

1 Thessalonians 5:12-28 | A Set Apart Lifestyle

Written by John Fox | 7.9.2023

Text: 1 Thessalonians 5:12-28

Title: A Set Apart Lifestyle

FCF: Laziness, selfishness, strife

Shaft: Let God sanctify you because he will do it (v.23)

INTRODUCTION

Series End & Presupposition of Christian Growth

We have been in a sermon series through 1 Thessalonians. This week we finish the small letter with 1 Thessalonians 5:12-28. Throughout the letter Paul has demonstrated his care for the Thessalonians and heartfelt desire for spiritual growth in Christ. Here at the end, Paul tells the Thessalonian church what their Christian community should look like as they seek to live together as God's set apart people.

Paul has a key presupposition for believers in Jesus that emerges back in chapter 4:1.

4 Additionally then, brothers and sisters, we ask and encourage you in the Lord Jesus, that as you have received instruction from us on how you should live and please God—as you are doing—do this even more.

I have this presupposition as well. If you are a believer in Jesus here today, then presume that you desire to grow into Christlikeness. It's what binds us together as brothers and sisters. We see the communal nature with the holy kiss and reading of the letter at the very end as well.

Main Point

Main Point: Believers in Jesus will become like Jesus— together.

Points: This passage shows us five essential elements of a set apart Christian community.

1. Leaders (v.12-13)
2. Members (v.14-15)
3. Attitudes (v.16-18)
4. Spirits (v.19-22)
5. Blessings (v.23-28)

BODY

1. Leaders recognized for their work

1 Thessalonians 5:12-13

12 Now we ask you, brothers and sisters, to give recognition to those who labor among you and lead you in the Lord and admonish you, 13 and to regard them very highly in love because of their work. Be at peace among yourselves.

Labor

This is not a selfish command by Paul. It's humble. It's a beautiful thing, and rare. We did this a couple of weeks ago with Pastor Aaron. And I have to say, great job! How many places in the world can you go to hear people speaking well of others? Not your daily news source! It's entirely the opposite. But Paul calls believers to act differently. He says, "recognize", or "respect" those who labor over, lead, and admonish you. What does this mean?

It means that these leaders "labor" or "work hard" among the members of the church. This is difficult or exhausting labor that is wearisome. It's taking other people's problems as your own.

Lead

Literally this means those who "are over you." These leaders take on other people's problems and they are set up over them for their protection and care, often as a benefactor.

Admonish

These leaders also admonish. We don't like this word. It involves correcting doctrinal and moral errors. This may make us uncomfortable, but this is why a leader is worthy of respect.

Gene L. Green Quote

An author would not employ this word to describe the task of imparting information.... While personal correction has almost become anathema in the church today, ancient opinion was that correction by others was profitable for a person's well-being. "To admonish" was considered one of the primary responsibilities of parents toward their children, of leaders toward their congregations, and of the various members of the congregation toward their brothers and sisters in the faith.¹

We live in a culture that places such an emphasis on self expression and autonomy that it's hard for us to stomach the idea of someone trying to explicitly change our conduct. But there's something difficult for the Thessalonians here as well.

¹ Gene L. Green, The Letters to the Thessalonians. The Pillar New Testament Commentary. Pg. 250.

Whereas we have a problem with anyone telling us what to do, Paul's audience undoubtedly had a very difficult time with this instruction because it placed so much emphasis on giving honor to people doing leading. In Roman culture you have honor to people of status. Some of these leaders probably did have high social status. But Paul calls for honor based off of demonstrated leadership, whatever the class.

How can we regard leaders in love? There are many ways we should consider, but I'll give you one. Give them the benefit of the doubt. When a church leader takes the initiative to point something out in your life that is sensitive and may be a problem, consider it and try to believe that they are doing it because they love you.

Whether it is substance abuse, codependency, gossip, strife, or poor parenting, it is loving for leaders in the church to tell a brother or sister when they may need to change their behavior.

Question: Do you have anyone like this in your life? You desperately need godly leaders of a local church in your life to help you see your blindspots.

But this isn't only a job for church leadership. Every believer should be engaged in ministering to one another as well.

2. Members engaged in ministry

1 Thessalonians 5:4-15

14 And we exhort you, brothers and sisters: warn those who are idle, comfort the discouraged, help the weak, be patient with everyone. 15 See to it that no one repays evil for evil to anyone, but always pursue what is good for one another and for all.

There are four ways Paul gives us to think through how to not be passive as a believers in Jesus.

Warn the idle: This doesn't refer to the "lazy" but those who were disorderly or undisciplined. These are people who rejected Paul's Apostolic authority and teaching as evidenced by needing to address them again in the second letter. But Paul doesn't shy away from dealing with disobedience, he warns!

Comfort the discouraged: People who are timid or fainthearted are the most likely people to give up. Sometimes people just need a warm meal and a word of encouragement.

Help the weak: The weak here could be believers who are physically weak or sick, theologically weak (legalists), socially weak, or financially weak. It's hard to know. Regardless, we can say that it is the duty of any believer to lift up and support those who are crushed by society.

Be patient with them all: If you have any sense of how long the Lord Jesus has been maturing you, you will extend the same kind of patience to others in their Christian development.

Wouldn't it be amazing to live in a community like this? I think outworking is not repaying evil for evil but good. I find that incredibly comforting because I mess up sometimes. I'll help the idle, or warn the weak.

Hierocles/Socrates Quote

The ancient philosopher Hierocles referenced Socrates debating on the purpose of vengeance in the Roman world, saying, "we should imitate Socrates who, when someone said to him, 'May I die if I do not avenge myself on you,' replied, 'May I die if I do not make you my friend.'"²

Membership

In summary, it's not just leaders in a local church that bear the weight of everyone maturing in the faith. Every member of a local church has this responsibility as well.

This and other similar passages are why we practice membership as a church. If you are not a member of our church, I encourage you to sign up. Membership is how we know who is committed to living this kind of life together.

This reflects one of our values: **Growing together**. We believe moving from an attender to a member of a local church is how you grow up into maturity. And speaking as one of the pastors, we want this for you. We want you to grow up into maturity whether that is here or somewhere else.

Membership is how we move from the presupposition of growth in Christ to the expectation of it.

3. Attitudes of the heart

1 Thessalonians 5:16-18

16 Rejoice always, 17 pray constantly, 18 give thanks in everything; for this is God's will for you in Christ Jesus.

Moving on from talking about leaders and members Paul talks about the attitudes of heart that every believer should constantly have. Rejoicing, praying, and giving thanks are often talked about in relation to hours or minutes in a day. But it would be better to take this instruction to say that the believer's life should be characterized by these things.

² Ibid, 255. Footnote 224. Cited in Malherbe, *Moral Exhortation: A Greco-Roman Sourcebook*, 94.

Rejoice always: This is not a superficial response to bad things. It's a thriving connection to the joy of having a personal relationship with God through Christ. Do you have this?

Pray constantly: Throughout your work, family life, and recreation do you stop to pray? Are your prayers always need based, or do they include daily adoration?

Give thanks in everything: We are not to rejoice for sinful or broken things, but can you give thanks in the midst of them?

We often think of God's will here being "everything," but it's probably better to take all three things as God's will for us in Christ. Meaning, God wants us to be constantly rejoicing, prayerful, and thankful. These are things all believers can do freely. We just need to try.

4. Spirit-led lifestyle

1 Thessalonians 5:19-22

19 Don't stifle the Spirit. 20 Don't despise prophecies, 21 but test all things. Hold on to what is good. 22 Stay away from every kind of evil.

You can almost feel the fervor of Paul's desire for the Thessalonians spiritual maturity the closer he gets to the end of the letter. Before the final blessing he gives them five imperative (commands) related to the Spirit and the practice of prophecy.

Another way to say Paul's command here would be, "Do not put out the Spirit's fire." This is one of the strongest passages in the bible arguing for the operation of the gift of prophecy in the local church. It's hard to know the exact reason, but it's obvious that the Thessalonians had some bad experiences with the gift of prophecy and had put a prohibition on it. In fact, the Greek words for the first two imperatives literally mean "extinguish" and "annihilate."

However, as a manifestation of the Spirit's presence Paul called for the use of prophecy, but with regulation. What does this mean? In the ancient world, even at this time, divination was regularly practiced. Unlike other religions, though, Paul wants all prophecy to be tested, hold on to the good, and stay away from evil. The evil here is likely related to pagan divination practices.

So what is prophecy? Paul teaches on prophecy in 1 Corinthians 14 to say that its main purpose is to build up the community of faith. The way that I believe prophecy to work is that a believer has a sense of God's will for a person and humbly shares that with them. This is not a rash or boastful thing to do. Rather, any prophecy comes with humility because it might be wrong. Only God's word is true and all prophecies can be tested against it.

Good Example: If a Community Group member says to you that they feel like the Lord may have a time of difficulty ahead for you but you should trust him, or something more specific.

Bad Example: another believer tells you they believe you are lonely and the Lord wants you to consider an open marriage for comfort.

It is easy to either reject prophetic words or have an unhealthy fascination in them. Instead, believers are to seek to be led by the Spirit and test all things with God's perfect word. Paul would not be able to provide instruction for every conceivable issue under the sun. But if we follow the Spirit we will make God honoring decisions.

5. Blessings through and through

1 Thessalonians 5:23-25

23 Now may the God of peace himself sanctify you completely. And may your whole spirit, soul, and body be kept sound and blameless at the coming of our Lord Jesus Christ. 24 He who calls you is faithful; he will do it. 25 Brothers and sisters, pray for us also.

As Paul closes this letter he ends with a prayer that is a blessing that is effective.

What an overwhelming list of ways to live with each other as God's community. That's what I feel. And that's probably the legalist in me. If you heard all these things to do this morning as law, you heard wrong. There is difficulty in living the Christian life, but God will sanctify us.

Paul's prayer isn't because he thinks God won't help the Thessalonians. It's a way of lifting their need for spiritual maturity up to God. Perhaps a better translation is "May the God of peace himself sanctify you through and through." And it's not up to us. We have a part to play, but He will do it. Now for each other's maturity, let's join Paul and say, "May God, He will".

This blessing reminds me of Jesus' ascension.

50 Then he led them out to the vicinity of Bethany, and lifting up his hands he blessed them. 51 And while he was blessing them, he left them and was carried up into heaven. 52 After worshiping him, they returned to Jerusalem with great joy. 53 And they were continually in the temple praising God.

CONCLUSION

Main Point: Believers in Jesus will become like Jesus- together.