

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. He 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 finely 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 exhibits (*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 would be 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 prophesyings” (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 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 is 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 is 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 are far from perfect, but what they do have is worth preserving until Jesus comes. As much as anything else, then, Paul is praying that they will 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:

- ① 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?
- ② 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?
- ③ 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.

Light in the Darkness: Part 1

Bhutan is a small mountainous country lying on the southern slopes of the Himalayas and bordered by northeast India. For generations it has been cut off from the outside world. Bhutanese are nearly all Buddhist and Hindu. There are few known Christians in the country. But God has ways of opening hearts and leading seekers to Jesus.

Tepa was a monk in Bhutan, but he felt dissatisfied. One day he met a Christian couple who secretly introduced him to Jesus. When Tepa's family learned that he had become a Christian, he was disowned and cut off from his village. Tepa, one of the first Bhutanese Seventh-day Adventists in the world, left Bhutan and settled in Nepal.

Tepa's son, Praveen, shared his father's passion to reach the Bhutanese for Christ. He became a teacher in a boarding school near the Bhutan border in India, where many Bhutanese students studied. Praveen befriended them and secretly taught them the Bible in a way they could understand. Some eagerly accepted Jesus as their Savior.

During vacations Praveen visited his students' families in Bhutan. Some of these families became close friends.

One day Praveen stared at the Himalayan Mountains, wondering how he could share Jesus with the Bhutanese. Just then a man approached and said he was a Seventh-day Adventist. The two talked long about the Bible, Ellen G. White, and *The Great Controversy*. Praveen was inspired to print copies of *The Great Controversy* to give to Bhutanese people who lived on the border of India and Bhutan. Others helped to finance the project.

The book created a stir. Some monks, and even some Christians, became alarmed and threatened to have the book banned. Christian leaders of other denominations denounced the book and urged their members to burn it.

But others became curious about this book that had caused such a stir. They sought copies for themselves and began reading it. The book was reprinted.

Praveen befriended two monks. After several months he introduced them to Jesus and gave them copies of *The Great Controversy* and a New Testament. The monks secretly read their books and have asked to take more copies across the Bhutan border.

Praveen's Bhutanese students take copies of *The Great Controversy* with them when they return home. They share the books with family and friends, and in this way God's truths have entered Bhutan.

(Continued next week)

The author, whose name has been withheld for security reasons, is an evangelist who works with Bhutanese people near the border of India.