

STUDY 7 – 1 THESSALONIANS 5:12-28

The title to this section doesn't inspire a great deal of excitement. In the NIV it is called "Final instructions" which conveys the impression that these verses were just written quickly as Paul was wrapping up the letter. However it would be wrong to suggest that these verses are not important. They are linked to the main themes of the letter that we have seen over previous studies, and it is leading up to a great concluding prayer in verses 23 and 24.

Firstly in verses 12 and 13 Paul addresses their relationship to their leaders in the church. It is helpful to remember that as Paul first wrote this letter the church was only a matter of months, possibly even weeks old. So the danger of this church struggling with their leadership (as they were likely to be young Christians too) was high. Paul calls them to respect (literally "know") their leaders.

It is interesting to see the reasons why Christians are to respect their leaders, and the description he gives of their work. They work hard among the people – leadership is about hard work (the word used is one which refers to physical labour), not about profiting at the expense of others. They are over the people, but crucially "in the Lord". It's not that they are over the people by nature of who they are in themselves, but because of the role they have been given by Christ in his church. They also "admonish you" – a word which refers to correcting and rebuking sin. To be a leader worthy of respect you need to be doing all three of these tasks, and a church must respect leaders who are doing this. If leaders are doing their job, and the church are respecting them, this leads to peace.

Secondly in verses 14 and 15 Paul turns his attention to their relationships with each other. The whole church has a responsibility to disciple one another and to deal with each other in an appropriate way. People are different and their struggles and sins are different so should not be treated in a "one size fits all" way. If people are idle, that is a sin that should not be encouraged (either deliberately or accidentally due to misplaced compassion) but they should be warned. Idleness here has the meaning of not being willing to work, but also of a disorderly/undisciplined life. This can be seen to link back to what Paul has

just said about how we are to live in the light of Christ's return (see 5:8). We must be prepared to confront sin in the church – in a careful, loving way, but remembering that to confront here is a loving thing to do.

The “timid” are to be encouraged. These are likely to be those Christians who lack faith, perhaps anxious about the suffering that comes on believers and shaken by trials. This encouragement was a vital part of Paul's ministry (remember 2:10-12) and is to be part of all our ministries to each other (remember 4:18 and 5:11). Christians who are struggling with their faith must not be written off, but we should come along side them. In the same way, the “weak” must be helped. The church must be a place where struggles can be admitted and strugglers helped. The presence of different kinds of people within the church with different needs shows the need for God's help in discerning how to relate in a godly way to each other.

Where people have been sinned against (and this happens in church as well as anywhere) revenge is not to be sought. Patience – that fruit of the Spirit should be evident in church life, and we should commit our wrongs to the Lord knowing we have been greatly forgiven. The command in verse 15 is wonderfully realistic “always try to be kind to each other and everyone else”

Finally Paul stresses our relationship to the Lord. Verse 18 is the second time in the letter where Paul tells us what “God's will” is for us (remember 4:3). We are to rejoice always (a characteristic of the Thessalonians when they first heard the gospel – see 1:6 – this joy should not fade in the Christian life). We are to pray constantly (Paul is a good example of this in this letter). We are give thanks constantly.

We are also to be people who listen discerningly. As you read 2 Thessalonians it becomes clear that there were a number of false prophecies going around the church about the return of Christ (2 Thess 2:1-3). In response the church were to listen to all who speak in the name of the Lord, and test it by what they know from God's word. It is not true, it is to be avoided. But the Spirit works by his word so if it is true – hold on to it.

The final prayer in verses 23 and 24 really summarises the whole of the letter. Paul has his eyes fixed on the return of Christ, and prays that God will keep the

Thessalonians until Jesus returns. He is a God who keeps his promises – he will do it. But don't miss exactly what Paul is praying – it's not simply that they will reach heaven, but that they will continue "blameless", it is a prayer for salvation and that they will continue to live out their salvation. This holiness affects their whole person – it's not just about the "spiritual" part of life (as if there is such a thing), but it involves our body as well (and therefore our sexuality – remember 4:3-7).

POSSIBLE QUESTIONS

How are leaders described in verses 12? What three things do they do?

How should we act towards them? (Verse 12 and 13) What will this lead to?

How are we to relate to each other in the church? (Verse 14-15) What does this tell us about

- Different people and different needs in the church?
- What an alive church looks like?
- Our responsibility for each other in the church?

What basic principles are we given for relating to each other (verse 15)? Does this sound realistic?

What is God's will for us (verses 16-18)? We probably all agree with these commands, why are they often so difficult?

What principles are we given for dealing with people who claim to speak for God in verses 19-22?

Where is Paul's focus in his final prayer in verses 23-24? How can we have the assurance we will be kept for Christ's return? What is Paul so concerned about on the way to Christ's return? Is this just about being "religious" or "spiritual" (praying/going to church)?

How does this prayer draw together all the themes we have seen in the whole letter?