

1 Thessalonians – Lesson 12

Paul's Final Instructions

Read 1 Thessalonians 5:12-28

1. Review 1 Thessalonians 5:1-11. Define what Paul means by "*the day of the Lord*." What does he expect true followers of Christ to be doing in *anticipation* of that day?

The day of the Lord is, for Paul, the future event in which Christ returns to the earth, inaugurating a number of other events: the resurrection of the dead, the judgment of individuals and nations, the destruction of the wicked, the establishment of the new heavens and the new earth, and the inauguration of the kingdom of God. It is a day of *high anticipation*, for it is the day when the hope of the elect is secured; when their physical bodies are transformed into glorious, eternal ones and they are secured from all of the effects of sin forevermore in the presence of Christ Jesus. Therefore, Paul expects true believers to be *living in anticipation* of that date: doing the works of sanctification that is the will of God for them, being ready to meet Christ in obedience towards holiness *in this life*. Thus, regardless of if the believer meets Christ when he returns (i.e., while still alive) or meets Christ at death, the believer is to be striving in the pursuit of holiness, "getting ready" for the day of glorification promised to begin when Christ returns.

2. (a) Who is Paul *likely* referring to in 5:12-13a as those who "*are over you in the Lord*?" What does he imply they are *doing* in the church? What kind of *attitude* does he expect towards them?

Paul is likely referring to the elders of the church as those who are "*over you*" in the Lord. These are the men who are leading the church to bring the believers further along in the process of sanctification; preaching and teaching so that everyone who confesses Christ is also working to be conformed to his image in sanctification. They are leading both through the teaching office and by example; they are working "*among*" the church as those *who are also* striving to grow in holiness and obedience and submission to Christ, as the head of the church. Paul expects believers to have the attitude of "esteeming" them, giving them an honor in which they are able to (then) call the believer to that process of holiness. In other words, Christians are to treat their elders with a kind of deference that says, "we trust you as having been called out by Christ to this office, therefore, lead us to him through the means of grace he has given to you."

- (b) What do you think Paul means that the believers are "*to be at peace among yourselves*" (5:13b)?

To be "*at peace among yourselves*" is (undoubtedly) a call for the church to be *unified*: to be a group of fellow believers who have put aside trivial things that may cause friction or faction in the body. To be at peace, as Christians, is to live *in the peace* that one has with God in Christ: to recognize that our rebellious state before God has been fully satisfied before him by the atonement of Christ, thus to live in harmony with others. To put aside *personal happiness* and allow others the "freedom" to be themselves; to not become "incensed" over the personal differences we have with others, even to the point of being willing to forgive others of their sin against us. In other words, it is to promote an attitude of *humility*, to accept differences and petty slights, and to keep the reputation of the church before the world as an institution of harmony and love.

(c) List the various admonitions Paul gives to the church in 5:14-15. What *general* principle is Paul applying to the church from a biblical worldview?

Paul lists a number of *horizontal* actions and attitudes that Christians are to have towards one another: to admonish the idle (i.e., to push those who show signs of laziness to be about the work of supporting their families and to pursue the goals of a believer); to encourage the fainthearted (i.e., to help those whose pursuit of holiness is difficult due to prevailing sin); help the weak (i.e., to work alongside those who do not have the strength, physically, emotionally, or spiritually, to accomplish their work, either in the world or in the church); be patient with all (i.e., recognize that not everyone is mature or fully able to work at the same pace as yourself); and, repay no one evil for evil (i.e., do not seek to “right” wrongs committed against you, but allow some things to pass, even if you are personally hurt by them). The general principle of a Christian worldview in all of these is this: Christians find their energy in the Lord, and strive to serve him with all their heart, soul, mind, and strength. The believer knows that life is hard, and that sanctification requires effort, both to do *positively* what is needed in life, as well as to *avoiding* those things that are sinful. A Christian worldview sees the Christian life as a *battle* (see 5:8); we are to *work hard* to accomplish the goal of being fully made into the image of Christ.

3. (a) From 5:16-18, what *attitude* does Paul expect the Thessalonians to maintain?

Paul lists a number of *attitudes* that should characterize what it means to be a follower of Christ: rejoice always (i.e., find praise of God in every circumstance, recognizing that all things, whether good or evil, are ordained by God for his glory and our good); pray without ceasing (see 3b below); and give thanks in all circumstances (i.e., give thanks to God in every circumstance; see 3c below). The follower of Christ is one who, knowing what God has promised and what God has done in Christ, finds an attitude of praise, thanksgiving, and prayer to surround every reaction he has to life, regardless of whether life is easy or hard.

(b) How can a Christian “pray without ceasing?”

Obviously, Paul is not suggesting in this command that Christians are *only* to be praying, and never doing anything else! Certainly he understands that the believer, like everyone else, has to put effort and energy and time into other, more mundane things, like working, sleeping, eating, etc. So, to pray “*without ceasing*” is to have an *attitude* of prayer *in every other activity*. It is to be filled with praise and thanksgiving to God in every circumstance (see 3a above). It is to be regularly lifting up to the Lord words of praise and thanksgiving while doing everything else; it is to be *ever mindful* of the work of God all around us, and to be regularly communicating our worship and adoration to God for what he is doing. It is, also, to be seeing the world through the lens of *biblical revelation*: to see life and its realities through the revelation God has given us in his Word, and to ask how each situation is a part of that revelation. This becomes our “prayer,” in that we become more and more “mindful” of God’s direct providence in our lives, and we communicate with him *as though he is with us step by step*.

(c) Why are believers to be thankful “*in all circumstances?*” If this is the “*will of God*” for the believer, how is this attitude connected to the work of “*Christ Jesus for you?*”

Paul knows that not all circumstances in life are “good” or “enjoyable”; life is filled with pain and misery (as he would so aptly confess). However, even in the midst of trouble, the Christian, by virtue of both his regeneration and the revelation of God given to him through the Word by the Spirit, recognizes the “purposes” of God in it. As in Romans 8:28, God is working every circumstance in life to the *specific, predestinated* end of our glorification, as his elect. Therefore, the Christian is able to be “thankful” in every circumstance; not for the suffering itself, *but for what that suffering will accomplish in the heart and mind of the believer*. For Paul to say that this is the “*will of God*” for the believer is to say that the believer *understands* this truth; he understands that God has *purposed* for us to suffer as a part of living in this world, but that the *hope* of that suffering (and why we can be thankful for it!) is that God will use it to transform us more and more into the image of Christ. Through the suffering we learn patience, and we come to *empathize* with the work of Christ; we see his suffering “through a better lens” as we suffer, and we find ourselves *not* taking that suffering for granted. As Paul articulated in Philippians 3:10, the true meaning of life is to “*share in his sufferings*” so that we might “*become like him*” in his death (i.e., in his purpose for us in all of life).

4. (a) What do you think it means to “*quench the Spirit*” (5:19)? List some ways that Christians are tempted to quench the Spirit in their daily lives.

To “*quench*” something is to cover it in such a way that it is diminished (or, as in the case of a candle, goes out). It is to *resist* the work of the Spirit such that he is not having success in building up our holiness, as we fail to cooperate with his leading and submit to him. To quench the Spirit is to diminish his work, even in subtle ways, not “giving in” to the clear leading that he gives through the Word or the church. We quench the Spirit by failing to be students of the Word, giving it only “lip service” as to its importance, or continuing to indulge in besetting sin without striving to put it to death, as the Spirit would lead us to do.

(b) What do you think it means to “*despise prophecies*” (5:20)? How would a believer go about “*testing everything*” (in the context of prophecies; 5:21)?

To “*despise*” something is to treat it with disrespect, to give it little attention because you believe it is foolish or unworthy of your attention. Prophecies, in the New Testament sense, are not about foretelling of the future, but of statements of doctrine or truth that are applied to life from the revelation of God in Scripture. Prophecies are applications of the Word of God to life, about things that God has made known to believers *as a part of his expectations to holiness* that is predestined for the elect. Therefore, to “*despise prophecies*” is to resist the application of God’s word to life, to ignore or downplay the value of the preaching and teaching of Scripture to one’s life. It is to disrespect or *intention* of Christ’s position as Lord when he speaks to us through his Spirit via the Word, and to *not* put into practice the things called for by him. By contrast, Christians are to “*test everything*”; they are to be sure that every “application” called for by the preaching and teaching of the Word is *consistent* with the message of Scripture. They are not simply to “believe” every call to action issued under the guise of Scripture, but are to test to see if those calls are consistent with what it means to pursue *holiness*.

5. (a) Describe the *content* of 5:23-24. How do these words correspond to the *rest* of the letter?

These verses are either 1) a doxology: a statement expressing worship of God in the face of his glory and honor, or 2) a prayer: a statement by Paul asking God *specifically* to accomplish his will in the lives of the Thessalonians *in accordance with* what he has just commanded them to do (i.e., the imperatives of vv. 12-22). Based on the letter as a whole, it seems clear that Paul is *praying* for the church (one he is no longer able to lead directly) to be held fast in the faith, to continue to follow Christ, to serve the Lord in full obedience, and to fulfill the intentions of God as to his will for them, their sanctification. He wants them to find *encouragement* in knowing that Christ will return, but that they will seek to be *fully obedient to the will of God* while they wait for it to come about.

(b) Summarize the final words of 1 Thessalonians in 5:25-28.

The final words of the letter are simply some *personal words* to friends in that place: a request for prayer, a call to greet one another with a holy kiss (i.e., a sense of true kinship); an oath over them that they would read this letter *out loud* in the assembly (i.e., to be sure that everyone hears it); and a final call for the grace of the Lord Jesus Christ to come over them.

6. What do you think is the most important *lesson* you learned from 1 Thessalonians?

The first letter of Paul to the Thessalonians is an encouragement to *sanctification*: it begins with Paul outlining in depth his relationship with the church in the past, and what he expects the believers to be doing *from this point forward*. The church is young and ignorant of many things (due to its position in the history of the Church Age), but Paul is confident that they have *enough* instruction to know what is important. Yes, they have questions about the future, and (more specifically) the promise of the Lord to return. But, the answers Paul gives are designed to turn them from a focus on the future *to a focus on the immediate task of serving Christ and being made into his image in sanctification of sin*. In other words, the entire letter is Paul saying to them, “you know what to do, now go and do it.” Namely, you know that being a follower of Christ is to be busy growing in that faith, stomping out sin and temptation, and preparing yourself in obedience to Christ for an eternity of being in his presence. It is *not* a letter about if or when Christ will return (as is so often assumed), but a letter about a people living for the work that God has prescribed *for today*.