

*“Gospelizing” the Faithfulness of Christ*

*Among the Gentiles:*

*A Study of the Letters to the Galatians and Thessalonians*

Diocese of West Texas

Spring & Fall 2010

Study and Reflection Session 11:

1 Thessalonians 5:1-28

Proving Everything Through Testing

*A Translation for Study, with Commentary*

*Translation of 1 Thessalonians 5:1-11*

**5:1** Now concerning the times and the seasons, brothers and sisters, you do not need to have anything written to you. **2** For you yourselves know very well that the day of the Lord will come like a thief in the night. **3** When they say, “There is peace and security,” then sudden destruction comes upon them, as labor pains come upon a pregnant woman, and there will be no escape! **4** But you, beloved, are not in darkness, for that day to surprise you like a thief; **5** for you are all sons of light and sons of the day; we are not of the night or of darkness. **6** So then let us not fall asleep [*katheudō*] as others do, but let us keep awake [*grēgoreō*] and be sober; **7** for those who sleep [*katheudō*], sleep [*katheudō*] at night, and those who are drunk get drunk at night. **8** But since we belong to the day, let us be sober, and put on the breastplate of faith and love, and for a helmet the hope of salvation. **9** For God has appointed us not for wrath but for obtaining salvation through our

**Lord Jesus Christ, 10 who died for us, so that whether we are awake [grēgoreō] or asleep [katheudō] we may live with him. 11 Therefore encourage one another and build up each other, as indeed you are doing.**

*Commentary on 1 Thessalonians 5:1-11*

**The Lord's future return has present moral dimensions.** Having now assured the Thessalonians that the risen Lord will return some day, Paul reminds them that they should be much less concerned about *when* it will take place as about its *moral* implications for *today*.

- Like many early Christians, Paul links Christ's final return – the *parousia* (or “presence”) discussed in 4:13-18 – to the “day of the Lord,” a phrase originating with the prophets of the Old Testament and referring to that anticipated time when God will visit the earth in final judgment.
- As for the timing of this event – *when* it will take place – Paul tells the congregation only that Christ's return and God's judgment will occur at an unexpected time (5:2: “the day of the Lord will come like a thief in the night;” compare Matt 24:43; Luke 12:39; compare 2 Peter 3:10).
- Paul's reference to the “day of the Lord” functions to remind the Thessalonians that, because they won't ever know the timing of Christ's return and God's final judgment, they must always be *morally* prepared for this event to occur.
- Thus, in 5:1-11, Paul focuses strictly on the moral preparedness of the Thessalonians, rather than speculating about the chronological timing of Christ's return and God's final judgment.

**Paul warns those who place their trust in the power of Rome.** In 5:3 Paul probably quotes the Roman imperial slogan “peace and security,” using it *ironically* to warn of the moral danger associated with trusting anything other than the saving power of God.

- The slogan heralds the political and social stability achieved through Roman rule that is enforced by the use of violence.
- With his imagery of the abrupt onset of the pains of childbirth, Paul warns of the sudden destruction that befalls those who are unprepared for the “day of the Lord” *because* they place their trust in the political and military power of Rome rather than in the saving power of God.

**Faithful followers of Jesus are “children of light”<sup>1</sup> who live in “the day” rather than in “darkness.”** Paul uses this apocalyptic imagery that characterizes faithful living to encourage the Thessalonians.

- The “light” and the “day” refer to the place where one can see clearly and make good moral judgments.
- Paul encourages the congregation by telling them that they are prepared for the “day of the Lord” and should not fear the day of judgment because they are *already* living holy lives.

**There are some Thessalonians, however, who are “sleeping.”** Paul uses the verb *katheudō* (translated as “sleeping”) metaphorically to characterize those who are “lying asleep” or “lying idle,” inattentive to the urgency of living by the highest moral values associated with “light” and the “day.”

- Despite Paul’s general encouragement in 5:1-10, there are, nevertheless, some Thessalonians who are inattentive to the urgency of living a morally upright life.
- In Greek, “sleep” is also used as a metaphor to characterize death; in 1 Thess 4:15 Paul used the verb *koimaomai* (“sleeping”) metaphorically as a way to characterize those who had died.
- Paul uses a different verb for “sleeping” in 5:1-11 (*katheudō*), suggesting that here he is not talking about those who have “died,” but about those inattentive to the urgency of living a moral life, who are unprepared for the “day of the Lord.”

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<sup>1</sup> Paul’s text literally reads “sons of light,” but for Paul, terms like “sons” and “brothers” include both men and women.

- In the following verses (5:12-15), Paul expresses concern about the “idlers” who are not working to support themselves and about others who are ignoring the prophets in the community.

**Nevertheless, those who are “awake” and those who are “sleeping” live together with Christ.** In 5:10-11 Paul reminds them that they are all members of one community in Christ and that they are accountable to each other.

- Therefore, **the members of the community must encourage and build up one another.**
- Those who are “awake” must “build up” those who are “sleeping” to restore the health of the *entire* congregation.

### *Translation of 1 Thessalonians 5:12-22*

**5:12 But we appeal to you, brothers and sisters, to respect those laboring among you, exercising leadership over you in the Lord, and admonishing you; 13 esteem them very highly in love because of their work. Be at peace among yourselves. 14 And we encourage you, beloved, to admonish the idlers, console the faint hearted, help the weak, be longsuffering toward everyone [*pantas*]. 15 See that none of you repays evil for evil, but always seek to do the good to one another and to everyone [*pantas*]. 16 Rejoice always, 17 pray without ceasing, 18 give thanks in all circumstances; for this is the will of God in Christ Jesus for you. 19 Do not quench the Spirit. 20 Do not despise the words of prophets, 21 but test everything [*dokimazein*]; hold fast to what is good; 22 distance yourselves from every form of evil.**

### *Commentary on 1 Thessalonians 5:12-22*

**Paul now identifies concrete ways to “build up” the community.** First, he addresses those who exercise leadership by laboring among

the members of the congregation, having charge of them “in the Lord,” and admonishing them (5:12).

- “in the Lord” defines the norm by which those who exercise leadership carry out all their responsibilities: they model the Lord Jesus Christ in all they do.
- to model the Lord Jesus Christ means that leaders live their lives in such a way that others recognize the risen Christ alive in and through all of the actions of the leader.
- included in Paul’s list of a leaders’ activities is the admonishment of others: encouraging and building up other people to live their lives according to the highest moral values in the imitation of Christ and to be prepared for his return.
- According to Paul, those who are serving the community should be respected and esteemed in love “because of their work” of exercising leadership “in the Lord,” not because they occupy a designated position of authority over others.
- Does Paul’s counsel in 5:13 to “be at peace among yourselves” suggest that the leadership and admonishment being exercised have created conflict in the church?

***Every member of the church bears a responsibility  
for the well-being of the community.***

**Next, Paul does not leave encouragement and admonishment to a small group of leaders in the church: they are *everyone’s* burden.**

- To admonish someone is to hold them accountable for their actions.
- The congregation must correct the “idle,” a likely reference to those who are not working to support themselves and have become a financial burden to the entire church (see 2:9).

- They are also to console the “fainthearted,” possibly referring to those who are discouraged or disconsolate over the persecution they are now enduring.
- Paul also counsels members of the church to be longsuffering (the Greek word can also be translated “patient”), which means being slow to anger and abiding in mercy and kindness.
- Paul suggests that we must be longsuffering towards *everyone* (Gr. *pantas*), not just members of the church; in this way we partner with God so that God can change the world.
- The Thessalonians continue over time to grasp at a deeper and deeper level what it means to follow Jesus in their daily lives.

**To live peacefully means both non-retaliation and affirmatively doing “the good” to *everyone* (*pantas*).** Like Jesus, Paul rejects Israel’s retaliatory principle of proportional violence (an “eye for an eye”).

- Doing “the good” means doing what is morally right.
- As with being longsuffering, Paul advocates the responsibility of doing “the good” to *all people*, not just those in the church.
- This is another way that Paul sees us as partners with God, doing the good to everyone so that God’s power transforms the whole world.

**Being set apart for God (being “holy”) means regularly rejoicing, praying, and giving thanks in the community.** According to Paul, this is “God’s will” for the church.

**“Prove everything through testing.”** In 5:19-22 Paul sets out one of his most important teachings on the disciplined practice of moral discernment – determining God’s will for people in the community.

- The congregation must not hinder the work of the Spirit, that “continuing, creative presence in the congregation... guiding and empowering believers into conduct that is worthy of the God who has called them” (Furnish, 122).

- The Spirit often speaks to the congregation about their actions through the words of prophets, so prophets need to be heeded.
- Throughout his letters, Paul consistently uses the verb *dokimazein* (“to prove through testing”) to refer to the task of moral discernment: the reflective practice of proving over time whether a particular word or action conforms to God’s will.
- This practice calls for the church to reflect together on the fruit (or lack of fruit) of the actions or words of its members; where an action or word appears to bear good fruit, it may be concluded that it conforms to God’s will (see Rom 12:2).
- When an action or word appears to produce chaos and destruction, Paul advises the community to distance themselves from such actions or words (or from the people who continue to act or speak in such destructive ways).
- For instance, in 5:14, Paul suggests that the “idlers” need to be admonished; earlier, in 2:9, Paul reminds them that he worked with his hands to support himself so as not to be a financial burden on them; it is likely that others in the church have become a financial burden because they are not working but relying on the generosity of the other members of the church.

*Translation of 1 Thessalonians 5:23-28*

**5:23** 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. **24** The one who calls you is faithful, and he will do this. **25** 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.

## *Commentary on 1 Thessalonians 5:23-28*

**The complete sanctification of believers comes only through the saving power of God, the faithful one who calls us into service.**

Paul is confident that the faithful God will continue to lead believers into fullness of life as they enter into partnership with God and Christ by living a “life worthy of God, who calls you into his own kingdom and glory” (2:12).

## *Questions for Reflection*

1. Throughout this letter, Paul counsels the Thessalonians to encourage one another. Every member of the church bears the responsibility for the well-being of the community. Can you tell about a time recently when you encouraged another member of your congregation? Can you tell about a time recently when someone else in your church encouraged you? How did the encouragement affect your relationship with the other person? Did that encouragement in some way build up the whole church? If so, how?
2. In 5:15 Paul tells the Thessalonians to “see that none of you repays evil for evil.” In this we hear echoes of the teaching of Jesus (Matt 5:39: “do not resist an evildoer...;” Matt 5:44: “love your enemies...”). Can you tell about a time recently when you followed Paul’s counsel and resisted the temptation to retaliate against someone who had wronged you in some way? How difficult was it to resist the urge to respond in kind? Did anyone else help you and encourage you not to retaliate?
3. In 5:14 Paul says to “be longsuffering toward everyone” and in 5:15 he says “always seek to do the good to one another and to

- everyone.” It’s one thing to be longsuffering and to do what is morally right to people in the church. It’s another thing to hear and respond to Paul’s counsel to be longsuffering and to do the good to everyone. Can you tell about a time recently when you were longsuffering or did the morally right thing to someone outside the church? How did God work through your actions to affect the situation or the other person?
4. In 5:1-11, Paul talks about the difference between those who are “awake” and those who are “sleeping.” Can you tell a story about a time recently when you “encouraged” and “built up” someone in your congregation who was not paying attention to how they were living? How did that conversation affect your relationship with that person? Have you ever *received* such encouragement or building up at a time when you were not attentive to the way you were living? What was the result?
  5. In 5:12-13 Paul sees the leaders of the church as behaving as Christ to the community, though some people in the community don’t see it that way. How does leadership look when it is truly “in the Lord”? Is this kind of leadership always welcomed in the church?
  6. In 5:14 Paul places the responsibility for admonishment (holding someone accountable) on every member of the congregation. What kinds of relationships need to be nurtured in the Christian community so that admonishment of others can truly be practiced faithfully? In Gal 6:1 Paul reminds us that admonishing someone must be done with a spirit of gentleness and that it carries with it the temptation to lord over another person. What do you think he means by this counsel? Is the faithful practice of admonishment an accepted part of your church’s culture?

7. In 5:16-22 Paul sets out a discipline for reflecting together on our lives and discerning which actions are proving fruitful and which ones are not. How do you practice this discipline in your own life? What role does prayer play in your practice of this discipline (v. 17)? What role do other people play in your practice of this discipline?