

Marks of a Gospel Church

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[0 : 00] Please be seated. Heavenly Father, it is indeed a privilege to have your scriptures in our own language.

And we pray now that you'll speak them into our hearts by your spirit, that we may understand them, believe them and obey them. We pray this for the sake of Jesus Christ. Amen.

Give thanks in all circumstances. It's one of the many commands in this passage. It's in verse 18.

Give thanks in all circumstances.

A simple command, but all circumstances? What about when you lose your job? Give thanks then?

Or your child is seriously ill?

Give thanks in those circumstances? Or when you've lost a spouse or a loved one? Give thanks then in all circumstances, in those ones?

[1 : 32] Or you fail exams? You don't get the scholarship or the job that you've been hoping for?

Give thanks in those circumstances? Or your visa's not renewed?

You have to go back to another country or something like that? Give thanks in those circumstances? Or perhaps you've been defrauded or betrayed? Lost a significant amount of money unfairly?

Give thanks in those circumstances? Verse 18 says, Give thanks in all circumstances.

Well, this last section of 1 Thessalonians is punctuated by a series of brief commands. I can almost envisage, it may not have been like this, but I can almost envisage that Paul gets to halfway through chapter 5 and he's been speaking about various topics, not at length, but in some length. And somebody's saying the post is about to go. Well, it wouldn't have been Australia Post, but it would have been somebody on his way to Thessalonica. And so perhaps Paul is sort of all of a sudden just summarising all sorts of brief commands that he wants to pass on to the Thessalonians.

[2 : 45] Maybe it wasn't like that. But that's what this style is in these last dozen or 15 verses is like. Little bullet points of commands and exhortations to the Thessalonians.

They have some common threads. The first couple of verses, 12 and the beginning of 13 at least, is about right relationships between the people in the church and their pastors or their leaders, their ministers or elders.

We're not quite sure who those people were. Presumably they were voluntary type folk in those days. And Paul appeals to them to respect those who labour among you, referring to those who are preaching, teaching, have responsibility for the church or congregation there.

Esteem them very highly in love because of their work. So that's the first thing. Maybe it hints that there is some problem in church relations. The end of verse 13 says, be at peace among yourselves, which may be a bit broader than just the people to the pastors, maybe just in general relations within members of the church.

And that then flows into verse 14 as well, which gives another sort of sequence or barrel of commands to the church members.

[3 : 59] Four things in verse 14. We urge you, beloved or brothers and sisters, firstly to admonish the idlers. That is to warn them or rebuke them.

The idlers are those who are refusing to work, not those who are out of their control, unemployed, unable to get a job, but those who are refusing to work. We saw a hint of that a couple of weeks ago back in chapter 4.

Paul exhorted then the people to work with their own hands, not to be lazy. Same thing comes up in two Thessalonians as well. So they are to rebuke them. And this now is a command to all the members of the church.

So it's showing a mutual love and concern, a mutual responsibility between all members of the church for each other. The next one is to encourage or literally comfort the faint-hearted, which because of the word encourage or comfort that was used back in chapter 4, it may refer to those who've lost loved ones and are perhaps distressed or anxious.

We saw this last week about, well, what does that mean for such folk in the light of the Lord's return? If they've now died, does that mean they've forfeited their place?

[5 : 09] And we saw that last week that Paul answers that in detail. Now, perhaps if it's the same group, he says it's your responsibility, each one of you, to encourage, to comfort the faint-hearted.

And then thirdly in this verse 14, help the weak. That may be the weak in faith, so help to build up their faith by teaching them the Scriptures and encouraging them in their faith and trust in God. It may refer to the weak physically who need physical help to get things done. Therefore, maybe the frail and elderly is part of that group. It may be the weak in other ways.

But in particular, and we see this in other places in the New Testament, those who are strong in faith have responsibility especially to help the weak in faith. And those who are strong physically have a responsibility to help those who are perhaps weak physically.

And that's within the life of the church. And it's all of our responsibility to do that. And the fourth command of verse 14 is be patient with all of them.

[6 : 14] Well, there are many people it's actually easy to be patient with. There are also lots of people it's very hard to be patient with. The people who somehow sort of get under our skin.

Those who we find irritable. Those who cause us to be impatient. Be patient with all of them. And again, that's a responsibility of all Christians for each other within the Christian church.

What we get then in verses 12 to 14 is a little glimpse, a little snapshot through these brief commands of what a church ought to be like. One where there is peace and harmony in the relationships of church members, including the leaders and the people of the church.

One where there is mutual concern, mutual responsibility, a care for those in particular need. And where that is a shared responsibility amongst all the members of the church. That's a mark of a gospel church in those three verses to begin this section.

We'll skip the next verses for a minute and we'll jump down to verse 19. And here we get another mark of a gospel church.

[7 : 23] Verse 19 says, Do not quench the spirit. And then verse 20, Do not despise the words of prophets. In the beginning of verse 21, But test everything.

Now those three things seem to go together. Quenching the spirit would be either or both of people refusing to speak as the spirit has led them or refusing to speak or preach the word of God.

And then secondly, those who refuse to listen or heed the word of God as it is spoken by prophets or preachers or whoever. We quench the spirit both by refusing to speak God's words or utterances and secondly, by refusing to hear and heed them and follow them and obey them as well.

So those three things seem to go together. Now, we're not quite sure if it's addressing a specific problem of the church in Thessalonica, but presumably Paul is picking up some of the issues that Timothy has alerted him about the church.

And so a mark of a gospel church is where the spirit is not quenched, where the word of God thus is spoken and preached by those trained and qualified or gifted to do so.

[8 : 41] The words of the prophets are not despised, but are rather attended to in our minds as well as in our lives by response. But they're also attended to by testing them.

Elsewhere, Paul talks about testing the words, either or both of, testing them according to the scriptures already there. For us, of course, we've got the full set of the holy scriptures for the Thessalonians, perhaps the Old Testament and maybe just little bits of the New.

This is a very early letter in the New Testament, so perhaps very little was yet written for the New Testament. So they're tested in accordance with the scriptures and tested in accordance with the preaching of other apostles as well.

There's certainly the test that Paul refers to back in, or later on when he writes the letter of 1 Corinthians, sometime after writing this letter itself. So the second mark of a gospel church, it seems in this section, this passage, is where the word of God is spoken and preached, not despised, but is tested.

But what that will lead to is right living, faith, obedience and so on. So that's the second mark of a gospel church. The third mark, and we'll keep moving on and we'll come back to the bits we've

missed out, is from the end of verse 21.

[10:04] Now in some senses this holds together, it's not a complete break of thought. Paul says at the end of verse 21, hold fast to what is good, abstain from every form of evil.

Now this flows out of the previous comments, where the word of God is preached, is attended to and not despised, where it's tested, the result will be not just an academic growth of knowledge, but rather holy lives.

Here that's expressed by holding fast to what is good and abstaining from what is evil. But as you've seen over the last four weeks, as I reiterated on Friday night in the address at the annual meeting, this pursuit of holiness is a major theme in this letter.

Here it's expressed in these ways, hold fast to what is good, abstain from every form of evil. How that is brought about is through the right ministry of God's word, the verses preceding it.

So that the word will be preached, it will be paid attention to, not despised, it will be tested to be sure that it's correct, and then as a result, the people will more and more hold fast to what is good and abstain from what is evil.

[11:24] There's quite a sense of attention and energy in these words. Hold fast to what is good is a bit like a dog with a bone, gripping it so hard, holding on for dear life is part of the idea, and abstaining from something is to shun it completely, not flirting with it, but putting it way out of sight and out of mind.

So quite a deal of attention and energy is expended in fulfilling these commands of verse 21 and verse 22 as well. So here's another picture of what church life ought to be like.

We've seen the mutual care and love of members of the congregation expressed in verses 12 to actually 15, I've skipped over 15 unintentionally.

Then secondly, the preaching of God's word in 19 to 21. Thirdly, the pursuit of holiness in 21 and 22. But notice also the balance in these verses.

Verses 21 and 22 talk about in a sense the human effort that is required for us to hold fast to what is good and to abstain from what is evil.

[12:39] But as we've already seen in this letter and again as I mentioned on Friday night in my annual meeting address, this is balanced with God's power. So Paul goes on to pray.

He's already prayed at the end of chapter 3, remember. May the Lord make you increase and abound in love for one another and for all and may he so strengthen your hearts in holiness that you may be blameless before our God and Father at the coming of our Lord Jesus.

That prayer at the end of chapter 3 actually picks up what we've already seen by the marks of a church, abounding in love and growing in holiness. Now he prays again in verse 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, the one who calls you is faithful and he will do this.

That is, we hold fast with all the strength that we can muster but relying upon God's strength and faithfulness to make us blameless on the last day.

[13:43] Both things are held in balance. It's not all of my energy independent of God but it's not just me sitting down and letting God do it all either.

There is a healthy balance of our effort but reliance upon God's strength and God's faithfulness to accomplish what he promises to do. So they're the three marks of a church so far and I'll come to now to the fourth one which I've done out of order simply because today is Thanksgiving Sunday and therefore I wanted to give it slightly more focus by making it the last of the sequence even though it's the second in the sequence of these verses.

Verses 16 to 18 say rejoice always pray without ceasing give thanks in all circumstances for this and that is all three of them is the will of God in Christ Jesus for you.

Again such short commands but so demanding rejoice always when you're grieving or pressured or stressed or sad yes when you're poor or struggling or depressed yes rejoice always pray without ceasing is also in effect pray always not so much the sense of joy and we can understand perhaps more readily praying always as a great expression of reliance upon God then we come back it's bracketed with give thanks so the rejoicing and the giving thanks always or in this case in all circumstances yes I might say well isn't this a bit unrealistic aren't there surely times in earth where we where we can't give thanks we can't rejoice Paul says no notice Paul is not saying give thanks for all circumstances so when something catastrophic or tragic or unjust or evil happens we don't

give thanks for that but in the midst of that circumstance we give thanks very important to keep that in mind we're not giving thanks to God for the death of somebody we're not giving thanks for a serious illness we're not giving thanks for a marriage breakdown or for a job loss or whatever else is the problem or dilemma or catastrophe but when those things happen we are still to give thanks in those circumstances to God now why is that

Paul doesn't give a reason in this verse or these verses specifically for that but in the context of what he's spoken about in this letter and the theology we see in the Bible in the New Testament it's very clear why not only we can but we should or must give thanks in all circumstances and rejoice always God is sovereign God is the one who is in control and no evil or unjust act no catastrophe is outside the bounds of his sovereign power so going beyond the bad things if I can put it like that we come to the bigger truth and reality of God's sovereign power and he's good for us he's promised that he'll work things for good for those who love him so we can give thanks we must give thanks and rejoice in all circumstances because God is bigger than the things that might cause us not to give thanks or not to rejoice being a bit more specific there is nothing that can separate us from the love of God in Christ so whether it's the circumstance of a job loss or a bereavement or an illness or some other thing that we're not anticipating that we don't want it still doesn't separate us from the love of God in Christ therefore even in that circumstance there is reason to give thanks and indeed following this command we must give thanks and rejoice or to pick up another expression from the New Testament we have received in Christ every spiritual blessing in the heavenly realms they are ours and they are secure they will not be taken from us by any circumstance therefore in the midst of whatever circumstance we are faced with we are the recipients of every spiritual blessing in the heavenly realms therefore not only can we but we must and ought to give thanks and rejoice always we can and must give thanks and rejoice always because the joys of heaven far outweigh the trials and pains on earth they far outweigh them both in time and in depth our life on earth is fleeting and transient the problems on life on earth are even more fleeting and transient in a sense the joys of heaven last for eternity in a temporal dimension simply they are far far greater and therefore by outweighing the strife trials problems or dilemmas on earth we have even more to keep giving thanks to God for but not only it's not just sort of the quantity it's the quality as well that is the quality of the joys of heaven are so deep and vast and boundless in quality as well as quantity that whatever the circumstance we face on earth we not only can but must and ought to give God thanks and rejoice always you see in a sense getting this right is about getting our perspective on eternity right getting our worldview formed by the gospel our society's worldview is so concentrated on earth on the things immediate that it's actually lost its

[20 : 14] God's perspective on our world but when we actually receive God's gospel and are transformed by the gospel promises and realities then we realize how fleeting how inconsequential eternally so many things on earth are and I suspect that when we've been in earth a few thousand years some of the things that cause us such strife and agony on earth will think wow I wish that I'd got it in perspective then that is the gospel transforms our worldview and perspective so that we see that the trials and problems of life yes they are deep I'm not meaning to trivialize them but they are far outweighed by the glories of heaven both in time and in quality as well and so when even now we appreciate a worldview shaped by the gospel the joys of the gospel the promises of God that are secure the benefits of the gospel which are many and numerous in being at peace with God adopted into his family receiving every spiritual blessing unable to be separated from the love of

God in Christ having our sins forgiven being sure of an eternal destiny that is perfect and kept in heaven for us unfading and imperishable when all of those things and many more are put into our worldview then we will give thanks thanks will flow out of us whatever the circumstances we find ourselves in I often hear people say well I am thankful because there's always people worse off than yourself I sometimes wonder if I'll ever meet the person who can't say that I mean presumably there must be somewhere on earth somebody who says there is nobody on earth worse off than me well I've never met that person but when people say or when we think I can always give thanks because there are people worse off I actually don't think that's the right motivation for thanks it's a thanks by comparison well I'm not doing too well but there are others worse so I'm sort of thankful for small mercies that's a sort of slightly meagre thanks I think it's a slightly begrudging thanks and it's also a small worldview now and not on the big picture of what God gives us in

Christ Jesus it's not the right motivation for thanks it's actually not really thanks it's actually an expression of relief that I'm not worse off this is a passage telling us to rejoice always and give

thanks in all circumstances and that's got the right worldview a worldview that recognizes gospel realities that are far bigger than this world that we live in now when Paul says rejoice always here I'm sure he means what he perhaps says more clearly when he writes the same instruction to the Philippians later on Philippians 4:4 says rejoice in the Lord always I'm sure that's what Paul means here that is that as we focus on the Lord Jesus Christ the heart of the gospel rejoicing and giving thanks will be dominant themes in our life and in our voice we see this sort of balance in the prayer that we said earlier on in this service prayer of thanksgiving that we often use in our non-communion services we give thanks for life and health and safety and freedom to work and leisure to rest and for the beauty of creation and they're all good things and to greater or lesser extents most of us can give thanks for most or all of those things but then that prayer goes on but above all we give you thanks in effect for the gospel of the Lord Jesus Christ for all the benefits of the gospel that are ours for knowing God having sins forgiven the gift of the spirit and assurance of eternal life in Christ and in whatever circumstance we find ourselves in those things remain true nobody and nothing can ever take them away from us we always therefore have reason and we are always commanded by these words at least to rejoice always and give thanks in all circumstances so our lack of thanksgiving often stems from a small world view that is focused on earth only our lack of thanks often comes from wrong waiting waiting as in placing too much weight on the things of the here and now and not enough weight on the joys of heaven that await us our lack of thanks and joy also sometimes come from misunderstanding the gospel of grace it's very easy and many of us do it fall into the wrong thinking that somehow we deserve what

God gives us as in heaven or forgiveness us that somehow by our own religiosity or piety or good works God is just giving us what we deserve paying us our wages for what we contribute or sometimes we might even go a touch further and say well actually God you owe me I've served you faithfully and I've done this and done that and I've read my Bible and gone to church and given money and helped the poor God actually you owe me I know it's easy for Christians to fall into that thinking it's a common thinking in society I think as well we become deceived into thinking that we deserve the gospel but we don't you see when we think that somehow we deserve the gospel then we're not thankful for it you don't run up to your boss and say thank you thank you for paying my wages you think well this is what I deserve I probably deserve more but but when you get given it freely which is what the gospel is about then thankfulness and rejoicing will flow but if we slip into the wrong thinking or if we're deceived into the wrong thinking of somehow God owes me something somehow the promises of Jesus

[26 : 45] Christ and his death for me is really what I deserve then we've actually betrayed the gospel in our hearts and we need to come back again to the heart of the gospel which is that it's a gospel of grace freely given to people who do not deserve do not merit do not earn and cannot earn so I salvation through the Lord Jesus Christ or salvation in any way for that matter that is all the blessings of the gospel our adoption into God's family the forgiveness of our sins freedom to call God our father freedom to pray to him the assurance of heaven none of that we deserve none of it we've earned we can never earn it it's a free gift of God that's grace and when we appreciate again that the gospel is about grace then our hearts will be filled with thanksgiving and rejoicing and when we wait the gospel rightly and see that the benefits of the gospel are deeper and far more long lasting than anything else on earth joys or distresses then our joy and thanksgiving will be continuous even now here on earth this letter of

Thessalonians like so much of the New Testament begins and ends with grace chapter 1 verse 1 grace to you and peace the very last verse of the letter the grace of our Lord Jesus Christ be with you we're used to saying that sort of expression as a sort of closing prayer or something like that and sometimes then we've lost the recognition of the the depth or significant of that what the significance of that word this is a profound word grace it is saying your whole being and life with God is absolutely sure and certain because God's given it to you by his grace freely given undeserved unmerited and unearned and therefore because the bottom line of the gospel for believers is grace then we will rejoice always because the bottom line of the gospel is grace we will pray without ceasing because the bottom line of the gospel is grace we will give thanks in all circumstances there is much for each one of us to give God thanks for life and health for safety for freedom for toys and even radios and other things but above all surely and always for the gospel of grace in our Lord

Jesus Christ these series or this series of brief exhortations and commands that finishes this letter to the Thessalonians highlights I think four marks of a gospel church mutual love and concern in verses 12 to 15 a right appreciation of God's word in verses 19 to 21 the pursuit of holiness that flows from God's word in verses 21 and 22 but at the heart of it and our highlight for today being Thanksgiving Sunday verses 16 to 18 constant joy and thanks let us ensure that these are the marks of our church always Amen Amen right did you do think wins even I did see them