I have a confession to make. I don’t read the news. I don’t watch the news. I don’t listen to the news. I don’t know the news. At least I didn’t until last week. In my internship meetings with Mike he became aware of the fact that I didn’t read the news and he admonished me to begin. My father-in-law has been on me to do the same for years. So, this last week I began reading the news, not a lot, but a couple of articles a day. Here are two observations I have.

People around the world are crying out for peace, but there is not a lot of peace, rather tension and unrest. Paul tells us that in the last days people will be saying, “There is peace and security,” (5:3) but as Mike pointed out last week there will not be peace and security on earth until after Christ returns. So, how should the church look/live as we await Christ’s return? Our text this morning has some answers to this question.

1 Thessalonians 5:12–28 (ESV)

12 We ask you, brothers, to respect those who labor among you and are over you in the Lord and admonish you, 13 and to esteem them very highly in love because of their work. Be at peace among yourselves. 14 And we urge you, brothers, admonish the idle, encourage the fainthearted, help the weak, be patient with them all. 15 See that no one repays anyone evil for evil, but always seek to do good to one another and to everyone. 16 Rejoice always, 17 pray without ceasing, 18 give thanks in all circumstances; for this is the will of God in Christ Jesus for you. 19 Do not quench the Spirit. 20 Do not despise prophecies, 21 but test everything; hold fast what is good. 22 Abstain from every form of evil. 23 Now may the God of peace himself sanctify you completely, and may your whole spirit and soul and body be kept blameless at the coming of our Lord Jesus Christ. 24 He who calls you is faithful; he will surely do it. 25 Brothers, pray for us. 26 Greet all the brothers with a holy kiss. 27 I put you under oath before the Lord to have this letter read to all the brothers. 28 The grace of our Lord Jesus Christ be with you.

How should the church look/live as we await Christ’s return? Since the church is saved by the God of peace, we should live at peace until Christ returns.

In other words, we are called to be a gospel-centered church. What is a gospel-centered church? A church that is centered on the gospel will obviously preach the gospel faithfully and they will celebrate the gospel by regularly observing the Lord’s Supper and Baptism. But they will also reflect the gospel in their actions and attitudes. There are many dimensions to gospel-shaped actions and attitudes, but for our purposes this morning, a gospel-centered church will reflect the peace of the gospel in a world that is without peace.
I introduced this diagram\(^1\) during our Galatians series and want to show it to you again because I think it is helpful in explaining how our actions and attitudes are distinct from the gospel, but they can and should be shaped by the gospel. God initiates peace between himself and fallen humanity, through the gospel – Jesus died for our sins (the gospel) making it possible for us to be reconciled to God. If we are reconciled with God (gospel-truth), we not only have peace with God, we are also at peace within ourselves and are called to be at peace with other believers (gospel-conduct).\(^2\)

Our text this morning covers two broad areas where the church should reflect the peace of the gospel. We won’t look at all areas where the church should reflect the peace of the gospel. For example, we will not even look at the important area of reconciliation. We will only consider the areas this text addresses.

First, we need to be at peace with those in the church (vv. 12-15).

**Be at peace with those in the church. (12-15)**

I’ve had the opportunity to speak at WSU a couple of times this school year on the topic of apologetics. As a result I’ve established relationships with a couple of guys from the Atheists club. I’ve been able to share the gospel with them, but I’ve also learned a lot from them. I recently met with a young man named Alex, an immigrant from Russia. He helped me understand more about what it is like to be an immigrant student in the United States. One thing he shared was how the school system here has been a big adjustment for him. The main reason why is because he feels there is no respect for teachers in America and that lack of respect hinders learning.

I think Alex’s insight captures not only the culture in our schools, but in our culture in general. We live in a culture that no longer holds leaders or authorities in high esteem. We are independent and can often be cynical. When that lack of respect for leaders creeps into the church it hinders not only learning; it hinders the peace of the congregation. If we are to be at peace with those in the church we need to respect those who minister to us (vv. 12-13).

\(^{12}\) *We ask you, brothers, to respect those who labor among you and are over you in the Lord and admonish you, \(^{13}\) and to esteem them very highly in love because of their work. Be at peace among yourselves.*

A large amount of church conflict is due to tensions between the leadership and the laity, the pastors and the people. One reason for this tension is a lack of respect, but another reason is many leaders in the church give little reason to be respected; however, that wasn’t the case at Thessalonica. Paul hints at three reasons their leaders were worthy of respect.

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\(^1\) Bullmore, Mike. “The Functional Centrality of the Gospel in the Life of the Local Church.”

First of all, they labored among them. What this means is they worked really hard; their work was difficult and exhausting. In my ministry I work closest with Mike and Dick. I respect these men greatly for many reasons, but one of the biggest reasons is their tireless labor and care for this church – they are worthy of our respect.

The second reason the leaders at Thessalonica were worthy of respect is they were “over them in the Lord.” This doesn’t mean that they were tyrants. What this means is they were the recognized leaders in the church – most likely the pastors or elders.

Actually there is no place for tyranny in church leadership. Church leaders may be over a congregation by position, but they are in fact under a congregation functionally. Jesus said Christian leaders should not lord their authority over people, but serve people, for even the Son of Man came not to be served but to serve, and to give his life as a ransom for many (Mk 10:42-45). Gospel-shaped leadership is service, not tyranny.

Church leaders are not only under their congregation they are also under the Lord.

Hebrews 13:17 (ESV)

17 Obey your leaders and submit to them, for they are keeping watch over your souls, as those who will have to give an account...

So, while church leaders are over a congregation they are actually under the congregation and under the Lord. Church leaders are accountable to God, for how they lead; the congregation is accountable to God for how they respect their leaders.

The third reason the Thessalonians should have respected their leaders is they admonished them. Admonition is not merely rebuke; it is aimed at correcting behavior; it is aimed at the health of a believer. Admonition is not received well in our culture and therefore it is not easy to give, but it is necessary for the health of the church.

Church leaders who work hard to serve the congregation and have the courage to admonish them should be respected and highly esteemed. John Stott says church members should affectionately appreciate their ministers.

Paul gives the reason for this in verse 13. Be at peace among yourselves. Respect for the leaders in the church is necessary if there is going to be peace. I am thankful that there is currently much peace between the leaders and the laity at this church; however, I don’t think we should take this for granted. We need to pray for sustained peace at First Free and for the peace of other congregations in the community who are not experiencing the peace we do currently.

The second way we maintain peace with those in the church is by ministering to one another (vv. 14-15).

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3 Green, Gene. The Letters to the Thessalonians.
And we urge you, brothers, admonish the idle, encourage the fainthearted, help the weak, be patient with them all. See that no one repays anyone evil for evil, but always seek to do good to one another and to everyone.

In verse 15 we are told to not repay evil for evil. Repaying evil for evil is the antithesis of peace. The antidote to repaying evil for evil is to do good to all people by ministering to one another. Paul shows us three ways we can minister to one another in verse 14.

First, admonish the idle. This phrase jumps off the page at me because the people are being called to do what the pastor is said to do in verse 12. Or to put it another way, the church members are being called to do what the ministers do – admonish.

The most important thing I want to say here is the wellbeing and peace of the church depends on the members as well as the ministers; it depends on the people in the pew as well as the pastors at the podium. You are called to admonish one another just as I’m called to admonish you in my teaching.

The second thing I want to point out is that the ministry of the laity is every bit as difficult as the ministry of the clergy. And the people you minister to are every bit as difficult as the people we minister to. We are all called to difficult ministry among difficult people. This is how the church maintains peace.

This first command illustrates my point. Admonition is a difficult ministry; it is not easy work. It is easier to ignore problems or to attack people who are in sin. Admonition is rooted in a heart of love, with the goal of building one another up and is therefore difficult. And the idle are difficult people. If they weren’t difficult, they wouldn’t need to be admonished.

People who are idle are not necessarily lazy. Idle people simply neglect doing things they should be doing. In the case of the Thessalonians there were some that should have been working, but weren’t. They needed to be admonished. You can be very busy and also idle. I am very busy. But I am also idle from time to time. I thank God for my wife, who has the courage to admonish me to spend my time on my most important responsibilities, not just my interests.

The second command we see in verse 14 is to encourage the fainthearted. Fainthearted people are people who are discouraged and therefore lack the courage to continue on; or put another way, they are timid. In Thessalonica there were fainthearted people who had recently lost loved ones and fainthearted people who may have been tempted to give up in the face of persecution. The fainthearted are difficult people, not because they are obstinate like the idle, rather, because their situation is difficult and it is therefore difficult to know how to minister to them. Fainthearted people can also be draining. But although difficult, we are called to give courage to those who are without.

What would the church be like if we didn’t have people who took the ministry of encouragement seriously? What would this church be like if it weren’t for people like Dorothy Watkins, Harry Castelli, Dave and Debbie Miller, Wes Penner, Laurie Ferguson, Jeremy Krause, and Fay Green.

5 Green, Gene. The Letters to the Thessalonians.
Netherton? These people are first rate encouragers. There are many more here this morning like them. Who is it in your life that needs encouragement? I encourage each of you to encourage the fainthearted, for the sake of the peace of the church.

The third command to help the weak is closely related to encouraging the fainthearted. But the ministry of helps is a ministry of service and action more so than words. It requires commitment and loyalty. Therefore, it is a difficult ministry. And like the fainthearted, the weak are difficult people because of their difficult situation. When Paul speaks of weakness he could mean morally weak. After all we know that some at Thessalonica were struggling with sexual immorality. But there are many other reasons people feel weak in the faith. The church is commanded to help the weak.

Vaughan Roberts tells the story of a father who once gave his son a bundle of sticks and asked him to break them. The bundle was too strong for him to break, so he gave him one stick at a time. The boy found the sticks easy to break one at a time. The same is true in the church. We are all weak and therefore easily broken when we are alone – broken by temptations or circumstances. But we are not easily broken when we stick together (pun intended). We need each other in the church – we need to strengthen one another so that we can stand.

Ministry is difficult and the people we minister to are difficult. Therefore, in verse 14 we are told to “be patient with them all.” Difficult ministry and difficult people call for patience. Mark Dever says it this way, “Patience tried is love applied.”

We’re called to admonish, encourage, and help the idle, timid, and weak. However, our tendency is to either do nothing or repay evil with evil.

We can’t afford to do nothing if we really love the church. Are you sitting on the sidelines or are you in the game of ministry. Some of you may be thinking, “I’m too busy.” And maybe you are too busy. But are you busy with the right things? We need one another in the church. We need to be committed to one another. And we need to be known as the people who are committed to one another. The work of the ministry is not to be left to the leaders alone.

Make time this week to do what the Lord has laid on your heart. Make time to write that note or make that phone call to your discouraged brother in Christ. Make time to visit the weak that are sick or hospitalized. Set that appointment with your friend who needs the admonition you’ve been afraid to give. Make time to make a meal for someone who is in need. We need one another in the church. Minister to one another; don’t repay evil with evil.

Christ laid down his life for the sin in each of us – he didn’t repay evil with evil. He bore our sin on the cross. We’re called to bear with one another in love, not to repay evil with evil. This is part of what it means to be a gospel-centered church. When we minister to one another, especially to difficult people, we reflect in some measure the love Christ demonstrated for us.

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6 Ibid.
The second area where the church should reflect the peace of the gospel is our peace with God in worship.

**Be at peace with God in worship (vv. 16-24)**

When I say, be at peace with God I’m referring to our ongoing relationship with God, not our standing before God. If we have placed our faith in Christ then we are at peace with God and there is nothing that can shake our standing before God. However, our fellowship with God can be broken. The commandments in these verses have to do with our ongoing fellowship with God.

First of all, we are to have an attitude of gratitude (vv. 16-18).

*Rejoice always, *pray without ceasing,* give thanks in all circumstances; for this is the will of God in Christ Jesus for you.

There are three commands given in these verses. The first command is to rejoice always. What does it mean to rejoice? Joy is not mere happiness. Happiness is focused on circumstances. If things are going well you can be happy. If things are not going well you are generally not happy. Joy, on the other hand, is focused on something higher than our circumstances; it is focused on God. We can have joy in the midst of horrible circumstances because we know that our standing before God is secure.

We have joy because of who we are in the gospel. We are reconciled to God and are no longer subject to the wrath of God (cf. 1:10). When we gather together for worship we all come from different circumstances, some happy, some sad, but we all share a common joy in the Lord, therefore, we can rejoice.

The next two commands, to pray without ceasing and to give thanks in all circumstances, are two ways to express our joy. If we have joy, our heart and mind will be fixed on God and that should naturally lead us to prayer. We are commanded here to pray without ceasing. Paul is obviously using hyperbole here. It is not psychologically possible to pray without ceasing, but prayer should be a regular part of our day and our worship; we shouldn’t compartmentalize prayer.

We are also called to give thanks in all circumstances. It is important to note that we are not called to give thanks for all circumstances. The Christians in Japan are not required to give thanks for the earthquake that has devastated their lives. However, they can still give thanks to God that in a world that is full of hardships there is hope in Christ.

Rejoicing, prayer, and thanksgiving are said to be the will of God for our lives in verse 18. The last reference to the “will of God” in 1 Thessalonians was in 4:3 where Paul says the will of God for the Thessalonians was their sanctification. I think he has the same thing in mind here (cf. 5:23). As we are being sanctified – or as we grow in Christ-likeness – we will be full of joy, prayer, and thanksgiving.

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8 Dever, Mark. “Our United State.”
9 Green, Gene. *The Letters to the Thessalonians.*
Consider the opposites to joy, prayer, and thanksgiving: despair, worry, and ungratefulness. A person who is characterized by these attitudes is surely not enjoying fellowship and peace with God. We need to be characterized by joy, prayer, and thanksgiving, not just as individuals, but as a corporate body.

The second aspect of peace with God in worship is to be teachable, but not gullible (vv. 19-22).

19 Do not quench the Spirit. 20 Do not despise prophecies. 21 but test everything; hold fast what is good. 22 Abstain from every form of evil.

If we desire to be at peace with God in worship we obviously do not want to quench the Spirit. We want the Spirit burning hot and bright in our lives – working in us and through us. We are told in verse 20 that one way we quench the Spirit is by despising prophecies. What does that mean? What is prophecy?

Let me start by saying what New Testament prophecy is not. According to Wayne Grudem, prophecy is not predicting the future, nor giving an authoritative “word from the Lord,” nor is it merely teaching. Prophecy in the New Testament is not equal with God’s authoritative Word. If it was there would be no need for Paul to tell the Thessalonians to not despise prophecy, for we know from 2:13 they had already received and accepted God’s Word as the very Word of God. So what is prophecy in the New Testament? Prophecy in the New Testament is reporting something that God has laid on your heart or brought to mind. Prophecy is from God, but it is spoken in merely human words.10

Although New Testament prophecy is merely human words it is still a spiritual gift and therefore a ministry God uses to encourage and build up his church, therefore, prophecy should not be despised.

1 Corinthians 14:3 (ESV)

3 ... the one who prophesies speaks to people for their upbuilding and encouragement and consolation.

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10 Grudem, Wayne. Systematic Theology, 1049-1061. This book is available in our church library if you would like to understand more about the spiritual gift of prophecy. The topics he covers are as follows:

Have Some Gifts Ceased? (pp. 1039-1042)
1. Would the Continuation of Prophecy Today Challenge the Sufficiency of Scripture?
Prophecy (pp. 1049-1061)
3. Indications That “Prophets” Did Not Speak With Authority Equal to the Words of Scripture.
4. How Should We Speak About the Authority of Prophecy Today?
5. A Spontaneous “Revelation” Made Prophecy Different From Other Gifts.
6. The Difference Between Prophecy and Teaching.
7. Objection: This Makes Prophecy “Too Subjective.”
9. Many People in the Congregation Can Prophecy.
10. We Should “Earnestly Desire” Prophecy.
11. Encouraging and Regulating Prophecy in the Local Church.
While I agree with Grudem that prophesying and teaching are not the same thing, it seems as though the application portion of a sermon or a Bible study can at times be very similar to prophecy, if not the same thing. John Stott nuances his understanding of New Testament prophecy by calling it “prophetic insight.” When a preacher or a teacher has particular God-given insight into how we should respond to God’s Word, that insight is on par with prophecy and should not be despised.

However, we must remember that prophecy in the New Testament sense is different from the Old Testament where prophets said, “Thus says the Lord.” That is why Paul commands the Thessalonians to test everything in verse 21. A prophetic utterance is not authoritative, but the Word of God is authoritative and we can test prophecies against the Bible. After testing prophecies we are further commanded to hold on to what is good in prophecy and to abstain from what is evil in prophecy, in verse 22. Grudem says, “Congregational prophecy in the New Testament churches did not have the authority of Scripture. It was not spoken in words that were the very words of God, but rather in merely human words. And because it has this lesser authority, there is no reason to think that it will not continue in the church until Christ returns. It does not threaten or compete with Scripture in authority but is subject to Scripture, as well as to the mature judgment of the congregation.”

It is important that we have the right attitude when someone shares prophetic insight, whether in corporate worship or in a small group Bible study. I confess that when someone says, “God told me…” I am very skeptical. This passage has made me check my attitude. We need to realize that God can still speak to us through his Spirit. And God could use the word of a pastor or a friend to build us up. But we also need to be like the Bereans who searched the Scriptures daily to see if what Paul was saying was true (Acts 17:11).

I pray that as you sit under the Word Sunday after Sunday that you have an attitude of expectation – do you expect to hear from God? But I also pray that you don’t simply take everything we say as infallible. We are called to teach the Word of God and I trust that God speaks through us, but you need to test what we say by the Word of God. That’s why I have summarized these verses by saying we need to be teachable, but not gullible.

Finally, if we are to be at peace with God in worship we need to remember that God enables what he requires (vv. 23-24).

23 Now may the God of peace himself sanctify you completely, and may your whole spirit and soul and body be kept blameless at the coming of our Lord Jesus Christ. 24 He who calls you is faithful; he will surely do it.

God is a God of peace and he wants his people who have been saved by the gospel of peace to live at peace with one another. That is a command. But notice that we are not commanded to sanctify ourselves. While we are commanded to live at peace it is the God of peace himself who sanctifies us. It is the God of peace himself who works in our lives to make us more like Jesus. We weren’t able to save ourselves and we aren’t able to sanctify ourselves. God must do the

11 Ibid, 1039-1040.
work in us. We are commanded to be blameless and holy. But it is only as God works in us that we will become blameless and holy.

We can only live gospel-centered lives if we actually keep the gospel at the center of our lives. And the gospel is all about the work of God in Christ. Sure we are called to live lives that reflect the gospel in our actions and attitudes, but it is God who enables what he requires. In verse 28 Paul says, *The grace of our Lord Jesus Christ be with you.* We need grace for salvation; we need grace for ongoing transformation.

**Peace out: final instructions (25-28)**

25 *Brothers, pray for us.*
26 *Greet all the brothers with a holy kiss.*
27 *I put you under oath before the Lord to have this letter read to all the brothers.*
28 *The grace of our Lord Jesus Christ be with you.*

For the sake of time, I’m not going to explain in detail verses 25-28, but I want to point out to you a couple of things.

Notice the repeated use of the word “brothers”. We have been saved by the grace of our Lord Jesus Christ. We are at peace with God; he is now our heavenly Father. We are therefore brothers and sisters in Christ. We are a family. We are the church.

And what should our family look like? What should our church look like? We should be gospel-centered. That’s why this whole series on 1 Thessalonians has been called “The Gospel and the Church.”

We live in a world that desires peace but will not experience peace until after the Lord returns. As a family who has been saved by the God of peace, we need to live at peace until Christ returns. People need to see the peace we have between the leadership and the laity, the love we have for one another as seen in our ministry to one another, and the joy that permeates our lives.

The gospel is truly glorious. When the gospel is reflected in God’s church, God will be glorified in his church.
References


