

**LESSONS IN BASIC CHRISTIANITY:
(7) CLOSING THOUGHTS**

1 Thessalonians 5:25-28

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SCRIPTURE

Beloved, pray for us. ²⁶ Greet all the brothers and sisters with a holy kiss. ²⁷ I solemnly command you by the Lord that this letter be read to all of them.

²⁸ The grace of our Lord Jesus Christ be with you (1 Thessalonians 5:25-28 NRSV).

MESSAGE

When I first informed the leadership of the church about my plans to retire I anticipated a year of personal reminiscing, farewell hugs, breaking bread together, and consuming at least ten dozen chocolate chip cookies. But, alas, the Covid-19 pandemic changed that. If you had told me that I was going to end my career living among turkeys and preaching at the zoo, I would never have believed it. But it has turned out to be true. For the last two and a half months Sandy and I have been living at Turkeyville thanks to the generosity of the Turpins who loaned us their trailer. And today, of course, we are at Binder Park Zoo. No one could have predicted this.

But one prediction about 2020 did come true – I get to preach my last sermon standing before dear friends.

Today marks the seventh and final installment of the series on 1 Thessalonians. I chose this book for three reasons:

First of all, it deals with the basics of the Christians faith – something I have stressed throughout my career. One of the weaknesses of the modern church is an alarming lack of knowledge of the essentials of the faith.

Secondly, I resonate on an emotional level with the Apostle Paul. No, I am not claiming to be anywhere near his stature. But just as he felt that there was so much more to be taught, I too feel like there is so much more to be taught. To help resolve his feelings he wrote something – we call it 1 Thessalonians. To help resolve my feelings I wrote something – I call it *Quintessentials*. It is a year long daily devotional covering the core essentials of the Christian faith. I have given an advanced copy of this book to the staff as a parting gift and donated a copy to the church library. Print and eBook versions will be available starting November 29 on Amazon, Barnes and Noble, and so on. (I can't believe I just put a commercial message in the middle of my sermon!)

The third reason I chose 1 Thessalonians as the basis for a final sermon series is because Paul recognizes that even though he is physically separated from his friends in Thessalonica, they are still part of the same family, the same fellowship of Jesus Christ. And, someday, they will all be re-united.

Saying goodbye is hard in the best of times. But I can relate to Winnie the Pooh's comment, "How lucky I am to have something that makes saying goodbye so hard."¹ Of course, Christians never have to say "goodbye" in any final sense. Even if we do not see each other again in this life we know we will be together again at the great feast of the Lamb (Rev 19:6-9).

As for Paul's letter, I have already mentioned that the body of the letter speaks of the basic teachings of the Christian faith. But here at the end of the letter he's emphasizing our connectiveness. We are connected with one another by virtue of belonging to Jesus Christ. Furthermore, we are to demonstrate that connection in at least three ways:

1. PERSONAL PRAYER

We demonstrate our connection through personal prayer. Paul says:

Beloved, pray for us (5:25).

One of the vital connections between Christians is prayer. Paul starts his letter this way, mentioning that he is always praying for his friends in Thessalonica. The body of the letter contains many allusions to prayer. And sometimes he stops and actually writes a brief prayer for his readers as he does in the section before today's reading.

Paul asks the new Christians at Thessalonica to pray for him. Indeed, throughout his other letters he frequently asks for prayer. No one is exempt from the need for prayer. We all need prayer.

I am retiring from the installed pastoral ministry. I am not retiring from prayer. I may not be praying for you anymore from Battle Creek or even the land of the turkeys but I will be praying for you from Greenfield, Wisconsin. And I hope you pray for Sandy and me.

2. RESPECTFUL AFFECTION

We demonstrate our connection through respectful affection. Paul tells us:

Greet all the brothers and sisters with a holy kiss (5:26).

¹ A.A. Milne.

In the ancient near east a kiss on the cheek or forehead was used to express both affection and respect. The early Christians practiced this (at least through the third century) to show their common bond in Christ. It did not have a sexual connotation. Many cultures continue this expression in one form or another today.

So why does Paul encourage it? We know that the members of the church at Thessalonica came from at least three different backgrounds: Greek, Roman, and Jewish. Such differences alone could foster conflict. But the church also faced challenges in its mission and direction. Knowing that Christians do not always agree, Paul urges the believers to continue to show respect and affection towards one another, to treat one another as members of the same family, even when they disagree. This does not necessarily mean a physical kiss – especially if it is not culturally appropriate, and doubly especially during a pandemic. But the attitude of respectful affection needs to be there.

The modern church faces many challenges. Most of these existed before the outbreak of the Covid-19 Pandemic, but the pandemic has exacerbated them. But this is also an opportunity to renew the life and mission of the church. However, there are tough decisions to be made. And you will not always be in agreement as to what to do next. In such times, do not forget to show affection and respect towards one another. We are part of the same family.

3. BINDING VALUES

We demonstrate our connection through Scriptures's binding values. Paul states with emphasis:

I solemnly command you by the Lord that this letter be read to all of them
(5:27).

Paul makes it clear that his teachings are for all Christians and not just the leadership. Now I can readily accept that he thought that what he wrote was important, but I doubt that he himself thought his writings were on par with Scripture. Nevertheless, even before the New Testament was completed, many of his contemporaries felt that way. The Apostle Peter described Paul's writings as "Scriptures" (2 Peter 3:16). Indeed, many of Paul's letters were recognized and received as being inspired by the Holy Spirit and later accepted as canonical Scripture.

But more than simply validating his ministry, Paul's command signals how vital the reading of Scripture is for our growth as Christians and for keeping us together. We need to continually read, study, and apply the Scriptures or we will lose the values that bind us.

4. ALL GRACE

Paul finishes the letter with a greeting similar to the opening:

The grace of our Lord Jesus Christ be with you (5:28).

Our life begins and ends with the grace of our Lord Jesus Christ. It's all about grace.

Several of you have told me of songs or hymns that bring tears to your eyes when we sing them in worship. One of the songs that does it for me is the hymn, "Come, Thou Fount of Every Blessing." (No. 475 in *Glory to God*.) The first verse goes like this:

Come, thou Fount of every blessing;
tune my heart to sing thy grace;
streams of mercy, never ceasing,
call for songs of loudest praise.
Teach me some melodious sonnet,
sung by flaming tongues above;
praise the mount! I'm fixed upon it,
mount of God's unchanging love!

The second verse talks about 'Ebenezer.'" Usually the only time we hear the word "Ebenezer" is during the holidays when we've seen a performance of "A Christmas Carol" featuring Ebenezer Scrooge. But the word is mentioned in the Bible and in this Christian song.

To understand what it means we look to the book of 1 Samuel. There we read how the Lord helped the Israelites repel a Philistine attack. After the victory, Samuel erected a stone monument and called it "Ebenezer" – which means "stone of help" (1 Samuel 7:12).

The next time you sing about raising your Ebenezer, you will be able to sing with understanding – you are acknowledging that you need God's help in your life (1 Corinthians 14:15). And guess what? You are not alone!

But the part of the song that brings tears to my eyes is the closing verse:

O to grace how great a debtor
daily I'm constrained to be!
Let that grace now, like a fetter,
bind my wandering heart to thee.
Prone to wander, Lord, I feel it,
prone to leave the God I love;
here's my heart; O take and seal it;
seal it for thy courts above.

The truth is, I am prone to wander. In spite of all that God has done for me, I wander off

down selfish paths again and again. This makes me cry.

Fortunately for me, my hope is not based on my own strength or virtue. My salvation is of God. I am sealed by the Holy Spirit.

God has given us outwards signs and seals of his claim upon us. Baptism and the Lord's Supper are two conspicuous examples. But the seal of the Holy Spirit is greater than these. God both claims us and gives us claim on him. Furthermore, this seal can never be broken. Praise be to God!