

**LESSONS IN BASIC CHRISTIANITY:  
(6) CHRISTIAN COMMUNITY**

1 Thessalonians 5:12-24  
Worship Moment Message  
October 18, 2020  
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**SCRIPTURE**

But we appeal to you, brothers and sisters, to respect those who labor among you, and have charge of you in the Lord and admonish you; <sup>13</sup> esteem them very highly in love because of their work. Be at peace among yourselves.

<sup>14</sup> And we urge you, beloved, to admonish the idlers, encourage the fainthearted, help the weak, be patient with all of them. <sup>15</sup> See that none of you repays evil for evil, but always seek to do good to one another and to all.

<sup>16</sup> Rejoice always, <sup>17</sup> pray without ceasing, <sup>18</sup> give thanks in all circumstances; for this is the will of God in Christ Jesus for you. <sup>19</sup> Do not quench the Spirit.

<sup>20</sup> Do not despise the words of prophets, <sup>21</sup> but test everything; hold fast to what is good; <sup>22</sup> abstain from every form of evil.

<sup>23</sup> May the God of peace himself sanctify you entirely; and may your spirit and soul and body be kept sound and blameless at the coming of our Lord Jesus Christ. <sup>24</sup> The one who calls you is faithful, and he will do this (1 Thessalonians 5:12-24 NRSV).

**INTRODUCTION**

In recent weeks I have been presenting a series on the New Testament book known as Paul's First Letter to the Thessalonians. Owing to the circumstances that prompted the writing, the content deals with the basic elements of the Christian faith. Having already stressed the importance of the church at the beginning of the letter, here near the end of the letter we have almost staccato like comments on the characteristics needed for a healthy Christian community.

I planned this series before I knew what the fall schedule would be like. I find it interesting that the date of our first in person gathering as a worshipping Christian community since March coincides with the date already scheduled to address the nature of Christian community. Perhaps this is a God-inspired coincidence.

**1. RESPECT FOR LEADERSHIP**

The first characteristic of a healthy Christian community is respect for leadership.

But we appeal to you, brothers and sisters, to respect those who labor among you, and have charge of you in the Lord and admonish you; esteem them very

highly in love because of their work. Be at peace among yourselves (5:12-13).

When Paul and his colleagues founded churches they did not leave them to fend for themselves. We know from reading the Acts of the Apostles that they appointed leaders called “elders” to govern the congregation and other leaders called “deacons” to facilitate ministries of compassion. In Paul's letter to the Philippians he mentions the leaders of the church. The church at Philippi was founded just prior to the church at Thessalonica. Paul says to them:

Paul and Timothy, servants of Christ Jesus, To all the saints in Christ Jesus who are in Philippi, with the bishops and deacons ((Phil 1:1 NRSV).

For Paul, bishops and elders are synonymous. In fact, in his letter to Titus he uses them interchangeably. Elder is the position; bishop is the function. Bishop is from a word meaning "overseer." And these elders in the particular church were to oversee the gathering and also the work of the Christians in that place.

Deacons were also appointed. It was an office of sympathy and service. They saw to the material needs of the congregation. And then later they took on other responsibilities as well.

So there are elders and there are deacons. Paul says that they are to be respected, esteemed, yes, even loved in their work. But more than that, these leaders themselves were to respect and esteem and love the Lord. And if both these things are happening, there will be peace in the church.

## **2. MUTUAL CONCERN**

The second characteristic of a healthy Christian community is mutual concern.

And we urge you, beloved, to admonish the idlers, encourage the fainthearted, help the weak, be patient with all of them (5:14).

Paul uses the term “beloved” to refer to everyone in the congregation. He is not addressing his remarks in verse 14 just to leadership but to all the members. Question: Whose job is it to care for the congregation? Answer: Everyone is to care for the congregation. It is every member’s job. A healthy church is marked by mutual concern.

## **3. EXTRAORDINARY KINDNESS**

The third characteristic of a healthy Christian community is extraordinary kindness.

See that none of you repays evil for evil, but always seek to do good to one another and to all (5:15).

Being kind to people who are kind to us is neither difficult nor unusual. But being kind to people who are unkind to us is extraordinary. Furthermore, the Scripture tells us such practice is not to be limited to our fellow Christians but is to be extended to everyone. This attitude went beyond any moral code of the time and is uniquely Christian.

Practicing extraordinary kindness is almost impossible without the Lord's help. When dealing with issues in life where it is hard to show kindness and we struggle to forgive, we need to look to the cross. Unfortunately, many Christians, including those from the 1st century, have had difficulty accepting the fact that Jesus was so willing to forgive those who tortured and killed him. Some early copyists of the New Testament had so much trouble with this that they were willing to violate their pledge to accuracy by deliberately omitted Jesus' prayer from Luke's Gospel, "Father, forgive them; for they do not know what they are doing" (23:34). But we have plenty of other reliable manuscripts that indicate that Jesus did indeed offer this prayer. And by doing so he was modeling what he had taught:

"But I say to you, Love your enemies and pray for those who persecute you, so that you may be children of your Father in heaven" (Matt 5:44-45a NRSV).

The concern behind this teaching is this: your behavior shows to whom you belong. If you behave like those who hurt you then they own you. Not only have they hurt you but you have allowed them to pull your soul down into a dark abyss. But if you behave like Jesus then you show that you belong to God and your soul is free.

#### **4. JOYFUL, PRAYERFUL, AND THANKFUL**

The fourth characteristic of a healthy Christian community is when the body has a clear commitment to being joyful, prayerful, and thankful.

Rejoice always, pray without ceasing, give thanks in all circumstances; for this is the will of God in Christ Jesus for you (5:16-18).

These are commands. And they do not mock us. Because God intends it to be so; he wants us to be joyful, prayerful and thankful, and he makes it possible for us to be so.

We need to understand that happiness is different from joy. Happiness is based on circumstances or "luck" but luck is not a dependable source for happiness. Barbara Johnson tells of a poster that caught her attention:

A hand-lettered sign nailed to a telephone pole said, "Lost dog with three legs, blind in left eye, missing right ear, tail broken, and recently castrated. Answers to the name of Lucky."

Joy, on the other hand, is not based on circumstances or "luck" but rather it flows out of a

growing, personal relationship with our Lord. The Bible clearly teaches that believers will experience trials and challenges in this life but we can rejoice in God who will never forsake us and who ultimately triumphs over sin and death and raises his children to everlasting life.

Prayer is an indispensable part of our relationship to God. Any relationship needs communication. If you're not communicating then the relationship falls apart. And prayer is our link in our relationship with God. It's not a Christian version of sitting on Santa's knee at Christmas. It's not like Huckleberry Finn praying for a fishing pole and not getting it. Prayer is a means of becoming what God would have us be. It is our link with God, our communication with God in order to seek what God would have us do and be in the name of Jesus. A healthy church not only prays in corporate worship and prayer meetings but the members also pray when they are alone.

If we have had a genuine experience of God's grace then we will want to respond with sincere gratitude. When we grasp what the Lord has done for us we cannot help but show our appreciation. As the author of Hebrews puts it:

"By him therefore let us offer the sacrifice of praise to God continually, that is, the fruit of our lips giving thanks to his name" (Heb 13:15 KJV).

As a result of our gratitude, we will want to grow in our commitment and in our desire to please God. If we grow in our desire to please God then the church grows in vitality and effectiveness. We become God's joyful, prayerful, thankful people.

## **5. RELIANCE UPON THE HOLY SPIRIT**

The fifth characteristic of a healthy Christian community is a confident reliance upon the Holy Spirit.

Do not quench the Spirit. Do not despise the words of prophets, but test everything; hold fast to what is good; <sup>22</sup> abstain from every form of evil(5:19-22).

Christians often use strange language to talk about important matters of faith. From time-to-time we will say something like, "That church is really on fire!" Now most of us know what that means but imagine hearing that from the point of view of a non-Christian. It sounds like we are saying that an arsonist has set fire to a particular church building and we are pleased to hear about it. Of course, this is not what it means. Rather, fire is symbolic of the powerful presence of God. A church on fire is a description of a group of people who are part of a faith community which cooperates with the powerful presence of God known as the Holy Spirit.

The ancients believed that thirst was caused by a kind of fire in your throat. Our word

"quench" as in "quench your thirst" relates to this ancient idea. Quench means "to extinguish" and so if you drink water you extinguish the fire in your throat. The command, "Do not quench the Spirit," means, "Do not put out the Spirit's fire!" If we were to restate the command in the positive it would be something like, "Do all that you can to keep the Spirit's fire going!"

Relying upon the Holy Spirit also requires us to examine our faith. Paul implores us:

"Do not despise the words of prophets" (5:20).

Then he says:

"Test everything." (5:21).

The words of the prophets (prophecy), have to do with speaking the Word of God. Unfortunately, in the popular mind set, prophecy is associated with fortune telling and predicting the future. Biblical prophecy has two aspects to it: foretelling and forthtelling. Foretelling has to do with the future but it is either a warning about the future that is deeply rooted in a concern for justice or it is a reference to unfolding events in God's plan of salvation such as the prophecies concerning the coming of the Messiah. But most Biblical prophecy is forthtelling, that is, applying God's message to contemporary concerns.

Paul tells us that there are two extremes we must avoid. On the one hand, we cannot believe everyone who claims to be speaking for God. On the other hand, we must not have an attitude that despises preaching even before it has started. To avoid these extremes we need to continually examine our own faith.

An acquaintance of mine from New York was trying to join the Secret Service. It was quite an ordeal. Part of the training has to do with detecting counterfeit bills. Trainees spend most of their time examining real bills. The theory being that if you are thoroughly familiar with the genuine article it becomes easier to detect a phony.

There is a lesson in this for Christians. We need to be people who examine our own beliefs, who study the Scriptures, and are so familiar with the essentials of the Christian faith that it is easier for us to spot a "phony," that is, someone trying to teach us something that is outside the parameters of what we believe God has revealed to us. Only in this way can we hold on to what is good and reject what is evil (5:22).

## **CONCLUSION**

If we want to be part of a healthy Christian community then we need to foster these characteristics: respect for leadership, mutual concern, extraordinary kindness, a clear commitment to being joyful, prayerful, and thankful, and a confident reliance upon the Holy

Spirit.

Paul concludes his remarks on Christian community with a prayer for God's people:

May the God of peace himself sanctify you entirely; and may your spirit and soul and body be kept sound and blameless at the coming of our Lord Jesus Christ. The one who calls you is faithful, and he will do this (5:23-24).

Paul commends us to God in body, soul and spirit. It is a powerful prayer. And if we believe God answers prayer then the church can become a healthy community of dedicated followers of Jesus Christ.