

Sanctified Together by the God of Peace

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[0 : 0 0] God's Word to us this evening. Please do keep that page of your Bible open as we spend time in it together, and let's pray that God would speak to us now through it. Gracious Father, we thank you for the truth of which we have just sung, that there is nothing that can separate us from your love for us in Christ Jesus our Lord. Father, we thank you that you are the God of peace, who has made peace with us through the death of your Son, and we do rejoice in you. We thank you, Lord, as we have prayed to you, and we pray now, Lord, that you would be with us as we have your Word open before us, that you would speak and that we would listen. Our Father, give us a heart, we pray of love for you and for one another, and help us, we ask, as we hear these instructions, to abide in Christ the vine, that we might bear good fruit. These things we pray in his name. Amen.

Well, we're coming towards the end of Paul's first letter to the church in Thessalonica. If you remember in the first half of this letter, Paul assured this church that they really do have the real deal, the gospel of God, and they could be confident that they are his, even through their intense suffering for him. And in the second half, then, as Paul himself has put it in chapter 3, verse 10, Paul has been supplying what is lacking in their faith. They have a genuine faith in the real gospel of the true and living God, but that doesn't mean that there aren't still gaps in their understanding and their living. They were baby Christians, remember. It's to be expected that that would be the case. And I expect, if we've been Christians a bit longer than that, we can relate to where they are. It's really good for us to see, isn't it, that Paul hasn't once in this letter clobbered them because there is anything lacking in their newborn faith. There's never been a point where he's said, you terrible Christians, can't believe you're doing that, can't believe you think like that. But he clearly does still expect, doesn't he, that their faith will be rounded out, that the gaps will be filled, that they will grow in their thinking, in their living, that their doctrine would be sound, that their lives would be faithful. And that is what the second half of the letter has been all about. It ends as it began back in 3, verse 11, with a prayer, and that prayer sums up,

I think, what Paul now wants for this church, Luke, in 5, verse 23. He says, 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.

So how much of them does Paul want set apart for God, holy to him, or sanctified? All of them, and every part of them. And so that's why these verses that came before are here.

Now maybe as I read it, it sounded like just a long list of small instructions. Maybe we get to an end of a letter like this, and it feels a little bit like coming to the end of packing. All the small kind of bits and pieces just get kind of stuffed in wherever they'll fit. But there's actually a really neat structure to this section. I've tried to outline it in a slide, if we can have that up for us to see. There's a kind of, oh, it's a wee bit small, but there is a kind of rhythm to these verses, if you can see that. We get a few groups of three in this list, and they're kind of grouped together around three relationships in the church. First towards leaders in the church, then towards one another in the church, and then towards God. I'm sure somebody could make that slide better, more accurate, and sharper, certainly bigger. But that's the gist of it, I think.

[4 : 3 3] Paul hasn't got to the end of what he wanted to say, and thought, I've still got a bit of page left. Now, what else can I say? What else can I put down just to kind of fill up this space? No, this is a carefully organized section of his letter that flows really nicely from the bit before it, which is about, remember, living in the light. You are all children of the light and children of the day, he says. We do not belong to the night or to the darkness, so then let us not be like others who are asleep, but let us be awake and sober. For those who sleep, sleep at night, and those who get drunk, get drunk at night. But since we belong to the day, let us be sober, putting on faith and love as a breastplate, and the hope of salvation as a helmet. And so there's that triad again, faith, love, and

hope.

And what does it look like then, says Paul, for us to put that on not only ourselves, but together as a church? How do we live in the light, not only as individual Christians, but together in our life, in our relationships here as a church family? So we'll look at these relationships in the order Paul gives them to us. Firstly, then, how do we live in the light in our relationship with our leaders? That's who he was speaking about there in verse 12. Those three doing words there are the same ways that he's spoken about himself, Timothy, and Silas, and their work when they were in the church back in chapter 2. He said before, they worked hard.

They loved and they cared for the Christians in the Lord, and they encouraged, comforted, and urged them to live lives worthy of God. It's that, we thought, motherly and fatherly presence that they had in the church in Thessalonica, a self-giving, maternal love and care, along with a bracing, paternal encouragement to spur them on in the faith. And so it's those who follow Paul, Silas, and Timothy, we then, in that pattern of service, who Paul says should be acknowledged or recognized. Now, there is a sense, isn't there, in which we all have a part in all of those things, and we should. You hard work, care, correction, these are not the sole domain of the minister or the elders of the church. You praise God that we all have a part in those things with one another, and there's a lot of one another that should go on, and we'll see that in just a minute.

But where the buck stops with those things is with the leaders of a church. Now, Paul doesn't say that explicitly here. I think it's important in the context to remember he didn't get a chance, as he did in other places, to appoint elders in Thessalonica. So there isn't a kind of formal or normal structure of leadership there in the church. But there would have been those who have taken up the pattern of work that Paul and the others had modeled and carried it on.

[8 : 05] So there is a type of service or a type of leadership which is to be held in high regard. We could say that the office of an elder or a deacon, properly understood and rightly practiced, is to be recognized and respected. There is work and responsibility and service that comes with holding a position of leadership in the church that we should acknowledge is sacrificial work and serious responsibility and costly service. If we can put it this way, sometimes people have difficulty with the idea that only some people get to be an elder. But who has ever said, why don't I get to have that really tricky conversation with someone? Or why don't I get to spend three nights a week caring for the church and working hard for God's family?

Some of those things are just an immense privilege that we do get to do. But as leaders, we do it all gladly because we love you so much. And yet it comes with a big responsibility. And lots of you do help us in that responsibility and work. We're so thankful for that. Your church, a church family like this, it cannot have life apart from all the members. We know that. But some of us have taken vows to pastor, to care, to work hard for this church family that God will hold us accountable for.

So verse 13, Paul says, hold them in the highest regard in love because of their work. Perhaps you know in his book, *The Prince*, Machiavelli famously asked this question, is it better for a leader to be loved or feared? I wonder what you think. His answer was ideally both.

But if you can't have both, better to be feared, he said. Sadly, that has been, and it is sometimes the way that church leaders lead, isn't it? Perhaps you've experienced that. But what does Paul say is right and best? Hold them in the highest regard, he says, in love. In love. Brothers and sisters, I wonder if I can ask you, do you love your elders?

Do you love your deacons? Maybe a good question to ask yourself is, how do I think of our leaders here when they do or decide things that I don't like or agree with? Or when they don't do things that I think they should be doing? It's not wrong to disagree with the direction of the leadership decisions that are made, but how you handle that disagreement or that dissatisfaction in your heart and behavior says everything about the regard that you have for those who hold that responsibility. In one way, I would say that you can love your leaders in the church. One way that you can love us well is that when you are unhappy about things, come and speak to us in love. Okay, not doing that if you're afraid to do that. That's not what we want. You can grow, can't it? A root of bitterness.

Sometimes that bitterness can spill out, can't it? Be directed or flow onto the wrong people. But Paul is saying, no, the buck stops with us. The buck stops with those who hold this responsibility of care and hard work and love. And that is why having that loving regard for the office and the work of ministers and elders and deacons, it can be the difference, can't it, between us keeping or not keeping. The end of verse 13, what does it say? Live in peace with each other. If we don't have a loving relationship with the leaders that we recognize as having a God-given responsibility in the

church family, what will we do? We'll go to the wrong people with the wrong things. Or we'll go to the right people in the wrong way. Or we won't go to anyone, and it will just grow into a resentment. In short, we just won't live in peace with one another if we don't love our leaders. I hope you know that you can talk to me about anything. I know that all the elders would tell you the same. Please do, in love, talk to us. If you have trouble, if you're not happy, if you disagree, we want to know. We love you so much. In love, please come and talk to us. We're not going to get it right every time. And we live out our responsibilities and work hard and care for you and admonish you. Please do pray for us in that. We're human beings. We're your brothers in Christ.

[13 : 46] And we need your loving prayer. And please not your frustration or your fear. And the church needs that to you so that we can live in peace. So he says, Paul, make a point. Make a point of looking after your relationship with your leaders and take care of your relationships with one another, verse 15. That's his next point. And it's marked there by his request, which is even stronger than the first one in verse 12. And we urge you, brothers and sisters, he says, warn those who are idle and destructive. Encourage the disheartened, help the weak, be patient with everyone. So see how that one anothering, speaking the truth in love, is being stressed here. And that word warn is actually the same word in verse 12, translated admonish. So in these ways, as I said before, you know, this pastoral concern for each other spills out from the leadership of a church into the everyday fabric of church life.

Warning, encouraging, helping each other. We should see that happening often in the rub of life together. But that assumes, doesn't it, that we know each other well enough to do that and to do it really well. You notice that what he doesn't say is, warn, encourage, and help the idle, disheartened, and weak. It's not, is it just, you know, whatever you're in the mood for that day, and whoever you happen to be speaking to, you just say what you feel like, and then you can say that you've done it.

Paul assumes, doesn't he, that we'll know and love one another to, one, work out to the best of our understanding where this person is. Where did what they've said or what they've done, where did that come from in their heart? And then, two, to know how to speak to them in a way that addresses that heart problem and not only their behavior. So, worked example, say somebody after the service is rude to you or speaks to you with a bit of an edge. What's your instinctive response? Do you assume that this person is idle and disruptive? You're just plain and simple that it's a sin problem.

Do you assume that they're disheartened? Do they are weary and worn out? Or that they are weak, you spiritually immature, just not very well grounded in Christ. Or perhaps straight away, you know this person well enough to know where that came from. But the point is that that kind of relational strain could come from any one of those places, couldn't it? Or all three of them.

How do we know what the root issue is in the heart? Notice that Paul doesn't say, well, we can never really know, can we? So, let's just not get involved. It's between them and God.

[16 : 59] No, he assumes that you, brothers and sisters, will know each other well enough to know what kind of response is called for. And that might take time. It certainly takes prayer. It could take more conversations with that person or with others who know them well to work it out. If it really is as simple as a hard heart that is idle and disruptive, he doesn't mind who gets hurt as long as I'm left alone to do my thing, well, Paul says that needs to be called out, admonish, warn that person in love.

If it turns out, though, that this person's heart is under strain, just worn thin in life and discouraged in service or faith, well, a warning isn't going to help. So, encourage that person, says Paul. Show them how worthwhile Jesus is, how worthwhile it is to serve him, how worthwhile it is to do that with others. But if it's a case, again, if a person's not having a weak grasp on the faith, just not having a solid foundation to build on, then more investment is needed, teaching, support, perhaps this person needs to be shown the fruit that should grow from a relationship with Christ or a bigger and deeper and fuller view of Christ himself. You see, do you see now how deeply invested Paul is instructing us to be in each other's lives? That not only would we want to do the hard work to work out where is this person coming from, but then in love go back to try and address that when this person's heart is spilling over into words, difficult words, difficult relationships.

And that's not only the work of the minister, Luke, is it? We urge you, brothers and sisters. So, I wonder which response do you naturally lean towards?

Do you naturally take a firm, corrective tone with people? Or do you naturally soften your words to try to encourage people?

Or do you naturally resort, perhaps, to supporting, helping, teaching people? None of those are bad responses in themselves. All of them are needed, but in the wrong situations, well, they can be bad responses.

[19 : 47] Do you know that we can do so much damage speaking hard words to a tired heart? But do we realize, too, we can do damage speaking soft words to a hard heart?

So, when things go wrong in our relationships in the church, as they will be in no doubt, Paul says, take some time. See that in verse 14?

Take some time. Where is this person's heart? What do they need to hear from me to help them out of that place? Be patient with everyone, he says.

Everyone. Make sure nobody pays back wrong for wrong. But always strive to do what is good for each other and for everyone else.

It's a reminder, isn't it, that the church is not an A&E; department. The church is not where we come for a quick fix. The church is the cardiology ward.

[20 : 55] And it's the rehab center. And sometimes it's the intensive care unit. The church is the place we come and never leave to get the treatment that our hearts need.

To be sanctified through and through. That growing holiness in our lives, in our relationships. It takes immense patience, doesn't it? Lifetime.

And if we're tempted to say, I don't have time to be involved with people like that. Let me invite you to think what it is you're saying you don't have time for.

I don't have time to really help someone grow more like Jesus. I don't have time to build up the church by speaking the truth in love.

Brothers and sisters, think how long some of you have been in this church together. You have God given you years, sometimes decades, to be in relationship with one another.

[22 : 00] And we don't have time to get to know each other well enough. To know one another's hearts. And to speak a word in season.

You're always the wrong response to one another is wrong, isn't it? It's a wrong in return. That's our sinful instinct always. Paul's reminding us a right response to one another takes striving.

Work, patience to get to what is good. But don't give up. Don't give up on one another. Don't give up on these relationships, brothers and sisters.

Don't give up striving for each other's good. Even when it hurts to take that step back towards somebody who has hurt you. Or even when it hurts for somebody to say something in love to you that you are not ready to hear.

Strive to do what is good, says Paul, for each other and for everyone else. It's hard work. That's why we need to abide in Christ, isn't it? Because that is how the fruit grows.

[23 : 08] And the third and last relationship Paul instructs us to look after is exactly that relationship with God himself in verse 16. So here's another burst of three instructions.

Rejoice always. Pray continually. Give thanks in all circumstances. For this is God's will for you in Christ Jesus. So these are three overlapping ways that we relate to God, aren't they?

We are joyful before him. We pray to him. We give thanks to him. And I don't think we're meant to kind of tease all of those apart. Especially because Paul instructs us, isn't he, to do all three all the time.

So it's not like we get to a point in the day where we say, I've finished rejoicing now. And so I'm going to pray. And then after that, I'm going to give thanks. No, he's saying all three, this relationship with God is to be woven throughout our lives.

So that it becomes as continuous as breathing. We just intersperse our day with prayer and thanks and rejoicing. Now, what does that even mean?

[24 : 16] I know a translation, pray without ceasing. What does it mean to not stop praying? Well, there's a sense that prayer is shorthand for how we spend time with God and commune with him.

So we could take it, couldn't we, in the sense that we should always be conscious of living in the presence of God. As the Reformers put it, living coram deo, living before the face of God.

And as an extension of that truth or an application of it, if we're conscious and aware of our communion with God throughout the day, well, won't it feel much more natural for us to speak to him?

How bizarre would it be to spend your day with somebody that you never spoke to? Or that you had an allotted 10 minutes for conversation at the start or the end of the day?

We wouldn't do that, would we, in any other relationship? But we do do that with God. And one reason we do that is because he is invisible. We can't see him. But if we learn to live with the awareness that he is with us in every moment of our day, then we would learn, wouldn't we, to rejoice, pray, and give thanks to God as and when we have the opportunity.

[25 : 41] We thought about holiness a few weeks ago, didn't we? What a privilege it is to be admitted into God's presence. So it's God's will for us in Christ Jesus that we live like that, verse 18, rather than kind of squeezing our relationship with God into whatever few minutes we have available at the start or the end of each day.

Now, our relationship is a two-way thing, isn't it? So if that's us speaking with God in relationship with him, well, now Paul goes on to instruct us how we listen to God in our relationship with him. So this begins verse 19. You can see in our NIV that that's a verse all on its own. Like the kind of three instructions we've just looked at, each bit gets a whole verse number.

So if we were kind of meant to deal with these each by themselves, you can imagine someone pouring over this, can't you? That's a sermon, isn't it? Oh, and there's another one, and that's a whole other sermon, and it might be.

It's interesting, though, that they didn't do that with the equally weighty instructions in verse 14. But these verse numbers, they're not inspired in any way.

[26 : 54] They don't tell us how we should interpret the passage. Neither does the English punctuation. Let me just ask you to follow along in your Bible these verses and just see how differently these verses read with the original punctuation.

Okay, ready? Do not quench the spirit, comma. Do not treat prophecies with contempt, semicolon. But test them all, comma.

Hold on to what is good, comma. Reject every kind of evil, full stop. Now, you weren't ready for a grammar lesson at 7 o'clock.

But it's really important. The NIV separates out do not quench the spirit as if it was something different from do not treat prophecies with contempt, when actually they're two halves of the same idea.

And then a semicolon break and a list of three. Test them all, hold on to what is good, reject what is evil. So what's going on here? Do not quench the spirit, Paul says, is the same as not treating prophecies with contempt.

[28 : 04] So what he's not saying is too much structure in a church service doesn't allow room for the Holy Spirit to work. He's definitely not saying sticking too closely with the text of Scripture doesn't allow space for the Holy Spirit to speak.

He's actually saying the opposite. Don't quench the spirit by having a critical attitude to the preaching. Treating prophecies with contempt in the apostolic age in which they lived, it might have been as simple as kind of dismissing out of hand anyone who said, God has given me a word to share.

Or it could be, as it is in the age that we live in, picking apart the ordinary preaching of the Bible in the church. Have you ever heard this?

I thought so-and-so was a bit off today. I didn't quite like that illustration. Your prophecy is people claiming to speak God's word.

That's what happens when we preach it. So his point is, if you talk down the preaching of God's word, then you are quenching the spirit. Because the word is breathed out by the spirit.

[29 : 23] Now that doesn't mean we shouldn't be wise and discerning. That's what he says. Check what you hear from the front is true. Keep what's good. Ditch what is evil. Okay.

Don't just believe what I say because I say it. Okay. Believe what is in the Bible because the Bible says it. But if on inspection, what is preached in your local church is what the Bible teaches, then God has spoken.

And where God is speaking, there the Holy Spirit is at work. And so a good question to get into the habit of asking before you say anything else about the sermon is, did the preacher today say what the passage says?

Was the sermon actually what the Bible has to teach? And if the answer is yes, well, that is the important bit. I can always be a better preacher.

Donald and I are working on it. But if what you've heard is the word of God, well, hold on to what is good. Strain out what is wrong. Feed each other on the word and forget whatever's false.

[30 : 42] Better still tell us. But whatever you do, don't be in the habit, says Paul, of pouring cold water on what the Spirit says to the churches. That's our relationship with God in the church.

So three relationships then to make sure that we're living as children of the day. Relationship with our leaders, with each other, with God himself.

All for the end, as we've seen, of us being sanctified through and through, set apart for God in our life together as a church in every dimension of our lives.

And as we finish, we just have to see our reliance on the God of peace to make this possible for us. This is our fourth point. Now, Donald's going to say much more on these verses next week, but it's so important we see that the power and will for us to live in this way in the church it doesn't come from us.

We cannot just try to love each other. We might have things we need to change. There might be people we need to speak to, but our prayer for our church family is this.

[31 : 54] 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, apart from the God of peace, brothers and sisters, there is no chance that we will live in peace with each other.

Without his sanctifying power, we cannot resist paying back wrong for wrong. And we will never strive for each other's good. Without his Holy Spirit speaking to us, we will not hold on to what is good, and we will not ditch what is evil.

And so it is this prayer that turns the last ten verses, the last two chapters, from a series of impossible commands into an invitation to a whole new way of life.

And it is the promise that assures us that living that new way of life relies completely on God, and he will not fail. The one who calls you is faithful, and he will do it.

I've told you before about the famous prayer of the church, Father Augustine, who said, give what you command, and command what you will. Well, Paul, in this prayer, is saying, this is what he has commanded, and he promises to give you what you need to live as he commands.

[33 : 32] So let's pray that prayer together now, and for each other. Let's pray. God of peace, we thank you for your presence among us.

We thank you for your grace to us. Lord, we have heard your word, and we tremble because your commands are so great and so searching. Lord, your holiness and righteousness pierce deep into our hearts, and Lord, there we discover what we are so afraid to see, our own sin, and our own darkness.

And so, our Father, how we pray that by your Holy Spirit, you would sanctify us through and through. Lord, we pray that for each one of us who believes in you, and that you would be pleased to continue your good work in us.

And Father, we pray that to you for our church family as a whole. Lord, bind us together in love, we pray, and strengthen those bonds of peace. Father, how we pray that we, in our relationships, would be growing bolder and more holy.

Lord, more ready to work hard and strive for each other's good because we love you and because you have loved us. Lord, keep us, we pray, in Christ the vine.

[35 : 01] Keep us bearing good fruit, we ask, and grant us your spirit, we pray. In Jesus' name, Amen. Amen. Amen.