

Northolt Park Baptist Church

Christian Community – 1 Thessalonians 5:12-28

We began this series on 1 Thessalonians by suggesting that the letter would have much to tell us about what a *church* looks like, and what *ministry* in the church looks like. We reflected on the temptation for the church to borrow models from the worlds of management, entertainment, and therapy when thinking through how it should think of itself and how it should minister. It's no surprise that Paul doesn't bless any of those ideas in this letter.

No – the view of the church that emerges most strongly from this letter is that the church is the *family* of God. Paul has used the language of family all the way through, addressing the Christians as brothers and sisters of each other. He uses the word 'brothers' five times in this passage alone! He's called himself a *mother* and a *father* to the Thessalonians (2:7, 11). When he had to leave them suddenly, he said it was like being *orphaned* (3:17). He has called them to love one another (4:9-10), and to build one another up (4:18; 5:11).

So, it's clear, as with Paul's letters elsewhere, that what's in view here is the whole people of God. The Christian life is not meant to be a solitary life, but a *shared* life. We're not on our own, but in it together. We're not given gifts to do our own thing, but to build up the body of Christ. That's the way it is in God's design: we can't be the church on our own; we need each other; we belong to each other – worshipping together, learning together, witnessing together, being together, all of us – *together*. So, this passage tells us what a Christian church looks like – a Christian *community* – in our relationships to leaders, to each other, and to God.

1. A Led Community (5:12-13)

The first thing Paul says is that a Christian community will respect its leaders. We might struggle with that notion. There is an increasing sense that society struggles with

respecting those in authority, like politicians and lawyers, and even church leaders. We're all too aware, perhaps, of the dangers of leadership, that leaders can be proud and vain, more interested in power than people, more concerned with the prestige that comes with leadership rather than the opportunities to serve, more skilled at manipulating people than nurturing people.

That's why it might be especially important for us to take these words seriously, to acknowledge that the Christian community is one which recognises certain people as leaders. And it might be important too to note that Paul is not just talking about a *position* of leadership, but about a *person* of certain qualities – three qualities in particular (5:12). How are the leaders characterised? They are those who work hard among us, who are over us in the Lord and who admonish us.

First of all, then, Christian leaders are those who *labour*, who toil, who exert themselves on behalf of others – which suggests that leadership is not easy work. Then secondly, they are those who are *over us* in the Lord, which suggests those who direct, and protect, and care for us. And then thirdly, they are those who *admonish* us, meaning they warn and perhaps even correct us, turning us away from error.

And, given that leaders do this for us, what should be our attitude towards them? Paul tells us – verse 12 – we are to *respect* them, and – verse 13 – we are to hold them in high regard. We honour them, we esteem them.

When leaders are this kind of people – hard working, caring, admonishing; and when the rest of us are this kind of people – respecting them, esteeming them – then we will not be torn apart by jealousy, pettiness, or pride. We will, as Paul says at the end of 5:13, be able to live in peace with each other.

2. A Caring Community (5:14-15)

It is not just the leaders who are to care for the Christian community but also the rest of us who are to care for one another. Pastoral care is not provided just by the professionals but by the people.

Paul gets specific (5:14). Some were idle, others were weak, still others were timid. We need to care for each other in different ways at different times: sometimes that may involve warning, sometimes encouraging, sometimes helping, but always and for everyone we will be patient (see the final part of 5:14). We may do this when we gather together on Sundays; it may take place in house groups or meetings during the week, or when we meet as friends in twos or threes, or in phone calls or cards. It's a caring for one another which helps us grow in the faith together.

A community that behaves this way towards each other would mean that no-one would be left alone with their problems, no-one would have to feel isolated, no-one would be left to wallow in self-pity, no-one would be allowed to preen themselves too much, no-one would be able to emotionally blackmail anyone else.

Of course, we don't always manage to look after one another this way, and we have to acknowledge that. There'll be faults, failings, and misunderstandings. Occasionally there'll be gossip, some angry words will be exchanged, some promises will be broken, and there could even be a build up of resentment. What are we to do? Verse 15 tells us. When we fail each other, we make sure we don't pay back wrong for wrong: no retaliation; no attempts at personal revenge; no replaying of arguments in our head where we're always the winner, because the other person can't answer back. We have been reconciled to God through his Son, and reconciled to each other through the work of the Spirit, brought together as one body of Christ, one family. And so, says Paul, we are to be kind to each other and to everyone else.

3. A Worshipping Community (5:16-22)

We move from leadership to fellowship to worship. And we begin with a triad in 5:16-18.

- *Rejoicing ceaselessly* (5:16). Our moods go up and down, and can be affected by how healthy we are, or by those around us, or by things that happen to us. But joy in the Bible does not appear to depend on my mood. Christian joy is an understanding of the presence of God in our life, which becomes a source of strength.

Joy is a deep satisfaction. Can you think of a better God? Can you conceive of a better gospel? Can you imagine a more complete salvation? Those things transform us from somewhere deep inside, and give us a strength from the Lord which is our joy. We wake up in the morning with that, we face the day with that, we interact with people with that sense of joyful confidence in God and in what he has done for us in Jesus.

- *Praying continually* (5:17). Not 24 hours a day, but as an ongoing part of our lives, of our day, of our week... in the shower, in the car, waiting for the bus, walking down the corridors at work. There is the danger of prayer being the *spare* wheel in our lives rather than the *steering* wheel. Is it the thing that's locked away, pulled out only in an emergency, or is it the wheel that drives the car of our lives?

- *Thanking constantly* (5:18). Notice that we give thanks *in* all circumstances, not *for* all circumstances! And we are to do this because it is God's will for us. This is probably connected with prayer – so that in prayer we *thank* God, which means our prayers don't become extended shopping lists which are preoccupied with our own concerns. If we don't find it easy, we can use songs and hymns that we know, or read some of the psalms of thanksgiving in Scripture and make their words our own words.

There is a constancy of action in these three things – *always, constantly, in all circumstances*. At the heart of our rejoicing, praying, and thanking, is a *persistence*, a long-term attitude of the heart – like a steady pulse, which beats through everything we are and do.

But once again, we must remember that Paul is writing to a local church, and this would have been read in the first place to the church as a whole. We often take verses like these and apply them to ourselves as individuals, but the

verbs are plural, which means that this is what the *church* is called to be like. But Paul has more to say...

- *Listening wisely* (5:19-22). It's not always easy to know what the New Testament means when it speaks of prophecy. We can be fairly certain that prophecy is *not* a prediction about the future, and we can be fairly clear that prophecy *was* intended to build up the Christian community. It might be an insight into what Scripture means or how it applies to a particular situation. Good preaching might be said to be 'prophetic' in that it speaks powerfully into the lives of God's people, but prophecy is not limited to preaching.

So, Paul tells us not to put out the Spirit's fire, not to quench the Spirit, and not to treat prophecies with contempt. And yet every claim to the mind of the Spirit is to be tested. All Christians have the Spirit, and may know and speak God's mind and will. Everything spoken is to be taken seriously; but it is also tested. So, we listen to whatever message is claimed to come from God. But just as we do not believe in *papal* infallibility, so we do not believe in *pulpit* infallibility, and nor do we believe in *personal* infallibility. 'Prophecies' need to be weighed and tested wisely. And we don't need a *mystical* key to judge a prophecy; we need a *moral* key (5:21-22). Is it directing us towards good or towards evil? Is it building up the body of Christ or boosting someone's ego? Is it leading us towards God or away from God? Let's listen wisely, testing everything, holding on to the good, avoiding the evil.

4. A Holy Community (5:23-24)

Paul prays for the Thessalonians in 5:23-24, and as he does so, he brings together a number of the things he's already spoken about in the letter.

The NIV uses the word 'sanctify' in the prayer, which means holy or set apart. Paul prays that they will be a sanctified community, holy and pure. He prays that God will sanctify them through and through, and that their whole spirit, soul and body may be kept blameless until the second coming of Christ.

It's good that Paul closes his letter with a prayer. We can't simply muster up the effort to live the kind of life Paul describes, to be this kind of Christian community. We need God to break into our hearts and lives, to set us apart, to make us holy. We might trust that God *can* do it. But *will* he do it? Paul tells us in verse 24: 'The one who calls you is faithful and he will do it.'

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And so we come to the closing verses, the end of the letter. Even here, however, we learn things about the nature of the Christian community. We are to be a *praying* community. Having prayed for the Thessalonians, Paul now asks the Thessalonians to pray for him (5:25). And then, we are to be a *loving* community (5:26). A kiss was the socially-acceptable way of greeting and welcoming one another, a mark of family unity, of oneness. And we are to be a *listening* community, gathered around the word of God (5:27). And we are a community which is *founded on and nurtured by grace* (5:28). 'The grace of our Lord Jesus Christ be with you.' Amen.

Notes from a sermon preached by Antony Billington at Northolt Park Baptist Church on 9 December 2007.