

March 14, 2021
Sunday Evening Service
Series: 1 Thessalonians
Community Baptist Church
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Greer, SC 29650
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MORE CHARACTERISTICS OF THE CHURCH

1 Thessalonians 5:16-22

Community Baptist Church, like most churches, yeah, like most organizations, has a mission statement that articulates what we intend to do or accomplish. It reads: “To glorify God as we attempt to fulfill the ministry that Jesus Christ has given us through obedience to God's Word and submission to the Holy Spirit.”

You also know that this church has a purpose statement included near the beginning of the Constitution. It reads: “The purpose for which Community Baptist Church is established shall be to maintain spiritual and religious worship of God; to bear a united witness to the faith of its members; to spread the gospel of Jesus Christ; to contend for the faith once for all delivered to the Christian Church; to accept as its supreme task the evangelization of the world; to yield unto God so as to be a constant Spirit-filled witness to those around us; and to build up its constituency in the most holy faith. We further purpose to engage in any ministry to which the Holy Spirit shall lead us.”

Great. That covers the question “What is the purpose of the Church?” pretty well. Frankly, that statement might be a bit wordy and maybe somewhat vague. In a word, what is the purpose of the Church? Not just Community Baptist Church but the Church universal as Christ intended?

Ask that question in a survey and you will likely hear that the chief purpose, the most important thing that church can do is tell the Good News. That is evangelism. Or someone might say, “No, the chief purpose of the church is to do good works outside the assembly in the culture.” That is in a sense socialism. Still another might conclude that the purpose of the church is to focus within and do

good works inside the church. That is monasticism. And still another person might conclude that we the Church need to give ourselves wholly to the study of the Bible. That might be called intellectualism.

All of those things should be found in the activity of the local church. But none of those things constitute the main purpose of the Church. The first, the primary, the most important thing the members of the Body of Christ must attend to is conformity to Christ. We studied that idea a few months ago from Paul's letter to the church in Ephesus.

We must do, *The work of ministry, building up the body of Christ until we all attain to the unity of the faith and of the knowledge of the Son of God, to mature manhood, to the measure of the stature of the fullness of Christ, so that we may no longer be children, tossed to and fro by the waves and carried about by every wind of doctrine, by human cunning, by craftiness in deceitful schemes. Rather, speaking the truth in love, we are to grow up in every way into him who is the head, into Christ (Ephesians 4:13-15).*

What does that ministry of conforming to Christ look like? Last week we considered some of the characteristics of the true Church as Paul listed them in 5:14-15. In fact, the description of the characteristics that should be found in the local Church began in 5:11-12. First, there was the matter of the people's relationship with the leaders of the local assembly (vv.11-13). Then we moved on to consider the relationship with each other which included admonition, encouragement, help, and patience to be shown to all. Now, in the text before us the emphasis has moved from attitudes and actions demonstrated toward each other to attitudes and actions that should characterize our relationship toward the Chief Shepherd and toward the Holy Spirit. In the few verses of our text, there are eight imperatives, commands, that clearly spell out our right relationship with our Lord and issues that impact our walk with Him.

Attitudes and Actions Related to the Good Shepherd (vv.16-18).

The first command, *rejoice always (v.16)*, simply requires what it says. We the Church should be joyful. We are to be characterized by a state of happiness or well being. And a lot of reasonable people respond, “You're kidding, right?” Christians have the spiritual insight

to know that the world is full of wickedness. Everything around us in the world is evil and sin, and sinful people doing and saying things that offend our good and holy God and Savior. And we ourselves, living in this flesh, tend to offend God. How are we supposed to be happy all the time, characterized by joy?

The Stoics developed an alternative idea to deal with this issue. They, like some modern Christians, were all about sobriety, somberness, and just downright dispirited. This attitude was due in some part to their basic philosophy that all emotions are defective judgments. Therefore, they developed the doctrine of the “good disposition” apart from affection. That is not the same as being joyful.

This is not just a command from one apostle. Our Good Shepherd, says, “Be happy.” That attitude really is the foundation of the beatitudes. Nine times in those opening words in the Sermon on the Mount, Jesus characterized the born again person as being blessed (*makarios*) which simply means to be happy. Having laid down these nine characteristics that should result in happiness for Christians, Jesus gave a command using the exact word of our text (*kairo*). Jesus told us to “*Rejoice and be glad, for your reward is great in heaven, for so they persecuted the prophets who were before you*” (Matthew 5:12).

Okay, maybe we can be happy once in awhile if we really work at it. That isn’t what the command requires. More accurately we who are the Church are to always be joyful. The present tense command expects this happiness to be a continuing characteristic. That means that even when we are having a “bad day” we need to stop and consider why and what is happening in our soul.

Going back to Jesus’s command that we should be rejoicing and be glad, we learn the reason why this should be our characteristic. We should be joyful because our reward in heaven is great. Is eternal life really eternal to you? Is there a chance that we are not going to make it into heaven? Is it possible that circumstances or people in this life will keep us from gaining our eternal reward? Questions like that inform us that we lose our heavenly happiness when we focus too much on earthly, passing stuff and situations. When life looms larger than Christ and eternity to us, we will almost certainly lose our joy.

We will of course have difficult days and times of sadness. But we should not stay in sadness, gloom, or depression because of who we are in our relationship with Christ and the future He promises us. We can certainly understand why this instruction was necessary to the new Christians in Thessalonica who suddenly faced resistance and persecution because of their faith in Christ. Paul certainly did not encourage them to be silly, unrealistic, and live in denial of their circumstances. Rather, in spite of the trials they were facing, they needed to find joy in their newfound relationship with Christ.

That is easier done when we are practicing talking to Him all the time. *Pray without ceasing* (v.17) is the second command for what is supposed to characterize the Church. It simply requires us to speak our requests to the Shepherd. This is one of the most common words for prayer, not only in the New Testament but in the Greek language as a whole. Even pagans would talk to their make-believe gods. In secular Greek this word is commonly found as a term for invoking a supposed deity, often in a vow.

Christians find the best pattern for prayer in the Good Shepherd Himself. He teaches us how to experience all the power of the Triune God in prayer. He teaches us by His example the joy the child of the heavenly Father has in talking to Him. He teaches us the need and practice of secret prayer.

And at the same time Jesus our Shepherd teaches us the practice of continual prayer, “praying without ceasing.” According to this command, we are supposed to speak to the Shepherd continually. There should not be a time in the Christian’s life when we are not prepared to talk to our Father in heaven. Our Good Shepherd demonstrated His continuity in prayer. He prayed before He healed needy people. He prayed before He multiplied the bread and the fish. He prayed for individuals like Peter. He prayed in the presence of crowds. He prayed in joy (Matthew 11:25). He prayed in human agony in the Garden and on the cross. Sometimes the prayer was a very brief sentence, a sigh, a glance toward heaven.

Like our Master, we should always be ready and in an attitude of prayer, unlike the Old Testament Jew who had to go through a ritual of purification before he could offer sacrifice and praise to God.

Third, God commands us to *give thanks in all circumstances* (v.18). This command requires us to express gratitude to the

Shepherd. Obviously, this action is connected with the previous command about prayer. Thanksgiving is a particular form or kind of prayer. It is an attitude of gratitude as we talk to our Heavenly Father. The Greek word for *thanks* can be expressed in ideas like, to pray, to ask, to beseech, or to petition in prayer. It is all about prayer. Especially for the people of the true God, thanksgiving is directed to Him.

This particular word is used repeatedly to describe how Jesus gave thanks before passing the bread and cup at the Last Supper. Paul thanked God for opportunity to meet fellow Christians on the way to Rome (Acts 28:15). Paul thanked God for Christians in the church at Rome (Romans 1:8). Paul was thankful that the Thessalonians received the gospel as the Word of God (1 Thessalonians 2:13).

While it is likely that this idea of thankfulness applies most accurately to our talking and petitions to God, at the same time we can and should express gratitude to other people. A continuing attitude of gratitude will be quick to say, “Thanks” to others. An introverted or selfish attitude seldom expresses thanksgiving.

Like the previous two commands, this requirement for us to be thankful pushes us to the extreme. Our Lord Jesus requires us to express gratitude regardless of circumstances. Often it is difficult to remember or realize that we are to be thankful. In fact, expressing thanksgiving to other people might be more common or natural than expressing thanksgiving to God.

But in addition to a natural aversion to be thankful, our Shepherd’s plan for us is to be thankful to Him in all circumstances. That not only seems to be humanly impossible, it IS humanly impossible. No right thinking person would ever expect you to be thankful when someone has been unkind to you, misunderstood you, or worse, persecuted you. But about the time we feel pretty justified in being unthankful, God reminds us to read the story in Acts 16. The preaching and ministry of Paul and Silas in Philippi was not much appreciated. Eventually sinners attacked them and, *The crowd joined in attacking them, and the magistrates tore the garments off them and gave orders to beat them with rods. And when they had inflicted many blows upon them, they threw them into prison, ordering the jailer to keep them safely. Having received this order, he put them into the inner prison and fastened their feet in the stocks. About midnight*

Paul and Silas were praying and singing hymns to God, and the prisoners were listening to them (Acts 16:22-25).

It is humanly easy to thank God when you receive your stimulus check or when someone does some random act of kindness to you. But God’s will is for us to be thankful even in the hard times because it is an expression of complete and full trust in His perfect will for us and His sovereign control of all things.

The fourth statement, that we must do God’s will, is not a command. *For this is the will of God in Christ Jesus for you (v.18b).* This is kind of a blanket statement that explains the previous imperatives. These traits are God’s will. On one hand, the application of this truth reminds us that it is God’s will for us to be thankful in all kinds of circumstances. But it seems more likely that the matter of God’s will applies to His desire for us to be joyful in all things, to pray without ceasing, to be thankful for everything.

These attitudes and actions are not only possible for the person who trusts Christ, but will become more and more evident as we mature because God’s will centers in Christ Jesus. All of our spiritual growth, maturity, sanctification is rooted in and directs us to Jesus Christ. Therefore, our faith is in Christ, not in circumstances or self. We believe God will do what He promises because all of His promises are guaranteed in Christ. *For all the promises of God find their Yes in him. That is why it is through him that we utter our Amen to God for his glory (2 Corinthians 1:20).* We are trusting Christ to use these commands to make us more like Himself.

Also, our identification is in Christ. At salvation we are placed in a new and unique relationship with Christ. We are in Him like a branch is connected in the vine. All things are in Him and of Him. Therefore, the will of God is carried out through these commands because they reflect His character.

And again, this is the will of God in Christ Jesus because He is our source of blessing. Any level of righteousness we attain is because of our connection to Christ. Therefore, we will never rejoice just because we are happy, or pray as we should just because we are disciplined, or be thankful for everything outside of Christ. The will of God develops and is manifested in our lives because of our identification in Christ.

Attitudes and Actions Related to the Holy Spirit (vv.19-22).

Now our text reveals four imperatives that impact our relationship to the Holy Spirit. First, we are commanded, *Do not quench the Spirit (v.19)*. This is an important command simply because, if we are really part of the Church, we have a relationship with the Holy Spirit.

It is significant that just in this letter and one reference in Paul's second letter to these same people, there are four statements about our relationship to the Holy Spirit. First, our introduction to the gospel is by the power of the Holy Spirit (1 Thessalonians 1:5). Then, in the miracle of salvation God gives us the Holy Spirit (1 Thessalonians 4:8). Third, as the Holy Spirit abides in us, we are having joy even in the face of trials or suffering (1 Thessalonians 1:6). And finally, the Spirit's ministry is to sanctify us, make us more like Christ by the truth of the Bible (2 Thessalonians 2:13).

Therefore, because we are so related to the Holy Spirit of God, we have the command to stop quenching Him. This again is a present tense verb. But here it is found with the negative particle and means stop doing what you are doing. To quench means to stop progress, to extinguish as a fire, to cause a fervent activity to cease. We are always in danger of stopping the sanctifying, teaching, comforting, encouraging, testifying ministry of the Holy Spirit in our lives. We stop the process of His work by sinning. The act of quenching His influence is sin.

Let's think of some practical applications of this principle. It is sin for us to allow anything or anyone to become more important to us than God is. In the broad definition that is idolatry. God is offended by our disaffection, our disloyalty, our lack of attention. In showing slight consecration to Christ, we are resisting, putting out the Holy Spirit's work of conforming us to our Lord's image.

But another aspect of this command is very important. It is possible that some people were quenching the work of the Holy Spirit in others. How so? The Holy Spirit gave instruction for the people through one of God's chosen messengers, but a "Spirit-quencher" despised it, criticized the person or the message, and influenced others to reject it.

Therefore, we are not surprised to read the second negative command, that we are not to *despise prophecies (v.20)*. The implication from this command is obvious. We will have a response to prophecies. A bit of review is in order at this point. We are first introduced to prophecies in the Old Testament. God told Abimelech that Abraham was a prophet. Moses and Aaron were prophets. In what way were there men prophets? Did they tell the future? They were simply messengers for God, men who conveyed the words of God to other people.

In later years, the Prophet became a most significant office in Jewish culture. Men like Samuel, Elijah, Elisha, Isaiah, Jeremiah, and a host of others were God's spokesmen (and sometimes spokeswomen). God gave them precise messages to declare to God's people or, on occasion, messages for people who were not God's people. The key to understanding the nature of prophecy is that it was God's message for a people and a time. But prophecy was not always a foretelling of the future.

The prophet who declared God's message was critical in the early Church. Jesus built His Church through these servants. We learned that in the study of Paul's letter to the Ephesians where he wrote, *And he gave the apostles, the prophets, the evangelists, the pastors and teachers (Ephesians 4:11)*. They were important messengers to deliver God's words before the New Testament was complete. Sometimes they gave explanations of the Old Testament messages. Sometimes they gave unique, completely new teaching from God.

At the completion of the New Testament, the whole Bible, the gift of receiving and communicating new revelation from God ceased. It was no longer necessary because the Church has all the information God desires for us to have. But, it is fair to conclude that the gift of proclaiming the completed message of God in the Bible is still valid and active.

Therefore the necessary command is that people stop treating God's message lightly. Applied to the early Church, this required the people to highly esteem unique revelation that God gave through the prophets. Applied to us, God expects us to highly value and esteem the Bible and messages taught/preached from the Bible.

Third, we are to test everything and hold the good: *but test everything; hold fast what is good (v.21)*. The command is for us to continue putting all things to the test. The practice requires us to try to learn the genuineness of something by examination and testing. Often this testing process is carried out through actual use. Ultimately, the command is for us to test, to examine, to try to determine the genuineness of something.

In this case, the object of our testing is *all things*. No doubt we should weigh all matters, all decisions of life by Bible principles. But here the context indicates all things that are being taught. Do not take the message declared or preached at face value. While not despising the sermon, put it to the test. Examine it against Scripture like the Bereans did. Notice with whom God contrasted the sincere Christians who put proclamations to the test to prove they were genuine. *Now these Jews were more noble than those in Thessalonica; they received the word with all eagerness, examining the Scriptures daily to see if these things were so (Acts 17:11)*.

And having put all teaching (especially) to the test to prove that it measures with God's Word, we are to continue to hold fast to what proves to be good. When the Bible confirms, affirms a truth spoken, hold it fast. In modern application this is the same as the instruction to hold fast to the Word of God. As Paul instructed the Philippian believers, we are to be *holding fast to the word of life, so that in the day of Christ I may be proud that I did not run in vain or labor in vain (Philippians 2:16)*.

Finally, we are commanded to abstain from every form of evil (v.22). At the outset we must understand that this requires us to deal with forms of evil. A form is that which is seen, the physical manifestation, as it appears to be. More exactly, the word means a kind, a sort of, a species. Sin is manifested in many forms or kinds. Therefore, this command has to do with how we handle sin.

When we have identified kinds or types of sin, we must continue to hold them away. Keep a distance from that which is manifested as sin. This is not a command to avoid everything that everyone else is of the opinion is sin. That is impossible given the broad array of opinions, experiences, and personalities. Rather, having put all things to the test, when Scripture identifies a manifestation of sin, avoid that thing. On a second level, this does

mean that we avoid practices or things, when in our brother's presence, that we know will cause our brother to stumble.

Here are eight clear commands (not suggestions) for successfully living life in the Body of Christ. There are four habits we need to pursue and four we need to avoid. The result will be a fellowship, an assembly of people who demonstrate genuine love for each other.