

Essentials for Churches

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Preacher: Phil Meulman

[0 : 00] This is the morning service at Holy Trinity on the 22nd of October 2000. The preacher is Phil Muleman.

His sermon is entitled Essentials for Churches and is from 1 Thessalonians 5, verses 12 to 28. Our Father, we thank you for what you have done for us in Jesus Christ. And we pray now that as we open your word, as we try to understand it, that you would give us the mind of your spirit in understanding.

And may we be better servants for Jesus' sake. Amen. Well, you may like to open your Bibles at 1 Thessalonians 5 as we look at these concluding verses of what is a great book.

Great letter, really. It's on page 960. 961. At a training course a long time ago, I once heard someone say, the most important thing in learning to relate to others is personal honesty.

[1 : 15] And once you learn to fake that, he added, everything else is easy. Many people, unfortunately, seem to follow that line of thinking today. Perhaps one of the most discouraging aspects of our modern world is not so much the moral collapse of leaders, such as we've seen many examples of in recent years, but rather it's the low level of ethical behaviour on the part of many Christians.

I don't understand what has happened to the Christian community. Believers who regularly go to church and profess to believe the Bible often seem to go along with the practices of the world around them with hardly any consciousness that what they are doing is unbiblical and certainly is really wrong.

They lie without hesitation. They evade paying their bills. They avoid their taxes. They ignore needy people. They fail to keep appointments. They lose their tempers.

They're critical. They desert their mates. Now, if the Apostle Paul were here today, I think that he'd be very concerned about this.

To him, the mark of true Christian faith is that it changes everything that you do and say. It affects every area of your life, not just an aspect of it.

[2 : 40] And so a Christian may no longer act as he did before he came to Christ. Sure, when you become a Christian, you are free to serve. You are free. You are free to serve Christ.

And this is very clear. He makes it very clear in his letters. Every letter that Paul wrote ends with pointed practical applications to daily situations of the truth that he had set out.

And this letter to the Thessalonians is no exception. The closing verses of this chapter in chapter 5, verses 12 to 28, which we're looking at today, are really practical guidelines on how to live Christianly in three areas of life.

First of all, in the area of how we act toward the leaders of the church. Now, we don't say much about this here at Holy Trinity, but it is part of the record of the New Testament.

So that's the first thing. And the second thing we see is how to live with other believers, with other Christians, whether it be at home, at work, at church, wherever it may be. And finally, we'll see and we'll look at how to live toward God and to respond to the situations where he puts you.

[3 : 54] So first then, how to act toward the leadership of the church. We begin with verses 12 of chapter 5.

And we read, But we appeal to you, brothers and sisters, to respect those who labour 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. Now, I didn't write any of that, but Paul wrote that. And I agree with it. Paul intends here that this word, God's word, should govern the behaviour of believers in the congregation at Thessalonica.

So when he says, Respect those who labour among you and have charge of you in the Lord, he is referring to those who stand out in front and lead the whole group. In other words, Paul is saying here, Follow your leaders.

Follow the leaders. Now, there are a few things that church members must do with regard to their leaders. First, they are to respect them. And by that, I mean know them, recognise them, be aware of them.

[5 : 00] Don't take them for granted. Now, I have known of churches where the minister has been treated like a hired servant. They're there to respond to the whims of the power brokers in the church or the vote of the congregation.

As a result, they're treated with little or no respect and at times are severely mistreated. And that's a real pity.

Here, Paul is saying, Get to know your leaders. Get to know them. Understand that they are people and don't ignore them.

Then second, Paul says, Esteem them very highly in love. Value them, in other words. Understand that though they may have their own personal idiosyncrasies, such as following Richmond or something like that, and they might be hard for us to handle them on occasion, and even sometimes they just might be here at 8 o'clock and they just duck off at the 10 o'clock service and go to Turut and to preach somewhere else.

Even though they might have those idiosyncrasies, recognise that their work is important and therefore they should be highly esteemed for that very reason. So why should we respect and esteem our church leaders?

[6 : 16] Primarily it's because we are told to in God's word. It's written here. But it's also due to the way in which our church leaders lead. I don't believe that as a church leader we should command respect from our Christian brothers and sisters by saying, I'm your vicar, you obey me.

I don't get up here and stand over you and say that. I don't think that's right. To do that is an abuse of power and the authority that we are ordained to, if you like. But I believe that we should be respected by the way that we live out our lives.

And that's done by modelling our lives on the Lord Jesus Christ. He was a true leader. He taught from the scriptures.

He opened the scriptures to teach. He worked hard. He worked hard telling people about the love of God, the good news of God's love in the world.

He spent time alone with God. He went out on his own regularly and prayed. He showed compassion to the poor and the needy, to anybody who needed it in fact.

[7 : 24] He showed righteous anger in the temple where he saw God's temple being profaned. And he exercised humility in submission to his father on the cross.

And any church leader that models their leadership on the life of Jesus will have, or ought to have, the respect of those that he or she has been placed in charge of.

Jesus exercised servant leadership. And so too should any leader of the church today. And it is interesting to note that styles of leadership in secular organisations are going to this servant style of leadership and not necessarily based on it on Jesus, but that's where it comes from.

The third thing that Paul says to the people in the Thessalonian churches is be at peace among yourselves. Verses 12 to 13 and particularly verse 13 here tends to suggest that relationships were not all that they could have been in the Thessalonian church.

Perhaps there was trouble between the idol of verse 14 and those who were admonishing them, the leadership in the church. The truth is though, we just don't know what the problem was or who was to blame.

[8 : 45] But no matter who was to blame, there had to be peaceful relations between them.

Leaders were to guard against abusing their authority and idlers were not to disregard those who had charge of them in the Lord.

Now we move on to how to behave towards other believers. In verses 14 and 15, we see Paul addressing our behaviour toward one another in the body.

So we read, And we urge you, beloved, to admonish the idlers, encourage the faint-hearted, help the weak, be patient with all of them. See that none of you repays evil for evil, but always seek to do good to one another and to all.

There's a good list there. How do you stack up on that list? Notice as well that this list here is not merely addressed to leaders.

Every believer, every Christian, is to live like this in these days. Paul points out first special behaviour towards three distinct types of people, the idlers, the faint-hearted, and the weak.

[9 : 58] Warn the idlers, he says. And the word there is literally the disorderly, those who are out of step with the rest of the crowd. In Thessalonica, it meant those people whom he had referred to earlier on in the letter who had quit working because they expected Jesus to return at any moment.

So they downed tools and just waited for him to return and bludgeoned people and so on. They were living off the gifts of others and weren't willing to work and support themselves. Paul says, Admonish them.

Tell them to mend their ways. Don't let them go on like that. He doesn't mean to do this in a mean-spirited way, but to point out to them that this kind of behaviour is not God's will for them.

Then second, he says, Encourage the faint-hearted, literally the small-souled person, one who feels inadequate and ungifted. Help them to find their place, says the apostle.

Now remember, this is addressed to everybody, all the Christians that are gathered in Thessalonica. People who feel out of it. People who think that they do not belong to a church and cannot contribute anything in that day and age and in our day and age must be helped to find their place because they do have a place within God's church.

[11 : 21] It shouldn't just be left to the leadership of the church. Now a great picture of the body at work is seen in 1 Corinthians 12. And there, in a lot of those verses, Paul says many things.

And in verse 16 he says, speaking about the ear and the eye, he says, If the ear would say, Because I am not an eye, I do not belong to the body, he thinks it's not involved with the body. Well, Paul says no to that. Even if it says that, it doesn't make it any less a part of the body. You need the eye to see and the ear to hear and those sorts of things.

And you know, the body needs all its various bits to make it work properly, doesn't it? Now sadly there are people who feel that way in many churches.

Even here at Holy Trinity, they think, I can't do anything. I don't have any gifts. Well, that's wrong thinking. If you think like that, it's wrong.

[12 : 26] God has equipped all his people with gifts. We are to help each other find our place, to give them that something to do, to use their gifts, to help contribute to the life of the church and encourage them in the work that they are doing.

It's not a job just for the leaders. It's a job for everyone within the church, the body of Christ. So encourage the faint-hearted.

Then finally Paul says, help the weak ones. This means those who are weak in the faith. Those who don't know very much about how to live the Christian life, who haven't learned the truth that sets them free and need extra help to learn about Jesus Christ.

Perhaps those sorts of people that were weak in faith are not sure about their salvation or they feel guilty about the past and they don't sense God has really forgiven them yet.

Whatever it may be, the word, God's word, the scriptures, are to help them to hold fast and to help them hold fast. And that may demand from us, who are a bit stronger in the faith, a little extra effort, a phone call perhaps, an invitation to lunch or a quiet talk about their needs and so on.

[13 : 47] These words are addressed to all the people, not just the leaders. And we're all to watch out for one another in this way. And that's why here we have the link person scheme so that we do look out for people.

That's why here we also have days like today, like Hospitality Sunday, so people can go and get to meet other people in the church and hopefully be encouraged in their faith and so on. We want to make sure that everyone here at Holy Trinity feels a part of the body of Christ.

Now, there are three attitudes that Paul says are required for this. He says, first of all, in verse 14, be patient with them all. Secondly, in verse 15, see that none of you repays evil for evil.

And thirdly, do good to one another and to all. Patience is willingness to keep trying over and over again. Non-retaliation means that you don't strike back and try to get even with someone who may have hurt you in the process of helping him or her.

help. So, helpfulness is a continual attempt to better a situation, to be part of the solution and not part of the problem.

[15 : 04] Well, in the last section of this chapter, we find instructions on how to behave toward God. And what is your attitude toward God to be like?

What's it like? First of all, in the circumstances where he puts you, let's look at verses 16 to 18. He says, Rejoice always, pray without ceasing, give thanks in all circumstances, for this is the will of God in Christ Jesus for you.

First of all, be joyful. Rejoice always. The word perhaps ought to be translated, be cheerful. Don't let things get you down. Now our world is filled with despair and gloom.

I often talk to people on the phone or face to face who are at the end of themselves. And the pressures under which we live today can do this to us.

But a Christian, in a sense, has an inner resource. Therefore, we can obey the words elsewhere in Scripture in the letter that James wrote. He says, Whenever you face trials of any kind, consider it nothing but joy.

[16 : 17] Don't take it as an attack upon you. Don't moan and groan and say, What have I done to deserve this sort of thing? But rejoice because God can work for good in these situations.

Trials may make you face yourself and learn things about yourself that you didn't know. And that's what James again goes on to say in chapter 1, that you may be mature and complete, lacking in nothing.

Now if you're in the midst of difficulty, being joyful, being cheerful, that sort of attitude I imagine is not an easy one to adopt, is it?

Now it's important to grieve when we experience loss and to express anger and even sadness. But unlike the world, Christians are not left alone here to deal with these crises.

Jesus is with us. He promises never to leave us. And as Paul says back in chapter 4, verse 13, he says, we don't want you to be uninformed, brothers and sisters, about those who have died so that you may not grieve as others do who have no hope.

[17 : 36] As Christians, we can rejoice in the hope and comfort of Christ, even in the midst of sadness and despair. Now as Christians, we ought to expect trials and tribulations to come our way, not because we want them to, but because of the understanding that we may have gained of the waywardness and the sinfulness of this world.

Paul himself, the apostle, knew of the trials, that he experienced many trials. The other apostles of Jesus, they knew of the trials and they wrote about them and they grew in their faith as a result. And that's why James again says that when trials come, we should rejoice because God is going to teach us something that will be of great value in life. No doubt, there are many here who can testify to this sort of thing as well.

Well, second, Paul says, be prayerful. Pray without ceasing. That's the method of drawing on the inner strength that God provides. pray without ceasing.

Sometimes we think we know the right answers for everything and think that everything will be right if we just do this or that or whatever it might be. We think everything will just be right then.

[18 : 56] But you know what? God often removes the props from our lives in order to teach us that he himself is all we need. God is all that we need.

He is sufficient. Have your props been taken away and have you begun to learn that God himself is the one who will meet your needs, can meet your needs?

As you pour out your heart, as you pour out your heart in prayer, sometimes in almost desperate prayer, you often discover that he answers in ways unexpected.

and in doing so, you relearn that he is God Almighty, that he is Yahweh, that he is El Shaddai, that he is God, the creator of you and me, the God who is enough, the God who can meet your needs. And when you discover or rediscover that, then you can move on and you will have something to contribute to all situations. That's why Paul says, pray without ceasing.

[20 : 05] When you are under pressure and in trouble, be prayerful. Lean on that inner strength that God will provide. Then third, he goes on and he says, be thankful.

Give thanks in all circumstances for this is the will of God in Christ Jesus for you. Why be thankful? Because when you are faced with a trial, you are being given an opportunity here to glorify God, to show God's goodness and glory in amongst all the trials and so on that are going on before you.

If you never face trials or pressures, how could anyone ever see that you have an invisible means of support, that you have a reliable source of strength that others don't know anything about?

these are the opportunities that God gives us. So it might seem hard, but be thankful for them. When the early Christian leaders were arrested by the Sanhedrin, they were beaten for their faith. But they left the council rejoicing that they had been counted worthy to bear suffering for Jesus' sake, for his name's sake. And that, friends, is a thoroughly Christian attitude that we should adopt. [21 : 20] That's how we ought to face our trials as well. Notice how Paul underlines this. He says, this is the will of God in Christ Jesus for you.

This is the will of God for you. The will of God is not to make some dramatic display of power or gift that is going to attract attention. Rather, it's the quiet response that you make to the daily trials and circumstances in which you find yourself.

Well, Paul moves on and addresses how to react toward the guidance that God gives you in verses 19 to 22. We read there, Do not quench the Spirit.

Do not despise the words of the prophets, but test everything. Hold fast what is good. Abstain from every form of evil. Two simple things are here.

Don't ignore the Spirit's leading and don't despise the Scripture's wisdom. Now, the Spirit's leading can come in a couple of ways. Stop doing what is wrong and start doing what is right.

[22 : 29] Could be the sense that you might hear sometimes. And if you are a Christian, you may be familiar with that inner feeling that says, God wants you to do something or God wants you to stop doing something.

We've all felt that inner guidance at some stage, I think. What the Apostle is saying here, what Paul is saying, is give in to those feelings.

When the Spirit prompts you to show love to somebody, do it. Don't hold back. When I was preparing for this, I found a story of a man and it goes like this.

I once heard of a man who said, sometimes when I think of how my wife works and blesses me, it's all I can do to keep from telling her that I love her. There is a man being guided by the Spirit, but he is quenching the Spirit.

Don't do that. Go ahead and tell her you love her. You may have to pick her up off the floor afterward, but don't quench the Spirit. Tell her you love her.

[23 : 38] It's all right, I'll tell her later. Next, Paul says, don't ignore the Scripture's wisdom. Do not despise the words of the prophets in verse 20.

Unfortunately, because of certain cultic tendencies in our day, we think of prophesying as some special power to predict the future, either for ourselves, individually, or for the world at large. But prophesying was not that. It's not that. Another writer says of this, about prophesying, that it is declaring the mind of God in the power of the Spirit, declaring the mind of God in the power of the Spirit.

In those early days, before the New Testament was written, this was done orally. Prophets spoke the mind of the Spirit in an assembly. But since the writing of the Scriptures, we have very little need for any kind of prophesying other than that based upon the Scriptures.

So an example of prophecy today, then, is what we would call expository preaching and teaching. And it can also be talking about the Scriptures in a Bible study group, in a small group, explaining, someone explaining the Scriptures, someone in a one-to-one situation, bringing the mind of God to bear on that situation, generally using the Scriptures.

[24 : 56] And there are other examples of that. But essentially, prophecy is opening the mind of God from the Word of God. And Paul says here, do not despise the words of the prophets.

That's the wisdom of God. The Scriptures tell us how to act. The Scriptures tell us how to think and even how to order our life, believe it or not.

So we ought not treat Scripture lightly. They will save you countless hours of headaches and heartaches if you seek to observe and obey what God writes in Scripture.

And friends, people so desperately need to hear those words today. They need to hear Scripture. and they need to take it seriously, not just what they want to put into it and take from it, but hear what God is saying.

And we're all charged to know Scriptures and to be able to bring the mind of God to bear in situations. But Paul goes on about prophecy and he adds, test it.

[26 : 04] Now, it's easy to imitate this. Anyone can stand up and say in a deep tone of voice, this is the word of the Lord. But we must learn to test what's said from what's already been revealed.

Paul commended the Bereans in the book of Acts for this, saying that they were more noble than those in Thessalonica because they received the word with all readiness of heart and they searched the Scriptures daily whether these things were so.

So, things were revealed to them and they searched the Scriptures to see whether what was revealed was true. Test it. Test the Scriptures.

Test what's been said to you is what Paul is saying here. Another writer says this, there was a saying attributed to Jesus that's been quoted by early Christian writers.

It is not in the Gospels but it was a commonly attributed saying that urged become approved money changers. Now, the money changers in the temple were occupied in changing various currencies and were constantly looking out for counterfeit coins.

[27 : 17] That was their job in a sense. And that's what Paul tells us to do here about prophesying. People on every side are telling us what God wants us to do.

All around us there's people telling us those sorts of things. But there is much that is counterfeit in what people say. Become approved money changers.

Test what is said against the Scriptures. Are you approved money changers? Well, with regard to the resources God provides we have these great closing verses.

In verses 23 and 24 Paul writes, 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 it and he will do this. And I hardly need to expand on that. Simply recognize that God is able to minister to the whole person.

[28 : 17] Not just a small aspect of it but to the whole person, the spirit, the soul and the body. He wants to work in all of those areas of our lives if you let him.

Serve him with faithfulness and obedience and he will sustain you in the process until he comes again. And that friends is the great hope that is set before us in this letter.

It's the great hope for all Christians. One, that we grow in holiness and godliness and two, that we look forward to the hope of eternity with Jesus.

You see, Jesus is coming again. God's kingdom will come and reign here on earth. And it is to that end that we labour. It is to that end that we obey God's words in scripture, even enduring hardship and testing times in our lives.

But there's only a limited time of testing to go through now. It might be hard but it's a limited time. It cannot go on forever. One lifetime in the whole sphere of history is very, very short.

[29 : 32] We can look forward to that day in eternity where we won't have those trials and tribulations for those of us who follow Jesus. There's a motto or a saying which you may have seen on people's homes and it says this, only one life will soon be past.

Only what's done for Christ will last. Now there's one word I'd like to change in that and it's on the last line, only what's done for Christ will last and say only what's done by Christ will last.

Christ. And that's where the apostle leaves us. He leaves us with the hope of the coming of our Lord and the resources that God has provided so that we may live in a new and different way in the midst of this modern age.

The grace of our Lord Jesus Christ be with us all. Amen.