

Church Life

(1 Thess. 5:12–28)



SABBATH AFTERNOON

Read for This Week's Study: *1 Thess. 5:12–28, Matt. 5:43–48, Gal. 5:22, Phil. 4:4, John 15:4–6.*

Memory Text: “Do not despise prophecies, but test everything; hold fast what is good” (*1 Thessalonians 5:20, 21, ESV*).

Key Thought: Paul gives these Thessalonians, both leaders and lay members, very practical, as well as spiritual, advice about how to relate to one another.

Paul concludes his first letter to the Thessalonians with seventeen admonitions (*1 Thess. 5:12–22*) followed by a closing prayer (*1 Thess. 5:23–27*). This week's lesson begins with three admonitions regarding the attitude of local church members toward their leaders (*1 Thess. 5:12, 13*). These admonitions are followed by six imperatives regarding how local church leaders should behave toward their people.

Eight brief admonitions follow in the next seven verses (*1 Thess. 5:16–22*). These can be organized into two groups; three counsels on maintaining a positive Christian attitude (*1 Thess. 5:16–18*) and five on how to relate to new light in the form of prophecies (*1 Thess. 5:19–22*).

In the concluding prayer Paul summarizes a main theme of this letter: that believers in Thessalonica and beyond would continue to grow in holiness until the Second Coming itself. In other words, they are to live every day in preparation for the Lord's return. In one sense, what could be more of a “present truth” message than that?

*Study this week's lesson to prepare for Sabbath, September 8.

Response to Ministry (1 Thess. 5:12, 13)

The two verses at the heart of today's lesson follow the concluding admonition of last week's lesson to "encourage one another and build each other up" (1 Thess. 5:11, NIV). This work takes place in local churches, in the process of mentoring and discipleship. The lesson today focuses on how disciples should respond to the efforts of their leaders and mentors.

Read 1 Thessalonians 5:12, 13. What is Paul's basic point, and how should we apply it to ourselves? In what ways can you better work with, support, and love those who are "over you in the Lord"?

The structure of the Greek of verse 12 indicates that the three phrases in the second half all refer to the same group, the local leaders of the Thessalonian church. Paul calls on the members to "know" these leaders, meaning to notice, respect, or recognize them. The implication being that, perhaps, some in the church were disrespectful of authority.

The word *admonish* has the connotation of instruct, warn, or even "knock sense into." Paul acknowledges here that church leaders will often need to exercise "tough love." This kind of leadership is not always welcome; yet, Paul goes on in verse 13 to ask the members to highly esteem their leaders on account of the difficult issues with which they have to deal. Paul wants all the members of the church to be at peace with one another.

The language of these verses reflects ancient strategies for dealing with people. Thought leaders of Paul's day knew that dealing with people is delicate work. They encouraged leaders to carefully diagnose the condition of their followers, to be sensitive as to whether or not the follower was open to correction, to choose the right timing, and to apply the appropriate remedy. Above all else, leaders were expected to examine themselves before trying to correct others. Paul added elements to this framework. For the Christian, God is the model of leadership, and the goal of church leadership is a membership who live lives worthy of God.

In some cultures, there is a tendency to distrust and challenge leadership; in others, to blindly submit to it. How has your own culture's attitude toward authority impacted the church in your area?

Providing Ministry (1 Thess. 5:14, 15)

In verses 12 and 13 Paul addresses ways in which members in the church should treat their leaders. In today's passage (*1 Thess. 5:14, 15*), Paul turns his attention to the leaders of the church and how they should treat those under their care.

Read 1 Thessalonians 5:14, 15. In what ways does Paul admonish church leaders in regard to their treatment of members? Look at the principles there. How can we apply them to ourselves, whatever our role may be in the church? Meanwhile, how should we apply these principles at work, at home, at play, and wherever we find ourselves? See also *Matt. 5:43–48*.

Paul encouraged the leaders in Thessalonica to “warn those who are unruly” (*1 Thess. 5:14, NKJV*). The unruly were members who refused to support themselves, who were willfully difficult to deal with, and who had to be confronted.

In contrast, Paul instructs the leaders to “encourage the timid, help the weak,” and “be patient with everyone” (*1 Thess. 5:14, NIV*). The “timid” are people who have little self-confidence or sense of worth. They are anxious and worried about many things. Such people matter to God; so, leadership should encourage them.

The “weak” are those with moral and spiritual limitations. They are gullible, easily discouraged by hardship, and fearful of the unfamiliar. Their hearts might be in the right place, but they lack knowledge and are troubled by the past. They need help to survive.

Paul directs church leaders to be patient with everyone. While the first three counsels in verse 14 are fine-tuned to meet various conditions, patience is always appropriate for pastoral care.

Paul probably continues to have leaders in mind in verse 15. Whenever caregivers are attacked by those who don't appreciate their admonitions, they may be tempted to retaliate. But when leaders retaliate, it demonstrates that their leadership was not motivated by the spirit of Christ. It is crucial to sound church leadership to keep the good of others in mind.

Verses 12–15 presume that there will be mentors and disciples in the church, and it is important that there be a lot of respect and patience in those relationships. But we should not forget 1 Thessalonians 5:11 (“encourage one another and build one another up,” *ESV*). Pastoral care will often go both ways. There are times when the mentors need to be mentored.

Positive Christian Attitudes (1 Thess. 5:16–18)

According to 1 Thessalonians 5:12–15, Christians need to learn how to accept and how to offer constructive criticism. That can happen only in the context of relationship. The bottom line is that every Christian needs to be accountable to others and needs to be willing to hold others accountable. A praying church will grow in admonition and encouragement.

Read 1 Thessalonians 5:16–18. What three things does Paul consider to be the will of God for every believer? Why is each one so important? See also *Gal. 5:22, Phil 4:4*.

Glenn Coon, a beloved Seventh-day Adventist preacher, loved to say that there are many more commands in the Bible to rejoice than there are to keep the Sabbath. Yet, we rarely give rejoicing the emphasis it deserves. Joy in life is a fruit of the Spirit (*Gal. 5:22; see also Phil. 4:4*). And spirit-filled joy is possible even in suffering (*1 Thess. 1:6*).

Paul certainly was a model of what it means to pray without ceasing. First Thessalonians is saturated in prayer, as we have seen. Here Paul invites readers of his letter to follow his example.

Thankfulness is another positive Christian attitude that Paul exhibited (*1 Thess. 1:2, 2 Thess. 1:3*). At the root of pagan depravity was a lack of gratitude to God (*Rom. 1:21*). According to Thomas Erskine, “In the New Testament, religion is grace and ethics is gratitude.”—Quoted in F. F. Bruce, *Paul: Apostle of the Heart Set Free* (UK: The Paternoster Press, 1977), p. 19. It is interesting to note, then, that the Greek words for “rejoice” and “be thankful” have the same basic root. The key to godly rejoicing is a continuing spirit of thankfulness to God.

Open your eyes. The gifts of God are all around us; we just forget to thank Him for them—often because we’re so focused on the trials and struggles of living. If we would cultivate an attitude of thankfulness to God more and more, our walk with Him would be much closer and our lives filled with joy.

Make a list of ten things for which you are thankful. Be very specific. Then, make each of these the center of a short prayer to God. Notice the changes that will come in your whole attitude and outlook. This practice can show you just how crucial thankfulness is in our experience with God.

Relating to “New Light” (1 Thess. 5:19–22)

“Do not quench the Spirit. Do not despise prophecies. Test all things; hold fast what is good. Abstain from every form of evil” (1 Thess. 5:19–22, NKJV). What is Paul saying to us here? How can these words be applied in our experience? What “form of evil” must you, in your own situation, work extra hard to avoid?

In 1 Thessalonians 5:12–15 Paul was admonishing the church. In verses 19–22 he brings up another form of admonition, the gift of prophecy. The two negatives with which he begins this section are both continuous in emphasis: “Stop quenching the Spirit” and “stop despising prophecies” (1 Thess. 5:19, 20, *author’s translation*). He’s basically telling the Thessalonians to stop something that they were doing on a consistent basis.

Though we don’t know what specific issue Paul was addressing, he seems to be telling them to be open to more light, while at the same time he’s telling them to test it, just to make sure it is indeed light (2 Cor. 11:14).

There are various ways to undermine the gift of prophecy. One of these is to “quench the Spirit.” We do this when we ignore or resist the work of a true prophet. Look at all the opposition, even from within our own ranks, to the prophetic gift we have been given in the life and ministry of Ellen White.

A second way to undermine the gift of prophecy is to accept what is said but misinterpret or misapply it. We can approach a prophetic message with an open mind but apply what is said inappropriately to the immediate situation. This is something about which we, as Adventists, need to be very careful. We have been given a wonderful gift; we don’t want to undermine that gift by misusing it.

A third way to undermine the gift of prophecy is to give prophetic authority to persons or writings that have not received the gift from God. The church must be continually vigilant, testing everything in order to see whether the prophetic message builds up the church.

What has been the impact of Ellen White’s prophetic ministry in your own life? Bring your answer to class on Sabbath.

End-Time Holiness (1 Thess. 5:23–28)

Read 1 Thessalonians 5:23, 24. What does it mean to be “sanctified wholly” and “preserved blameless” at the coming of the Lord? Shouldn’t we be that way, even now?

In today’s passage Paul returns to the language of prayer. His style is similar to that of 1 Thessalonians 3:11–13. His main theme is also similar: being found blameless in holiness at the Second Coming. Paul makes a transition here from what the Thessalonians are supposed to do (*1 Thess. 5:12–22*) to what God does in us (holiness) and for us (the Second Coming).

Believers have often disagreed as to exactly what this text says about the nature of human beings and the kind of character they can expect to have when Jesus comes. In our brief encounter with this passage, we will focus on what can be said clearly on the basis of this text.

Paul is saying that what God does in believers should extend throughout the entire person. Every part of the believer’s life is to be affected by sanctification as the return of Jesus approaches. In speaking of “spirit, soul and body,” Paul was not attempting to be scientific and precise about various layers of the human person (in biblical thought mind and body are a unified whole, not parts that exist separately). Rather, he was expressing that every part of our mind and body is to be submitted to God. God is to be allowed full control of our thoughts, feelings, and actions.

Paul’s prayer extends from the present time to the Second Coming. Believers are to be preserved, or kept blameless, until the coming of the Lord. Paul is praying that the completeness of their dedication to God will be maintained all the way to the end. According to this letter, the Thessalonians were far from perfect, but what they did have was worth preserving until Jesus comes. As much as anything else, then, Paul was praying that they would continue to grow in grace through a relationship with Jesus (*see also John 15:4–6*).

In what ways can you, and should you, be preparing every day for the Lord’s return?

Further Study: “[As a child] Jesus carried into His labor cheerfulness and tact. It requires much patience and spirituality to bring Bible religion into the home life and into the workshop, to bear the strain of worldly business, and yet keep the eye single to the glory of God. This is where Christ was a helper. He was never so full of worldly care as to have no time or thought for heavenly things. Often He expressed the gladness of His heart by singing psalms and heavenly songs. Often the dwellers in Nazareth heard His voice raised in praise and thanksgiving to God. He held communion with heaven in song; and as His companions complained of weariness from labor, they were cheered by the sweet melody from His lips. His praise seemed to banish the evil angels, and, like incense, fill the place with fragrance. The minds of His hearers were carried away from their earthly exile, to the heavenly home.”—Ellen G. White, *The Desire of Ages*, p. 73.

“Nothing tends more to promote health of body and of soul than does a spirit of gratitude and praise. It is a positive duty to resist melancholy, discontented thoughts and feelings—as much a duty as it is to pray.”—Ellen G. White, *The Ministry of Healing*, p. 251.

Discussion Questions:

- ❶ As a class, go over your answers to Wednesday’s final question. Look at it in two ways: what has been Ellen White’s impact on our church as a whole, and how has her ministry impacted our lives as individuals?
- ❷ Dwell more on this idea of how our culture’s attitude toward authority affects our attitude toward authority in the church. Does our culture incite us to disrespect authority or to pay too much deference to it? How can we strike the right balance?
- ❸ How can your local church do a better job of mentoring new believers in character growth? What kind of spiritual leadership training is needed?

Summary: In this week’s passage (*1 Thess. 5:12–27*) Paul addresses a variety of issues, but he is particularly focused on the spiritual quality of local church life. Believers at the local level are to mentor each other and be joyful and thankful. They are also to be open to new truth, particularly prophetic truth, yet careful and thoughtful in their evaluation of new ideas. Above all else, Paul calls for complete submission to God in every area of personal life with an eye toward the return of Jesus.

The Lesson in Brief

► **Key Text:** *1 Thessalonians 5:12–28*

► **The Student Will:**

Know: Reflect on the importance of the role that leaders and lay members have in the lives and well-being of communities of faith.

Feel: Desire to make his or her church a place where leaders and members dwell together in harmony.

Do: Choose to be a positive and loving influence for the good.

► **Learning Outline:**

I. Know: The Need of Good Leaders and Committed Followers

A The work of God has always prospered under the care of good spiritual leaders. What qualities does God wish to see in church leaders, and how should their responsibilities be carried out? *Compare 1 Tim. 3:1–7, Titus 1:6–9, and 1 Thess. 5:14.*

B What examples do you find among the judges and kings of Israel that illustrate the positive or negative influence that leaders can have on others?

C Jesus said, “No . . . house divided against itself will stand” (*Matt. 12:25, ESV*). What can leaders and laity do to foster unity within the church?

II. Feel: Appreciative

A In what ways have you benefited from the admonition, encouragement, and help that has been manifested by the church? How did it make you feel?

III. Do: Live the Life

A Whether a leader or a follower, everyone has some kind of influence. How does your influence make your church a better place?

B What could you do to show your esteem and love for the work of local church leaders?

► **Summary:** Leadership and laity within the church should carry out their respective duties with an attitude of respect and love for each other as they work together to advance the cause of God.

Learning Cycle

► **STEP 1—Motivate**

Key Concept for Spiritual Growth: Life within the body of Christ should be grounded in complete submission to God and marked by the expression of mutual love, respect, and support between church leaders and laity.

One well-known leadership expert says that everything rises or falls on leadership. As shocking as it sounds, history bears witness to the truth of this claim. Whether we follow the stories of the kings of Israel in the Old Testament or the more recent history of business and world leaders today, leaders play a tremendous role in determining the success or failure of the people and events that they oversee.

To highlight the type of difference that a godly leader can make in the world or in the church today, reflect on the following qualities of a successful leader.

A successful leader is one who:

Uses his or her power for good at the right time and in the right way;

Is accountable for his or her mistakes;

Is honest in not just the large but the small things as well;

Motivates and inspires others;

Leads by example;

Puts others first;

Overcomes adversity;

Holds fast to integrity;

Knows when to compromise without compromising principles;

Puts service to others ahead of his or her advancement.—John C. Maxwell, *Developing the Leader Within You* (Nashville: Thomas Nelson, Inc., 1993), pp. ix, 201, 202.

Consider This: While these qualities of leadership are certainly inspiring, more often than not, they seem the exception rather than the rule. What would a person need to do in order to manifest and/or develop such leadership skills?

► **STEP 2—Explore**

Bible Commentary

I. The Importance and Duty of Church Leaders (*Review 1 Thessalonians 5:12–15 with the class.*)

It is helpful to remember that when Paul wrote these final instructions to the Thessalonians, the church in Thessalonica was only a few months old and was made up primarily of Gentile converts. This means that the leaders who had been appointed by the apostle would have had little time for formal training before they were suddenly (and certainly uncomfortably) thrust into the spotlight. While they did their best to fill the power vacuum left by Paul's absence, it is understandable that not everyone would have been pleased with the new arrangements. It was one thing to listen to Paul but an entirely different matter to listen to leaders who were new Christians just like everyone else.

In light of the persecution faced by the Thessalonians after Paul's departure, it is not hard to imagine that the church leaders made a few mistakes along the way and that some members probably didn't take their authority too seriously. It is against this backdrop that Paul urges the Thessalonian converts "to respect" their leaders and to esteem them for the work they are doing (5:12, *ESV*).

In what kind of work were the leaders in Thessalonica engaged? Paul does not provide a lot of detail, but he provides a couple of helpful clues. First, Paul describes the local leaders as those who "labor among you" (*vs. 12, ESV*). The word translated as "labor" refers to the difficult kind of toil and exhausting struggle associated with manual labor. Given that the leaders in Thessalonica most likely worked full-time jobs in addition to their responsibilities for the church, they certainly would have been physically tired at the end of a day. But the far more difficult part of ministry is the spiritual, mental, and emotional exhaustion that comes from caring for the burdens, worries, and needs of others.

Another aspect of the work of the church leaders is the task of "admonition." Admonition refers to the task of warning against bad behavior and the consequences that follow from such behavior. While the task of admonition is never easy, it is important to note that the word Paul uses does not entail the kind of harsh scolding that often leaves a person feeling belittled and bitter. The goal of admonition is not to wound but to heal.

While church leaders are responsible for the care of their local congregation, Paul makes it clear that the task of ministry is not to be the sole responsibility of church leaders. We all are called to look out for one another, whether that means admonishing the misguided, encouraging the despondent, or helping those who are spiritually weak (*Rom. 14:1, 2; 1 Cor. 8:10, 11*). And in all cases, it is important to remember to be patient (*Rom. 15:1, 1 Cor. 13:4*) with those to whom we are ministering.

Consider This: Paul states that ministry is a task that belongs to both clergy and laity alike. Why is it important not to make ministry the exclusive task of the clergy?

II. The Last Word *(Review 1 Thessalonians 5:23, 24 with the class.)*

Paul's instructions to the leadership and laity make it clear that the type of life that God desires His people to experience doesn't happen automatically once a person comes to Jesus. It takes personal determination to surrender our lives to God on a daily basis and a moment-by-moment decision to put the needs of others before our own. But that is not even enough. Paul makes it clear that we all need Christian teaching and leadership. Preparation for God's kingdom is not a solitary enterprise; it also requires the loving care and support of a church family.

But now, after all the instructions that Paul has given about living a life that is pleasing to God (4:1), he reminds the Thessalonians that in the end it is God who is the only One able to produce such a change in our lives. We can't make it happen. The power necessary to live a godly life resides in God and God alone (3:13). As long as we are willing, He will do that work in our lives.

Consider This: When talking about how to live the Christian life, sometimes people will use the expression, "Let go, and let God." In what sense is that saying true, and in what sense is it misleading?

► **STEP 3**—Apply

Thought Questions:

1 Paul assigns the responsibility of admonition to both church leadership and laity. What insight can we gain from Jesus' teaching in Matthew 18:15–20 and from the situation that Paul describes in 1 Corinthians 5:1–5 about how to deal with wrongdoing in the church?

2 Paul ends his letters with specific instructions relevant to the needs of each congregation. Compare Philippians 4:1–9 and Colossians 4:2–18 with 1 Thessalonians 5:12–22. What aspects of Paul's counsel are the same? What do you think is the reason for the similar counsel?

3 Although the Thessalonians were experiencing persecution for their faith, Paul instructs them to “give thanks in all circumstances” (*1 Thess. 5:18, ESV*). What do you understand Paul to be saying? On what basis could they be thankful?

Application Questions:

1 How does one show respect and esteem for church leaders while dealing with disagreements? What about in the case of wrongdoing?

2 Paul says Christians should be patient and kind toward all. Do others perceive you as kind and patient? If not, what can you do that could change their perception?

3 What have you found most encouraging for your spiritual life from our study of 1 Thessalonians?

► STEP 4—Create

Just for Teachers: Humans learn best when they have a model or an example to follow. Use the following activity to help class members to come up with concrete examples of the abstract leadership qualities highlighted in Step 1.

Activity: Divide the class into groups of no more than five people. Number each of the leadership qualities listed in Step 1, and give each person a copy of the list. Instruct the groups to write down the names of at least one person who positively illustrates each of the leadership qualities. After they have finished, have the groups share their lists.

Conclude by encouraging the class members to take their individual lists home and to place them on their refrigerators or in some other visible place. Encourage each of them to look at the list during the week and to seek to demonstrate each one of the leadership qualities during the upcoming week.