

1 Thessalonians 5:12-28 – A healthy Christian Community.

Introduction

If share house living taught me anything, it was that helpful guidelines often equal healthy community. My experience in shared rentals taught me that where you have a list of agreed upon expectations (often stuck up on the fridge), the dishes stayed washed, people were more likely to stay friends, and the household just seemed to work and feel healthy. *Without* guidelines, dishes would often *not* get washed, people more likely to get annoyed at each other, and the house would more easily have unhealthy vibe to it. I remember in one share house, anxiously listening through the walls as a one of my housemates berated the other for having been woken up by the volume of his computer game. The shouting still haunts me.

A set of good guidelines can be the difference between a toxic living environment in which people avoid being home and a healthy living environment in which others love to drop over. I have lived in both kinds of houses.

Good guidelines make for a healthy community because they help us to do life together *well* for the long haul. This is true for a share house community. And it's true for a church community. You see, it's possible, for a church community – even one that has started well, to turn toxic through unspoken differences in expectations over how we should be relating and what we should be doing.

In our final passage tonight, Paul is leaving the Thessalonians with some final guidelines to help them to life together in a God-honouring way for the long haul. They had started out well as a church, Paul gives these guidelines to ensure they *continue* well beyond this letter. I think we have started 2021 well as a 5pm community. After a very difficult 2020, it's been wonderful to see so many of you returning with a willingness to learn, to grow and to serve where you can. But if we want to be a church that, not only starts the year well but continues well, we need to listen to the parting words of Paul to these ancient believers.

There are a lot of commands in this passage. I've grouped them into five general guidelines that if we follow as a community will help to keep us *healthy* church where Christ is honoured and people are loved: Here are five God-given guidelines from this passage that we're sticking on the church fridge so to speak:

1. Acknowledge the work of your leaders.
2. Minister relationally to one another.
3. Cultivate a culture of joyful thanksgiving.
4. Test the messages you hear.
5. Rely on your Faithful God.

Helpful guidelines for a healthy Christian community. Let's jump right in.

1. Acknowledge the work of your leaders.

First, a healthy church community is one that acknowledges the work of its leaders. Look at verses 12-13:

¹² Now we ask you, brothers and sisters, to **acknowledge** those who work hard among you, who care for you in the Lord and who admonish you. ¹³ Hold them in the highest regard in love because of their work. Live in peace with each other.

Now, I suspect some of you immediately struggle with the first item on the list here. The idea that God wants you to respect, let alone hold in the highest regard your church leaders might seem a little weird. I know when I think highest regard, I'm thinking neuro surgeon, astronaut, elite sports player, but not necessarily church leader. And particularly if you've been *burnt* by a Christian leader in the past this command might feel even more difficult.

Well, it's worth noting at this point that Paul is not saying that you should all respect and hold in high regard your church leader because, well He is a church leader. For Paul, it's not about the title they wear but the important work they do in teaching the life-giving gospel of Jesus and shepherd God's people. When Paul thought church leader, He thought hard working, caring and willing to admonish – that is, willing to correct and warn in a tactful way because they love the people they minister to and don't want to see them drifting away from the life that is in Jesus.

I don't actually think God is calling you to hold in the highest regard a leader who neglects their responsibility to teach the Bible (but prefers fluffy and warped messages that don't mention sin or judgment). I don't think this is a call to hold in the highest regard a leader who is abusive or controlling because that is contrary to the shepherd idea of a leader Paul has here.

But I praise God that the vast amount of church leaders I've come across have been the sort of person Paul speaks of. And as I reflect on the other pastors here at Bundy and the elders God has given you and all the GG, YG, and SS leaders what I see is a lot of hard work, care, and love that will say the hard stuff. So, what does it actually look like for you to hold your leaders in the "highest regard" with an attitude of love (v.13), *because of their work* among you.

Let me give you a few examples:

- I think it means actually listening to the teaching and counsel they give you. Now, as we'll see, you need to test all things (including the words of our leaders), but an attitude of respect and love says, "I'll take the time to consider what my leader is saying as I sit under their teaching or receive their biblical counsel, even when it might be hard." I will assume they are speaking out of love for me and therefore I won't keep them at arm's length or outright reject their words outright."
- I also think it means you take opportunities to encourage your leaders. Caring for Christians as a pastor/an elder, a GG leader, YG or SS teacher can be hard, emotional, and tiring. But words of encouragement, in a context like that, put wind in the sails of a leader and show them that you do value the work they do and that you want to see them keep going in their good work. There's a particular person that will occasionally send me an encouraging text – I refer to him as Barnabas – a name that Acts tells us means Son of encouragement.
- And I think it means being respectful and loving when you disagree with a leader or think they should do something differently. And this is important because Christians leaders are not infallible. Your leaders may have training and experience but we are still human and will still make mistakes. But an attitude of respect and

love can still be in play in those moments. I was speaking with someone recently and during the conversation they mentioned a recent moment in which they thought I could have been more thoughtful in how I said something. Now, it's never going to be pleasant to receive critique as a pastor, but, like this moment, it can be appreciated and welcomed when it comes with gentleness, respect and a clear motivation of love towards their leader/pastor.

You see, the more you respect and value all your leaders, as they work hard for you in their ministry, the more they will be encouraged and freed up to serve you in their teaching and pastoral care ministry. It's for your good that you stick to this guideline. That, I think is the message of Hebrews 13:17:

*¹⁷ Have confidence in your leaders and submit to their authority, because they keep watch over you as those who must give an account. Do this so that their work will be a joy, not a burden, for that would be of **no benefit to you**.*

You reap the benefits when you have an attitude of respect for those who care for you in the Lord. A healthy Christian community is one that acknowledges the work of the leaders God has given them.

2. Minister relationally to one another.

Second, a healthy church community is one in which the members minister relationally to one another. You see, although God has placed *leaders* in the church, he has not limited congregational ministry to them alone. You see it there in vv.14-15:

¹⁴ And we urge you, brothers and sisters, [not just you leaders] warn those who are idle and disruptive, encourage the disheartened, help the weak, be patient with everyone. ¹⁵ Make sure that nobody pays back wrong for wrong, but always strive to do what is good for each other and for everyone else.

A church stays healthy as members relationally minister to other members.

Sometimes you hear the language of being “called to the ministry” in reference to someone who has entered into Pastoral ministry. But there is a real sense here, in which God has actually called *you all* into the ministry with each other.

God is not calling you to simply be a *consumer* but a *contributor* when you enter a church community.

You see, the consumer mindset says: “I come to church primarily for me – I want the bible teaching, I want the good music, I want the good friendship.” I come to get, but not to give.

But the contributor mindset says: “I come to give as well as get. “These people sitting in this building are not just the responsibility of the pastor but of me. God also wants me to care for them. Me to warn, encourage, help... God also wants *me* to speak His word into their circumstances when I get the chance.”

Paul says something similar in Colossians 3:16:

*¹⁶ Let the message of Christ dwell among you richly as **you teach and admonish one another** with all wisdom through psalms, hymns, and songs from the Spirit, singing to God with gratitude in your hearts.*

A healthy church will have members ministering to members with the gospel.

I'm actually very grateful for the way I see "every member ministry" happening within our church. I know some of you have had those harder "warning" conversations. There have been countless times when I've seen people rallying around those who are feeling disheartened in the midst of struggle or feeling weak spiritually or physically. I've seen some of you exercising patience in the midst of conflict and thinking carefully about how not to repay wrong for wrong but striving to do what is good for each other (v.15). All this is God-honouring "every member ministry." Doesn't this radically transform our understanding of supper, or the social event after church – that stuff is not just a nice add on to the real ministry of the service – it is ministry, because it is the moment when you get the chance to relationally minister the gospel. Are you taking those opportunities?

The 5pm service will stay healthy as we minister to one another.

3. Cultivate joyful thanksgiving.

Third, a healthy church community is one that cultivates a culture of joyful thanksgiving.

Look at verse 16ff.

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

I met a guy at a Kinder sausage sizzle a couple of nights ago. And he was one of those people who just seems constantly happy. He did not stop smiling when he talked. But during the course of our conversation I realised that he wasn't just a happy guy, he was a deeply thankful guy. He told me that he and his family had come over from South Africa within the last two years and were desperately hoping to stay in Australia. He told me how they had known the fear of living in a place of high crime and danger. But how good it was to come here and experience such peace and safety. He spoke of how this contrast was often on his mind and how it made him so thankful. And, I could even see how it affected them in the Kinder context. They were one's helping on the BBQ, while people like me were hanging out in the background, avoiding responsibility.

It's easy, I think, for a Christian community to lose a sense of wonder at the contrast between with and without Jesus. It's easy to become so familiar with Jesus that our joy and thankfulness towards him starts to dry up. But we do have a contrast worth rejoicing over. Without Christ our whole lives are without true hope – we are lost in our sin and rebellion against God, we have constant desire to find meaning and purpose, but in all the wrong places, and always, God's looming day of judgment hanging over us.

But in Christ, our lives have hope! His death and resurrection brings forgiveness for our sin, we are not lost to God but found by Him. We have true purpose and meaning, because we have Christ. We do not fear condemnation – but eternal life. Like this guy at kinder, we need to keep coming back to the idea that God has taken us from a dangerous context (sin and death) and brought us to eternal peace and safety in knowing Christ. That's what will help us

to live out God's will for us (v.18) so that we keep rejoicing not just sometimes, but "always." That's what will give us motivation to pray not just occasionally, but "continually." That what will keep us thankful not just when we things are going well, "but in all circumstances." This is why we sing about the gospel, pray about it, preach about it every Sunday.

If you don't yet follow Jesus, know that He is calling you too, to come and be satisfied by him. To come and find life and know the joy of that wonderful contrast for yourself.

Have you become too familiar with the message of Jesus? Or does is He still bring a sense of joy to your heart?

A healthy church keeps the gospel front and centre of its mind so that it cultivates this kind of joyful thanksgiving.

4. Test what the messages you hear.

Fourth, a healthy church community is one that will test the messages it hears. This must be true of the sermons we listen to, or the bible studies we participate in for example – we must do what the Bereans did in Acts 17:11 and examine the Scriptures to see if what we hear from the speaker or leader is biblical and therefore true.”

But actually, Paul's not *directly* speaking of the message that come in our sermons or bible studies here is he? Paul focuses his attention specifically on prophecy here. Look at what he writes:

19 Do not quench the Spirit. 20 Do not treat prophecies with contempt 21 but test them all; hold on to what is good, 22 reject every kind of evil.

It would appear that in the Thessalonian church people were becoming suspicious and wary of prophecy. We know from 2 Thessalonians 2: 2 that the church at time was unsettled by certain prophesy that had claimed the return of Jesus had already happened. I think it's fair to say that the Thessalonians had become jaded by their experience with wacko prophecy.

And perhaps that's where some of you are at tonight. Perhaps you've had a bad experience with people claiming to be prophets or you've seen the misuse of possible prophecy and you're jaded by it, you're suspicious of it, perhaps even contemptuous of it.

Well, Paul's message to the Thessalonians and to us might come as a little surprising. He doesn't tell them to just steer clear of it all. What he does tell them is not to throw the baby out with the bath water.

True prophecy is a good work of the Spirit that shouldn't be quenched (v.19) nor should it be held in contempt. And therefore, while a discerning attitude is called for (v.21), a dismissive attitude is not called for (v.20) "Do not treat prophecies with contempt – test them all."

God's word is telling us to be discerning not dismissive.

To be discerning, we probably need to know a little bit about NT prophecy. The description of Agabus and his prophecies in Acts 11 and 21 and the discussion in 1 Corinthians 14 all paint the picture of prophecy as Spirit-given revelation from God for the express purpose of encouraging and comforting believers in particular contexts. I Corinthians 14:4:

³ But the one who prophesies speaks to people for their strengthening, encouraging and comfort.

But while Prophecy is described as a Spirit-promoted message to share for people's good, it is never described as being on the same authoritative level as Scripture.

The NT simple does not describe it as infallible like it does the Word of God. And that makes sense because we, as humans are not infallible. We can make mistakes in the way we perceive it, think about it, and therefore speak it to others, which is why it has to be weighed (1 Cor 14:29) or tested by God's authoritative words in the Bible.

So that's my very brief summary of NT prophecy – revelation from God, that is given to encourage believers in a particular contexts, but must always be tested. We are not to be dismissive of prophecy, but discerning. That according to God, is a healthy attitude for the community of His people to have. So, we should have that attitude if and when we are to come across it.

Both Neil and I are happy to talk further about prophecy following the service if you have any specific questions. But the point about prophecy in this passage is focused on us to know how to handle it rightly when we come across it so that we be able to hold on to any good that it might bring and reject any kind of evil.

So I thought I'd give you a few examples on this topic that I've come across in my years as a Christian.

- Many years ago, I had a Christian neighbour share a prophecy that someone in his bible study had apparently received. It was a message about the glory of heaven. In

this prophecy, the man said that Heaven was a place where mention of Jesus' shameful death on a cross was no longer spoken of. That horror was only to be remembered in this world. I remember my neighbour saying, "that's how you know we won't be singing of the old rugged cross in heaven." So, what do I do with that? What would it look like to test this? Well, I went to Revelation – which appears to have the best descriptions of heaven and see whether this checks out. And what do I read about heaven in Chapter 5:12. I read thousands of angels crying out:

"Worthy is the Lamb, who was slain..."

Jesus' death is spoken of – in fact it's praised. Prophecy tested, prophecy rejected.

- Here's another example. Some of you would have heard testimonies from one or two of our Iranian brothers and sisters who have spoken of receiving some kind of revelation as part of their conversion story – it may be something like a dream in which they were told to go and meet with a particular Christian who then shared the gospel with them. What do you do with that? Well, God tells us not to be dismissive, but discerning – does it contradict Scripture, does it bring about good? Well, from my understanding, there has not been anything in those dreams that have contradicted Scripture – in fact, they appear to have been used by God for the good purpose of leading someone *to* the Scriptures wherein they have found out about the forgiveness and life on offer in Jesus. This, I think, is a moment where we hold on to what is good (v.21).

- But what about those moments, which some of you may have experienced, where a Christian friend or family member comes to you with an apparent prophecy that is just very general in nature and kind of hard to really test in that way – “I feel led by the Spirit to give you the message that God loves you and has a good plan for your life.” I think this passage still helps us in these general messages. Again, remain discerning, without being dismissive.

Now, there’s nothing in that general message that contradicts scripture right? The gospel tells us that God does love us and his making us like Jesus in all circumstances – which means there is always a good plan for every believer. So, I’d say you take the general encouragement which the bible does affirm and simply get on with living as a Christian. *However*, it is good to remember that prophecy (when it is given) is for the purpose of building up the church community – so if you find that it is actually becoming an unhelpful source of curiosity which is distracting you from thinking outside yourself to the good of others maybe it’s time to move on.

That’s a few examples of what it might look like to test all things

A healthy church community remains discerning, not dismissive.

5. Rely on your Faithful God.

But finally, and perhaps most importantly, a church community, remains healthy by relying on our faithful God to help us and to keep changing us.

And we need God’s help don’t we, because being a healthy church in the way He commands in this text is often difficult.

It's little like our attitude to being a *physically* healthy person. It's not enough to *know* what we should be eating, or *know* how we should be exercising, we actually need to keep doing it. But that is often just plain hard. And it's the same with the commands God has given us here to make us a healthy church. We might agree that they're good, but we just find it all so hard.

- It's sometimes hard to hold your leaders in the highest regard.
- It's sometimes hard to feel motivated to minister to a fellow brother or sister.
- It's often hard to rejoice and give thanks and pray.
- It's hard to be discerning and not a dismissive when it comes to something like prophecy.

If we have any hope for change, it can't simply come from our will power – because most of us, if we're honest, know that we lack will power. It has to come from God. And that is the great promise we are given in Paul's final prayer. Look at verse 23-24:

²³ May God himself, the God of peace, sanctify you through and through. May your whole spirit, soul and body be kept blameless at the coming of our Lord Jesus Christ. ²⁴ The one who calls you is faithful, and he will do it.

Do you see the great hope of this benediction? It's telling us that God is committed to making us the healthy community He wants us to be. He will make sure that we will continue on and that we are welcomed into His presence on the day of the Lord. He who brought us to salvation, will also sanctify us (help us to become more like Jesus) as we move towards that day – the one who calls you is faithful, and he will do it.

And God really is faithful isn't He. I mean He has shown us this in the death of His Son. He who did not spare his Son for us, but gave him up as a sacrifice for our sin, is not about to leave us to ourselves now. He is faithful to help us as we commit to being the community he wants us to be.

Think of what this says to the people-pleaser who feels they could never muster up enough courage to minister a hard truth in love to a friend. It tells them that they will have divine help in that conversation.

It says to the person who has been hurt deeply by a brother or sister that God will give them the grace they need to be patient and not return wrong for wrong.

It says to those of us who are prone to grumpiness and grumbling (like I know I can be), that God can grow in us an attitude of joy and thanksgiving in all circumstances.

It says to those of us who are prone to being contemptuous of a particular work of the Spirit, that God can humble us so that we are discerning, not dismissive.

Helpful guidelines make for a healthy community.

Conclusion

Helpful guidelines make for a healthy community.

After asking for prayer and a kiss of greeting Paul finishes this letter with these words:

27 I charge you before the Lord to have this letter read to all the brothers and sisters.

28 The grace of our Lord Jesus Christ be with you.

Verse 27 reminds us this letter – these guidelines are for the good of everyone in Jesus’ church. They help us stay healthy, they help us do life together for the long Haul. It’s as though God is saying I’m sticking my words up on the fridge – read them – live by them.

And that’s my prayer for us – that we will be a community of people who:

- Acknowledge the work of your leaders.
- Minister relationally to one another.
- Cultivate a culture of joyful thanksgiving.
- Test the messages you hear.
- Rely on your Faithful God.

God’s helpful guidelines for a healthy Christian community. Let’s pray.