... and guides. ... We need to affirm that process in God's kingdom... and honor those who are sacrificially giving in this way.

One of the joys of being involved in this congregation... is that it is very encouraging toward its leadership. ... I have benefited greatly as I have been encouraged by so many people throughout my 10 years here.

1 Thessalonians 5:13

Of course every church leader has faults... limitations... and blind-spots. But... in spite of all these... unless it is obvious that they are out of God's will... spiritual leaders are to be respected and obeyed. ... You can trust God ... and be certain... that God will rule and overrule in the decisions they make.

Now the last part of verse 13... is where this instruction starts getting very challenging. Verse 13 ends with: "*Be at peace among yourselves...*"

Peace is a harmony that results from authenticity of relationship. ... Let me repeat that... Peace is a harmony that results from authenticity of relationship. ... So... this command means... commit yourself to find a place of real... and deep relationship with one another.

That requires honesty. ... You know... as well as I do... that nothing leads to disunity... and a lack of peace... more... than not being honest with each other... and keeping relationships distant. ... There is probably no place on earth... where we ought to be freer to be honest... than in the family of God. ... But... (once again) as we all know... ironically... there is probably no place on earth... where most people feel less free to be honest. ... We all know how to play the church game. ... An acquaintance of mine used to think of Sunday morning as “game day.” You put on your uniform... You get your game face on.... And you put on a façade that everything is going well. ... To varying degrees we break out of that... but isn’t it sad that one of the places we are really afraid to be honest is in church?

Our obedience to what Paul writes here demands that we develop authentic relationship with one another. But here is our challenge. ... Every church seems to have lazy (or idle) people... fainthearted people... and weak people.

1 Thessalonians 5:14

Do you know what Paul is saying about the body of Christ? ... He’s saying we’re not perfect. ... At one time or another we probably all fit into one of these categories (lazy/idle... fainthearted... and weak.) ... God brings people in need of his saving and transforming grace into his family... and here we all are together. ... We all have things we’re growing in... and Paul is saying we have to deal with that. ... We can’t just shove it aside. So he gives some specific instructions.

FIRST - Warn the lazy, idle believers. ... The word translated “lazy” is used only in the letters to the Thessalonians (here and in 2 Thessalonians 3:6, 7,

11.) Paul seems to have been a particular concern about lazy/idle believers in this church. ... The Greek word translated “lazy” (ataktous) was used for soldiers who would not stay in the ranks. ... These people had set themselves outside the prescribed pattern for the church... everyone else was working and serving... but they would not. ... The problem with idle people is that... because they are not busy enough with Spirit-led activities... they usually stir up trouble of one kind or another around the church. These people need to be warned to get back in line and to use their God-given gifts in service for the Kingdom.

SECOND - Encourage those who are timid. The lazy need to be warned, but the timid need to be encouraged. ... The “timid” are the fearful people who lack confidence... perhaps in themselves or even in their faith.

Fainthearted" is the compound of two words—"little" and "soul." This combination comes out in its meaning as "little-souled" or "little-hearted." In other words... it describes the person who is easily discouraged. ... The picture is that of a person who hesitates to serve... or witness ... or a person who fails to live for Christ because of intimidation from a godless world. ... Some might even call them “quitters.” ... We must not rebuke or despise them... but instead comfort... encourage... and assure them. ... These people need loving instruction from their fellow believers to calm their fears and to build their confidence.

THIRD - Take tender care of those who are weak. The word for “take tender care” is (an-tech-esthe) ...In the ESV... this word is translated simply as “help”. It pictures the action of holding on to these people... wrapping arms around them... clinging to them. "Hold fast to the weak!" is

the literal translation. "Don't let them fall!" But who are these weak believers?

Usually, the weak Christians were afraid of their liberty in Christ. They lived by rules and regulations. In the Roman assemblies, the weak Christians would not eat meat, and they held to the Jewish system of holy days. They were severe in their judgment of the mature saints who enjoyed all foods and all days.

These have not yet learned to lean on the Lord as much as they should for their spiritual needs. Until they do, they need strong support from other believers. Of course all Christians are weak and need the strength that comes from Christian fellowship, but the spiritually weak need it more than most.

Listen! ... To "help" the weak... means to be committed and loyal to them... and that will always cost us something. ... Paul says this is part of being a family. ... People who aren't ministry superstars... or the prettiest people in the church... are not to be left behind... or overlooked. We need to minister to our disenfranchised ... draw them back into the fellowship... encourage them... and help them to walk closer to the Lord in their journey. ... They might be needy and very immature. But we are to give them the support that they need.

Look how verse 14 ends... "Be patient with them all..."

That means: Don't lose your temper. That is so difficult! In business or in our other relationships with people, we meet ungodly, unholy, cantankerous, unsaved people who are definitely trying to trip us or to

abuse us in some way, and it becomes very difficult to be patient and not to lose our tempers. But God commands us to be patient with everybody.

We have to be patient because all of us are in process. None of us has arrived. We all have weaknesses and insecurities that we are dealing with. We all naturally want everyone else to grow quickly and we want everyone else to be patient with us while we grow slowly. But as we walk together as the family of God we have to allow God to work in each other's lives, encourage that process, so that we all can indeed be transformed. It will take time and sacrifice and a great deal of patience.

The opposite of patience is retaliation in some form. ... Retaliation is not an option for a Christian. ... Even if the wrong done to him is an imposition by a needy brother... or an action springing from evil intent. ... The offended one never has the right to repay wrong with wrong.

1 Thessalonians 5:15a

Paul understood that the natural fleshly inclination when we are wronged or we see a problem is to want to repay in kind. We want revenge. We want the scales of justice balanced. We talk about fairness. We get defensive and want our position to be acknowledged. But Paul is saying, "That must not be your objective." That doesn't mean that when there is injustice and wrong, we don't seek to set things right. But our response needs to be led by the Spirit toward how this process can end up in good even for those who have hurt us, as well as everyone else. We need to see God work in each other's lives, even when we are on the receiving end of pain, to ask God to give us a heart that says, "Lord, turn this around. Redeem this

situation so that all experience good, so that you are able to transform the lives of all of the people in this process. It's not about my winning or getting vengeance."

The fact that Paul stresses this to the Thessalonian church makes this command against retaliation especially poignant. These believers were being persecuted! ... If believers who are under persecution are instructed that they cannot retaliate... how much more... would this be true of us...?

1 Thessalonians 5:15b

Paul finishes off the instructions in his letter with eight short, penetrating statements which strike at the very heart of the Christian life. Each is a command that expects obedience. These imperatives could be viewed as the ABCs of Christian living.

1 Thessalonians 5:16

Don't you hate verses like that? ... Okay... I will rejoice more often... but can't I also whine sometimes? The problem is... that "sometimes" often becomes a pattern. ... So, Paul says, "Rejoice always... recognizing that God is at work."

The child of God is commanded... not to go around as a sour puss. The child of God must not be known as a cantankerous individual. If you a child of God... you are to rejoice... it is to be the centerpiece of your outlook... the predictable pattern of your life. ... If this is not the case for you... then begin reading the Word of God... and calling on God to put joy in your heart. He will do it.

True joy transcends the rolling waves of circumstance. Joy comes from a consistent relationship with Jesus Christ. When believers' lives are intertwined with Christ... He will help us to walk through adversity... without sinking into debilitating lows... and He will also help us to manage prosperity... without moving into deceptive highs.

1 Thessalonians 5:17

Worship is the most important activity of a local church family. Ministry must flow out of worship, otherwise it becomes busy activity without power and without heart. There may be "results," but they will not glorify God or really last. . . . Paul begins to name various elements that make up the worship ministry of the church.

Pray without ceasing! This does not mean we must always be mumbling prayers. The word means "*constantly recurring*," not **continuously** occurring. We are to "keep the receiver off the hook" and be in touch with God so that our praying is part of a long conversation that is not broken.

I think it means three things. First, it means that there is a spirit of dependence that should permeate all we do. . . So... even when we are not speaking consciously to God... there is a deep... abiding dependence on Him... that is woven into the fabric of everything we do. . . In that sense, we "pray" or have the spirit of prayer continuously.

Second - and I think this is what Paul has in mind most immediately - praying without ceasing means praying repeatedly and often. . . Our default mental state... our first response to every challenge should be: "O Lord . . . I need Your help right now!"

Third - I think praying without ceasing means not giving up on prayer. Don't ever come to a point in your life where you cease to pray at all. Don't abandon the God of hope and say, "*There's no use praying.*" Go on praying. Don't cease.

Right here in the middle of our passage... is the key to all of the commands... that came before... and will come after it.

1 Thessalonians 5:14-15 says, "We urge you, brethren, admonish the unruly, encourage the fainthearted, help the weak, be patient with everyone. See that no one repays another with evil for evil, but always seek after that which is good for one another and for all people." Now that is a very fruit-bearing life. He is telling us to be like trees planted by streams of water that bring forth fruit. Look at all these needy people draining you: the "unruly" are challenging you; the "fainthearted" are leaning on you; the "weak" are depleting you. But you are called to encourage and help and be patient and not return evil for evil. In other words, you are called to have spiritual resources that can be durable and fruitful and nourishing when others are unruly and fainthearted and weak and mean-spirited. ...AND to make it even more challenging... you and I are to be rejoicing – always!

How? ... Answer: Through prayer and thanksgiving. ... "Pray without ceasing." And verse 18 says, "In everything give thanks." So the answer seems to be that continual prayer and thanksgiving is the key for our obedience.

Give thanks in all things. How can we thank God for terrible trials such as accidents and death and sin? We don't; this is not what Scripture means.

What God means is to thank Him for His presence and power as we walk through such trials. In Christ Jesus there is victory and triumph over all, no matter how terrible. Therefore, in everything (not for everything)—as we walk through all—thank God for the victory He has given us through Christ.

Giving thanks in everything means believing in God's goodness and love even when life is unfair or difficult or painful, as well as at the heights of great joy and blessing. We can give thanks for everything because we know God is at work in us and is committed to our good, just as he calls us to be committed to everyone else's good.

Note how verse 18 ends... "*for this is the will of God in Christ Jesus for you.*" What is the will of God? All three exhortations that have just been given:

- ⇒ that we rejoice always.
- ⇒ that we pray without ceasing.
- ⇒ that we give thanks in everything.

" If you come to me and ask what is the will of God for you, I can tell you three specific things that are the will of God for you: Rejoice always, pray without ceasing, and give thanks in everything. That is the will of God for you. ... Oh... and one more. We saw it in chapter 4... verse 3... that you abstain from sexual immorality.

But the key to obeying the commands that we have been looking at in today's passage is our immediate attention to these three... rejoice always... pray without ceasing... and give thanks in everything.

1 Thessalonians 5:19

God's Spirit is seeking to work in us in all these circumstances. We can quench his Spirit through disobedience, whining, bad attitudes, failure to listen to him, or failure to seek him. But we must instead allow God to work, to teach us and transform us. What a wonderful gift that God's Spirit lives within us, because that means God's very presence never leaves us. He invites us to hear his voice and walk with him, to trust him day by day that he is working out his will for us.

Quenching the Spirit does not mean that God is so weak that you can stop Him but it means to take yourself out of the place of blessing. It is not that God can't; it is that God won't when you quench the Spirit. Quenching the Spirit involves any action that hinders the work of the Lord in your own life or the life of others.

1 Thessalonians 5:20

This is not so much about the spiritual gift of prophecy. But some will be called to speak the truth—perhaps a pastor or teacher up in front, or a Bible study leader, or we ourselves, one on one with each other. In the body of Christ we are called under the leading of the Holy Spirit to speak truth to one another. Paul is saying, “As people speak truth into your life, don't despise that. Listen to it.”

But he follows that up with the admonition, “Examine everything carefully.” We are not to accept everything people say without thinking about it. He says to examine what is said carefully. Ask God, “Is this your voice, Lord? Show me the truth in what is being said to me. Let your Spirit guide me to understand it.”

1 Thessalonians 5:21

When a person or a truth is proven, hold it fast. Hold fast to all that is good. Do not let a good person go: learn from him. Do not let a good doctrine or exhortation go: hang on to it, live and practice it, and teach it to others.

1 Thessalonians 5:22

What a powerful prayer Paul prays for them in verse 23...

“May God, who is committed to you, continue to make you whole people, so that every part of you—body, soul, and spirit—is transformed into the likeness of Christ, so that you will be able to one day stand before Christ and worship Him and praise Him forever as you live with Him.”

Expecting to see Jesus Christ is a great motivation for holy living.

1 Thessalonians 5:24

God enables us to do His will. We cannot live the Christian life without the help of God. This verse speaks of the Divine help. When God calls, God enables.

Everything God calls you to be and to do, he promises that he will accomplish in you. It's all the work of his grace. This is not a call for you to

get out your to-do list and make sure you're doing all your spiritual things. It's a call to trust God's work in your life and in other's lives. He is forming us into the image of Christ, preparing us for an eternal life in his presence. So Paul says, "Just enter into that. Believe that the One who has called you to that end is going to do it." What a faithful and wonderful God he is, and what an incredible promise that is! God supplies us with all that we need to grow and obey.

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Paul closes this wonderful letter with some words of personal greeting. Again we see his heart for them. "*Brethren, pray for us. Greet all the brethren with a holy kiss. I adjure you by the Lord to have this letter read to all the brethren. The grace of our Lord Jesus Christ be with you.*" Once again we are reminded just from these words how much he loved these people, how much he admired what God was doing in their lives. Paul comes to the end with the passion that God would continue His work in this church and in their lives.

It is tragic when believers neglect or ignore the local church. No family is perfect and no local church is perfect; but without a family to protect him and provide for him, a child would suffer and die. The child of God needs the church family if he is to grow, develop his gifts, and serve God.

