

# I Thessalonians 5:12-22

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## Introduction.

- A. As we've observed before, one of the things that we see in the epistles of Paul is that Paul often writes with a doctrinal discussion in front, and practical applications of Christianity in the back. In fact, those practical applications will often take the form of what is almost a list of bullet points, short little machine-gun bursts of ideas that every Christian needs to put into practice. From our perspective, these bullet-point lists are often more immediately useful than the doctrine that precedes them because of how universal they are.
- B. We see an example of this in 1 Thessalonians 5. Perhaps the primary doctrinal concern that moved Paul to write 1 Thessalonians was that just after he left the church in Thessalonica, just after that church was founded, in fact, some of its members died. Because Christianity was so young at that point, the surviving members worried about what was going to happen to their brethren who had passed on. They feared, in fact, that those departed Christians would miss out on the triumphant return of Jesus in the skies. Paul, then, wrote 1 Thessalonians to those mourning Christians to reassure them about the resurrection from the dead.
- C. Today, by contrast, we're pretty familiar with the thought of the resurrection, although like the Thessalonians, we may well turn to 1 Thessalonians 4 for comfort when we lose a loved one. However, that's not something we think about all the time. Something that we should be thinking about all the time, by contrast, is the list of bullet points that Paul penned to inform the survivors how they should live. Those same ideas should be the foundation of our Christian lives today. Let's look at them as we study 1 Thessalonians 5:12-22.

## I. Congregational Behavior.

- A. After we read through the text once, it appears to be divided into two main sections: advice on dealing with other members of the congregation, and advice on personal spiritual growth. Let's take the first section first, which begins with Paul's advice on dealing with elders in 1 Thessalonians 5:12-13. Admittedly, the text doesn't use the word "elder," but it's clear from the way that Paul describes these people that they are elders.
- B. In fact, vs. 12 describes the work of the elder in a nutshell. First, elders are to labor among their brethren. The work isn't something they order others to do; the work is something they take the lead in. We're blessed here with elders who aren't afraid to get their hands dirty, and that's the way that elders should be.
- C. Likewise, elders are to have charge over the flock. Sometimes, I think this is something we get confused on, with respect to preachers and, to a lesser extent, to deacons. There have been times in my preaching career when even other Christians have called me "pastor." We understand, of course, that "pastor" is not a correct description for me, but even more than that, it's not a work that I'm called to do. My work is to preach the word, not tend the flock. The same is true with deacons. Deacons can take on any number of works in the church, but they are still not elders, nor even elders in training. Only the elders have charge over us.
- D. Finally, elders are to give instruction. They need to be men who are skilled teachers of God's word. This is an important message for me and for all younger men who wish to become elders. It's not enough for us to show up at church three times a week and live good moral lives. We need to be men who know the Bible and are eager for any opportunity to teach, not because we love the spotlight, but because we love God's book.
- E. When a congregation has elders who are fulfilling this job description, Paul urges two things upon them: appreciate them and esteem them in love.. Sadly, these are commands that too many brethren forget about. It's very easy for us to focus on the things that the elders do that we don't like, or on the things they aren't doing that we think they should be doing. Brethren, that's a flat-out ungodly attitude, and it's just as unfair as it is ungodly. There is no more grueling, difficult job in the entire kingdom than the work of elder. It takes a man of rare spiritual quality to do it at all. Let's appreciate our elders and all that they go through for us.
- F. Just as we have responsibilities to our elders, though, we also have responsibilities to each other. Paul tells us so in the second part of 1 Thessalonians 5:13. We are to be a peaceful people. This definitely falls into the category of "easy to understand, hard to do". God's people have been disobeying this instruction all over the place for 2000 years, and it's not any less challenging for us. We need to remember, brethren, that when we are interacting with other Christians, we're dealing with holy people for whom Christ gave His life. When we see that Christ did that, we must be willing to surrender our way and our preferences for them too.
- G. Of course, not everybody in any group of the Lord's people is going to be doing what they should at any one time. That's what gives rise to Paul's instruction in 1 Thessalonians 5:14. The first thing that this text makes clear is that different Christians need to be dealt with in different ways. The sister who is frightened of the future and wants to turn back shouldn't get the same response as the brother who stubbornly insists on disobeying God. When a Christian isn't living an orderly, godly life, we need to get on them about that. We need to point to the word, show them what they need to be doing, and say to them, "You need to shape up." However, when a saint is struggling to do what's right, but failing, that's when we need to praise what is good

about them and gently lead them back to God. In all cases, though, whenever we're dealing with brethren with problems, we need to be patient. Those folks didn't get their lives in a mess all at once. It took them months or even years to sink to where they are, and it will take them just as long to get back. We need to be with them throughout that entire process, so that they will return, healthy and strong, to the Lord's work.

- H. Just as we are to do good to one another, we are also to do good generally. Consider this in 1 Thessalonians 5:15. It's never pretty when a man returns evil for evil, and though we might be tempted to do so, we must remember the example of Jesus on the cross. He was surrounded by men jeering at Him and mocking Him, but even in the midst of incredible pain, He never said one insulting word back. Like Christ, we should seek to bless everyone, not just those in the church, but those outside of it as well. Regardless of what someone else has done to us, we need to return good to them, and indeed, look for opportunities to do so.

## **II. Personal Behavior.**

- A. However, Paul also has plenty to say to us here about the way we should act even when we aren't necessarily with other Christians. The first of these instructions appears in 1 Thessalonians 5:16-18. Before we move on, take a moment to notice what the text DOESN'T say. It does NOT read, "Whine always; complain without ceasing; in everything make a fuss." We've all known Christians, though, who act as though it did. I can think of brethren who've left me with the impression that if they make it to heaven, they'll start complaining about the cleanliness of the golden streets and the taste of the water from the river of life!
- B. The truth is, when our speech is full of complaining instead of thankfulness, it points out a heart problem. It says that we have determined to overlook the massive, overwhelming blessings we have in Jesus, in favor of focusing on some tiny, insignificant problem. It says, "I don't care about all that God has done for me; I'd rather whine because I think He should have done more." Honestly, that makes me thankful I'm not God, because I don't think I'd handle ingratitude nearly as well as He does. Let's look for ways, then, not to vex our Creator. Whenever we find that we want to complain or feel sorry for ourselves, let's follow the advice of the hymn and count our blessings instead, thanking Him for all we have received. If we do have a problem, we need to either address it ourselves, or use prayer to take it to the One who can actually help us. That way, we can spare God and everybody else the whine barrage, live happier lives generally, and please Him.
- C. Next, we see the admonition of 1 Thessalonians 5:19. Of all of these little bullet points, this is perhaps the most difficult to figure out. However, when we consider Paul's advice to Timothy and other, related Scriptures, it seems likely that this is an encouragement to the Thessalonians to use the spiritual gifts that they have from God. Even though our gifts often take different forms than theirs, we need to remember that we are a gifted people too, and that we must awaken the gifts we have within ourselves. As I've said many times before, God has given every Christian here useful abilities and a role to play in the work. It's our responsibility to put those gifts to use as God wants. This could be in the context of our group program. It could be some private work, completely on our own initiative. We can be sure, though, that, God wants to see a return on His investment.
- D. Another bullet point that is somewhat challenging to understand and apply to our situation is found in 1 Thessalonians 5:20-21. However, I think once we consider this command in its context, we can see a direct application. Remember, friends, when 1 Thessalonians was written. It's actually one of the first of Paul's letters. He wrote it in the middle of the second missionary journey, during the events described in Acts 17-18. The Thessalonians almost certainly had access to none of the rest of the New Testament, 90 percent of which wasn't even written yet. In such a setting, the Thessalonians were completely dependent on their prophets to tell them what God's will was. However, even while they were so dependent, they had to be cautious as well, because a prophet who decided to turn false teacher could easily lead an entire church astray.
- E. Today, of course, we no longer have living prophets, but we do have the writings of those prophets preserved to guide us. In many ways, our situation is much better than that of the Christians in the first century. Any one of us, without bothering anybody else, can sit down with the word and figure out what God wants us to do. We need to treasure those prophecies, not despise them. However, just as there was false doctrine in those days, there is still false doctrine today. We must always be alert for the work of Satan, and test all the spiritual ideas we encounter, whether they come from somebody else or from our own heads. The devil is always eager to use our pride in our scholarship to lead us astray from the truth. We need to be more cautious than that. We need to rely on the truth we have been taught to study new learning for falsehood.
- F. Of course, it's not enough just to study righteousness. We must also practice righteousness, and that's where Paul is pointing us in 1 Thessalonians 5:21-22. Remember, brethren: there is no area of our lives in which God is silent. His word gives us life principles that serve us equally well in our homes, in our schools, in our workplaces, and even in our social interests and hobbies. The devil is always after us to give our ideals up in response to some imagined crisis or necessity. He's fantastic at coming up with reasons why we should leave what's good behind and move on to something else. Our response is simple, brethren. We must always stay with what we know is right. Likewise, just as all good is always good, all evil is always evil. There is never a time when it's appropriate to lie, or hate, or lust. We must hate and avoid evil in all its forms all the time.

**Conclusion.** If you want to start down this path of righteous, practical living, God will help you with it today.