

St Paul's Dorking Small Groups - Sunday 26th November 2017

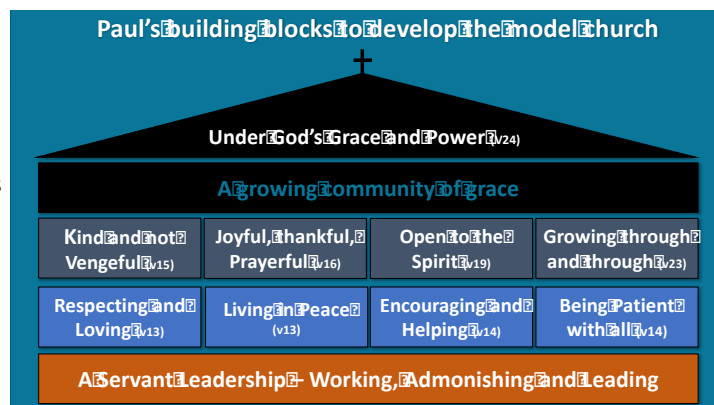
Courageous Hope: Paul concludes his letter to the Thessalonian Church - 1 Thess. 5:12-28

Courage

LOADING

Introduction and background

Paul visited Thessalonica, the capital city of Macedonia on his second missionary journey around 49 AD (see Acts 17). His converts included Jews and Greeks who had attached themselves to the synagogue - both rich and poor. Paul caused quite a stir amongst the Jewish community who hounded him out of the city and pursued him to Berea. Following a series of setbacks Paul was greatly encouraged to hear of the blossoming church in Thessalonica (See 1 Thess. 1:7-9) and its reputation grew, even to the extent of Paul describing them as a "model" (v.7). Paul wrote the letter to the Thessalonians soon after his time in Corinth. It is thought to be one of his first letters along with Galatians (circa AD50). **Paul wrote this open-hearted letter to a church that was one of his great joys.**



His purpose in writing was to:-

- Correct or defend himself against the slander that was being campaigned against him by Jewish opponents.
- Fortify his brothers against pagan persecution and moral pressures.
- Correct a misunderstanding that had developed about Christ's return being before anyone within the church had physically died.
- Correct a misunderstanding regarding the need not to earn a living before Christ's return.
- Provide counsel on matters regarding the role of the young leaders of the church and the role of Spiritual gifts.

Leon Morris concludes "Much of the contents of this letter concerns the difficulties a young, very enthusiastic, but as yet imperfectly instructed church might face. It addresses what they naturally might encounter as they seek to live out their faith in a totally new and hostile climate. Here we meet the weak, the faint hearted, the idlers, the workers, the visionaries and the puzzled."

Paul outlines the building blocks for the "model" Thessalonian church and instructs them how they can be, the best they can be....from GOOD TO GREAT!

The work of leadership is Servanthood:-

- It involves "toil" - it's hard, never-ending, and often over-bearing work.
- It involves servanthood ... they are those who 'work hard among you' - No ivory towers but rolled up sleeves.
- They have charge over you - "They exercise a position of leadership over you/like a head of a family".
- They admonish you - "To counsel about avoidance/correction" - they are to challenge us - but that requires open minds.

4 Attitudes - 4 ways of being:-

- Respecting and loving:** Our attitude to leaders is to be respecting and loving (12-13). Paul is seeking to help them understand what distinctly Christian leadership looks like. It's not democratic, it's not autocratic - it's theocratic - but that is a new and delicate balance. Too often we are complaining and projecting super-human qualities on to them - then they fail, then we get frustrated, then we get bitter ... then we are not loving!
- Living in peace with each other (v13):** When you put a diverse community together, with different expectations, needs, faith expressions and journeys - you get trouble! That is why we need to be a growing community of GRACE. Without giving one another a break, church becomes poisonous not peaceful. In short, give peace a chance!
- Encouraging and helping (v14):** There is no place for Michael Hammer's famous quote "We carry the wounded but we shoot the stragglers" in the community of Grace. Here we warn the idle, encourage the timid, help the weak. Everyone is encouraged to step up and contribute (no passengers), but we need to take real account of everyone's disposition or experience and be encouraging of those who are timid (no-one left out) and there is special care and concern for the weak (no-one left alone). *Are you lacking purpose or lacking resilience in your inner self, or unable to stand through illness or infirmity? Then we need to provide some encouragement! (The Nevins translation).*
- Be patient with everyone:** Not everyone is growing at the same rate, not everyone wants to grow/change/develop. This is not a one size fits all community. So we need forbearance, patience, tolerance, poise and restraint.

4 Actions - 4 things to do:-

- Be kind not vengeful:** One mark of a healthy congregation is the absence of a judgmental spirit. Part of this kind of non-judgmental, intentional stance is to be kind. Paul expounds on this further in Rom 12:17-21.
- Be joyful/prayerful/thankful:** Be joyful. This is not about being happy in spite of yourself or putting on a good face. It means putting our focus and faith in God as a life habit towards him who is the creator and orchestrator of life.
Pray continually: Some have tried to fulfil this prayer by repeating the Jesus prayer 1000's of time a day. However, what it means is making prayer an integral part of our life. Smith Wigglesworth, the great Christian leader, said "I don't ever pray any longer than twenty minutes.... but I never go twenty minutes without praying".
Your prayer life is not measured in minutes. Prayer is to be a lifestyle. Prayer is a constant two-way communication with God.
Give thanks in all circumstances: Paul says to "give thanks in all circumstances. It does not say "Thank God for all circumstances," but "in all circumstances. "Give thanks" is *eucharisteō*, "to express appreciation for benefits or blessings." There is further help in Paul's letter to the Philippian, "Do not be anxious about anything, but in everything, by prayer and petition, with thanksgiving, present your requests to God." (Philippians 4:6) ... **for this is God's will for you in Christ Jesus.**

3. **Don't quench the Spirit, but test prophetic words. Don't treat with contempt**" (NIV): "Despise" (NRSV) is *exoutheneō*, "to show by one's attitude or manner of treatment that an entity has no merit or worth, disdain." When we begin to despise the working of God through the Spirit because of our prejudices and experiences, we are in danger of ignoring the true work of the Spirit. **But Test ...** This word "test" (NIV) means "to make critical examination". When a prophecy is given, there should be a time of reflection to consider how it fits (or doesn't fit) with the Scripture. Instead of rejecting prophecy out of hand (as many churches do), the group needs to reflect on it. Not everything that comes as a prophecy is pure from God. It goes through a human filter that sometimes introduces error - **but it should not stop us trying!**
4. **May God sanctify you and keep you blameless:** Paul prays that we might be sanctified "*through and through*" (NIV). The verb is *holotelēs*, "*pertaining to being totally complete, with implication of meeting a high standard, in every way complete, quite perfect.*" So often we satisfy ourselves with a relative holiness ("I'm better than some others") or a partial holiness ("I'm better than I used to be"). But Paul calls the believers to a high, high standard of moral conduct and mental purity.

Paul describes the extent of this holiness further, "*May God ... sanctify you through and through. May your whole spirit, soul and body be kept blameless at the coming of our Lord Jesus Christ.*" (5:23) He is saying that the holiness should not be just spiritual, or mental, or physical, **but touch every part of our being!**

Some suggest that Paul's tripartite description here of the totality of the person as "spirit, mind, and body" as the only way to think of our human make up. The problem is that people are described in different ways in other passages. Psalm 31:9 -- soul and body, Proverbs 16:24 -- soul and body, Matthew 10:28 -- soul and body, Romans 8:5-8; Sinful nature, mind and Spirit, Hebrews 4:12 -- soul and spirit, heart. "*For the word of God is alive and active-sharper than a two-edged sword, it penetrates even to dividing soul and spirit- it judges the thoughts and attitudes of the heart*"

"Love the Lord your God with all your heart, soul and mind." Matt 22:37 NIV

While "Spirit, soul, and body" gives us insights, let's not get too dogmatic about it. This is the only place in scripture that we are described thus, but it is a useful language and connection with much of the thinking of our society today.

God's keeping power and grace (v24-28).

Does this all sound like hard work? How can we possibly go from "*good to great*" as individuals and as a church? The answer is that it is not all about our efforts and our tenacity as - "*the one who calls you is faithful and he will do it*" (v24) BUT we do have a responsibility to partner in God's process. We are called in Philippians 2:12-13 to "*Work out our salvation.*" (Message translation: "*Re-double your efforts. Be energetic in your life of salvation, reverent and sensitive before God. That energy is God's energy, an energy deep within you, God himself willing and working at what will give him the most pleasure.*"

This is a cooperative venture- it is HIS church, our faith takes hold of God's power. God's power is great enough to keep us, to preserve us blameless, so that we will stand before God complete, whole, and loved as one who is in Christ.

The grace of Lord Jesus Christ be with you!" (v28)

===== **QUESTIONS TO DISCUSS:**

1. What would your perfect church look like? Why would it be like that?
2. Consider the diagram of the building blocks of the model church at the top of the notes. Which are the 2-3 areas we are well underway with, and which are the 2-3 areas where we need to develop further?
3. Pick 3 or 4 areas to discuss and read the notes associated with these areas above:
 - Leadership
 - Respecting and Loving
 - Living in peace
 - Encouraging and helping
 - Being patient with all
 - Kind and not vengeful
 - Joyful, thankful, prayerful
 - Open to the Spirit
 - Growing through and through
 - Under God's grace and power

Consider together:

What is your understanding of what Paul is saying about these topics?

What is fresh for you here? What have you not seen here before?

What can you do as individuals or as a group to develop this/live this/be this more?