

“The apostle Paul cherished high ideals for the Christian church. According to his characterization of it at the beginning of his letter (1:1-4), it is a community loved and chosen by God, drawing its life from Him, and manifesting this divine life in the basic Christian graces of faith, love, and hope. Such a community could justly be called a ‘gospel church’, both because it has been brought into being by the gospel and because it is continuously shaped by the gospel” (Stott, 117).

The church is a family whose members are recognized and treated as brothers and sisters. This theme comes out very clearly in the second half of 1 Thessalonians 5 where the word “brothers” occurs five times (verses 12, 14, 25, 26 and 27). Like many of Paul’s letters, the final paragraphs squeeze in a number of last minute comments that may or may not flow together.

Our relationship to one another affects our behavior. Paul had already urged the Thessalonians to love one another (4:9–10), to comfort one another (4:18), and to encourage and to build each other up (5:11). In verses 12 and following he further develops his vision for the church family. The primary goal is the ordering of community life and the relationship of its members. Paul begins with instruction concerning leaders in the church.

***5:12 But we request of you, brethren, that you appreciate those who diligently labor among you, and have charge over you in the Lord and give you instruction, 5:13 and that you esteem them very highly in love because of their work. Live in peace with one another.***

The words “but. . . brethren” is often used by Paul to introduce a new theme, and the word “request” (ἐρωτάω *erotao*) as a means to start an exhortation (Marshall, 146).

The early church followed the same organizational structure as the synagogue, using a group of elders to exercise oversight. In Acts 14:23 it says that Paul appointed elders in every church. A few years after that, they were also called pastors and overseers (Acts 20:17, 28; Phil. 1:1). Paul doesn’t use any of these titles here, although most agree that, based on the description that follows, elders (pastors/overseers) are being referenced.

We don’t know what prompted Paul to write verses 12 and 13, but we do know from the Book of Acts that the church in Thessalonica had responsible leaders (Acts 19:29; 20:4; 27:2). Either Paul was rebuking some church members who did not acknowledge the leadership, or he was simply reminding the church of the proper relationship they should have to their leaders.

Paul describes Christian leaders in three ways (the Greek construction shows that these are three qualities of the same group of people, not three different groups).

First, he says that they *labor diligently*. “Labor” is normally used of manual occupations. It means to toil, strive, or struggle, and to grow weary in doing so. Paul often used this word when describing his own

work as an apostle. Care for the flock of God requires hard work, and the elders of the church should be hard workers. Their labor should be acknowledged by those whom they care for.

Secondly, he says that they *have charge over* others in the Lord. This, of course, is one aspect of their labor. The Greek word translated as “have charge” has a very broad meaning. In Romans 12:8 it is used of sharing material resources and showing mercy. It is used of exercising authority in 1 Tim. 3:4, 5, 12 and 5:17. In Titus 3:8 it is used of applying oneself to good deeds. It could mean “rule over” or “be concerned about” or “stand as a protector” (Wanamaker, 192). Although elders are to be *servants* of the church, they have the responsibility to care for the spiritual needs of those under them. They are to lead and manage the church so that the believers grow in their faith and Christ is glorified. The fact that they have charge over others “*in the Lord*” shows that their authority is for the spiritual good of others.

Lastly, Paul says that Christian leaders *give instruction*. The word translated as “instruction” is almost invariably used in ethical contexts. It means to warn against bad behavior and its consequences, to reprove, admonish, and even discipline those who have done wrong. It often appears together with the word teach since both activities go hand in hand. As Leon Morris has put it, “while its tone is brotherly, it is big-brotherly” (Morris, 166). The implication is that those who are admonishing are in a position to do so.

The three phrases taken together, then, describe the activities of those to whom the care of the church is committed, those who work for its good, who are responsible for its welfare and therefore direct its activity, and who have authority to speak a word of warning to members who are in need of it. Such authority is exercised “in the Lord,” within the context of the situation where Jesus is acknowledged as Lord and where this acknowledgment controls the behavior of the members (Marshall, 148).

The church is told to appreciate and esteem these men.

In verse 12 “appreciate” is literally, “know” (οἶδα oida). Here it means “to know the worth of something” (Marshall, 147), or as Morris says, “to know fully and appreciate their true worth” (Morris, 165). Thus, it has the sense of “acknowledge,” “respect,” or “appreciate.” However, the content that follows leads us to believe that Paul isn’t telling the church to appreciate these men as much as acknowledge their position and role among them.

In verse 13 Paul says “to hold them in high esteem.” This wording is very emphatic, meaning that respect should be given in highest measure (very highly); it must not be given grudgingly or in part. The reason they are to be esteemed is not on account of their persons, but on account of their work (5:13); according to Acts 20:28 the Chief Shepherd delegates to under-shepherds (pastors) the oversight of the flock which He purchased with His own blood. This combination of appreciation and affection will enable pastors and people to live in peace with each other (5:13b).

Over the years the church has vacillated between an over emphasis on the pastor’s importance and the rejection of pastoral authority altogether. Both are unbiblical. Pastors are neither singularly important in the church nor is their role to be despised, simply tolerated, or ignored. They are appointed by Christ

through the Holy Spirit as under-shepherds (1 Pet. 5:1; Acts 20:28), and they play a vital function in the health and nurturing of the church.

**5:14 We urge you, brethren, admonish the unruly, encourage the fainthearted, help the weak, be patient with everyone.**

In verse 14 Paul switches from instructing the church about its attitude toward its leaders to instructing the church in relation to its struggling members. Three groups of people are to be given special attention: the unruly, the fainthearted, and the weak. Notice that Paul is asking everyone in the church body to help in ministering to people with these needs—“you (plural), brethren, admonish. . . encourage. . . help.

Ataktos (ἄτακτος) is found only here in the NT and is translated as “unruly” in the NASB, and as “the idle” in the ESV. The meaning of the word is vague. “The original denotation of the word concerned undisciplined or disorderly actions of a person [as a soldier who stepped out of rank—Morris, 168], but it was also used of idle or lazy individuals as well” (Wanamaker, 196). When coupled with 1 Thessalonians 4:11 (a verse that exhorts the Thessalonians to work with their own hands), a strong case appears for understanding this as an admonition toward those who were idle or lazy in regard to work. This is also the meaning in 2 Thessalonians 3 where the related verb (v. 7) and adverbs (vv. 6, 11) occur.

The second group of people is described as “fainthearted”—another word that lacks a precise meaning and is found only here in the NT. It could refer to worry, fear, or discouragement (Wanamaker, 197). The fainthearted are those who are emotionally distraught or despondent. They are temporarily overwhelmed by stress. They feel that they lack the strength to face what could lie ahead—possibly the events surrounding the parousia (4:13–5:10), rejection, or persecution. They should not be sharply rebuked or looked down upon, but consoled and encouraged so that they are fit for battle once again (Morris, 169).

The weak (ἀσθενής *asthenes*) constitute a class of people characterized by some sort of weakness—they could be physically weak, economically needy, spiritually weak (1 Cor. 8:9–11; 9:22; Ro. 14:1ff.), or morally weak. They may be having difficulty exercising self-control (Ro. 5:6) and following God’s will (4:3–8; Ro. 4:19; 8:3, 26). Elsewhere, the word for “help” refers to holding fast to something (sound teaching, Tit. 1:9) or being closely attached to it. The exhortation is not to let them go, but cling to them and hold them near.

Finally, Paul says, “be patient with everyone.” This could also be translated as “be patient with them all” meaning, be patient with the unruly, the fainthearted, and the weak. Patience is a characteristic of God (Exo. 34:6; Psa. 103:8), the fruit of the Spirit (Gal. 5:22; 1 Cor. 13:4), and an expression of love (1 Tim. 1:16). Believers should not lose patience when others are difficult, burdensome, demanding, disappointing, argumentative, or rude. “There are many people who resist all efforts to help them, or show a lack of gratitude, or who keep falling back into the situations and attitudes from which they have been rescued. It needs patience to continue to help such people when repeated help seems of little use or is unwelcome” (Marshall, 152).

**5:15 See that no one repays another with evil for evil, but always seek after that which is good for one another and for all people.**

In 5:15–22 Paul turns from helping struggling members to Christian behavior in general. “See” in Greek is a plural imperative. That is, it a command meaning “you all see that . . .” Once again everyone in the church is responsible in making sure that others don’t fall short of what is required (Frame, 200).

Believers should watch out for one another making sure that no one repays evil for evil. Although the OT had a provision for equal justice to be met (a tooth for a tooth, Exo. 21:23–25; Lev. 24:17–21; Deut. 19:21) it was not required to be exercised. The NT stresses enduring evil, forgiving others who sin against us, and blessing our enemies, rather than even seeking justice.

- Matt. 5:44: “love your enemies and pray for those who persecute you.”
- Ro. 12:17: “Repay no one evil for evil, but give thought to do what is honorable in the sight of all.”
- 1 Peter 3:9: “Do not repay evil for evil or reviling for reviling, but on the contrary, bless, for to this you were called, that you may obtain a blessing.”
- Matthew 6:12: “forgive us our debts, as we also have forgiven our debtors.”

“Always seek after that which is good for one another and for all people.” “Seek” means to make it our goal and strive to achieve it. Although Paul is addressing those in the church, “always” and “all people” stretch the command beyond the church family to the community at large. There are no circumstances or people that fall outside of this requirement of seeking good for others.

The next section begins with the three commands that are linked together by a common form. Each is very general in content but describes the expectations of typical Christian behavior.

**5:16 Rejoice always;**

**5:17 pray without ceasing;**

**5:18 in everything give thanks; for this is God's will for you in Christ Jesus.**

**Rejoice always:** Joy and rejoicing are Christian traits (Phil. 2:18; 3:1; 4:4), but they are often associated with hardship and persecution. 1 Peter 4:13 says, “to the degree that you share the sufferings of Christ, keep on rejoicing. . .” Jesus said in Matthew 5:11–12, “Blessed are you when people insult you and persecute you, and falsely say all kinds of evil against you because of Me. Rejoice and be glad, for your reward in heaven is great.” 1 Thessalonians 1:6 says that the Thessalonian believers “received the word *in much tribulation with the joy of the Holy Spirit.*” Grammatically, 1:6 indicates that the Holy Spirit was the source of their joy (also see Gal. 5:22)—a joy that was based on their confidence in their future salvation. Paul was also joyful in his knowledge that God was at work among them; in 1 Thessalonians 2:20 he said to them, “you are our glory and joy.”

“Although Paul does not spell out the source or basis of Christian joy in 5:16, the instruction ‘to rejoice always’ derives its meaning from the earlier passages in the letter. To rejoice always is to see the hand

of God in whatever is happening and to remain certain of God's future salvation. Without such conviction joy would not be possible in the face of affliction, suffering, and death" (Wanamaker, 200).

***pray without ceasing:*** In Luke 18:1 Jesus told His disciples "that they ought always to pray and not lose heart." Paul was a man devoted to prayer and in a number of his letters he instructs his readers to pray (2 Thess. 3:1; Ro. 12:12; Eph. 6:18; Col. 4:2). Because the next exhortation is to give thanks (which is a part of prayer), Paul may have petitions and intercessory prayer in mind here. Although "without ceasing" cannot be taken literally, it is clear that Paul expects believers to pray for others and themselves frequently throughout the day—both privately and at the church.

***in everything give thanks:*** In Psalm 103:2 the psalmist said, "Bless the LORD, O my soul, and forget none of His benefits." Paul says, "in everything give thanks." "In everything" could mean "at all times" or "in every situation." Whether we are thanking God always, or in every situation the result is the same. If we thank God always we will be thanking Him in every circumstance and if we are thanking God in every circumstance we will be thanking Him always.

To thank God at all times is to see God working in every situation. This is to acknowledge, as Paul does in Romans 8:28, that God is working in all things for our good, bringing us to completeness in Christ.

***for this is God's will for you in Christ Jesus:*** "For this is God's will for you in Christ Jesus" applies to all three commands. It is God's will that we rejoice always; it is God's will that we pray without ceasing; it is God's will that we give thanks in everything. Paul rarely grounds his exhortations in the will of God; when he does, Christians should take note.

***5:19 Do not quench the Spirit;***

***5:20 do not despise prophetic utterances.***

***5:21 But examine everything carefully; hold fast to that which is good;***

***5:22 abstain from every form of evil.***

Verses 16–18 focused on spiritual activities; verses 19–22 focus on the Spirit in the life of both the individual and in the community of believers (Wanamaker, 201).

Although it is possible that the command "do not quench the Spirit" and the clarifying imperatives, "hold fast to that which is good; abstain from every form of evil" could be taken independently, it seems much more probable that the "but" (δέ) in verse 21 links all the verses together (Wanamaker, 201). This will be seen in what follows.

In verse 19 Paul instructs the church not to quench the Spirit. "Quench" properly applies to putting out a flame. It has a particular relevance to the Holy Spirit who is symbolized by fire (Acts 2:3).

Verse 20 is parallel to verse 19 and makes it clear that Paul's concern is that the Spirit not be quenched by despising prophetic utterances. Prophetic utterances would be the gift of prophecy (1 Cor. 14), but may also include other gifts, as well (i.e. tongues, word of wisdom?). The point is that the Spirit gives prophetic utterances for the church to benefit from; to reject, ignore, treat with contempt, or leave them unheard is to quench the Spirit.

At the same time, prophecy could be abused in the church and cause disorder and therefore, it needed to be tested (5:21–22). In fact, Paul emphatically says, “test everything!” “Everything” is certainly a reference to prophetic utterances. Paul does not specify how to test them or what to look for, but a number of tests could be suggested.

- A prophetic word would not contradict Scripture or apostolic teaching. In Acts 17:11 the Berean Christians are praised because they did not just accept what Paul told them, instead they examined the Scriptures daily to see whether these things were so.
- Another way that a prophecy could be tested would be by knowing the character of the speaker. In Matthew 7:15–16 Jesus said, “Beware of the false prophets, who come to you in sheep’s clothing, but inwardly are ravenous wolves. You will know them by their fruits.” Then in Matthew 7:22–23 He said, “Many will say to Me on that day, ‘Lord, Lord, *did we not prophesy in Your name*, and in Your name cast out demons, and in Your name perform many miracles?’ And then I will declare to them, ‘I never knew you; depart from Me, you who practice lawlessness.’” The prophecies of those who live ungodly lives should not be trusted.
- Thirdly, in 1 Corinthians 12:3 Paul said, “no one speaking in the Spirit of God ever says, ‘Jesus is accursed!’” In Galatians 1:8 he said, “even if we, or an angel from heaven, should preach to you a gospel contrary to what we have preached to you, he is to be accursed!” Likewise, 1 John 4:2–3 states, “By this you know the Spirit of God: every spirit that confesses that Jesus Christ has come in the flesh is from God; and every spirit that does not confess Jesus is not from God.” In other words, false teaching about Christ would also be an obvious reason to reject a prophecy.

Stott concludes by saying, “An authentic prophetic message will ‘strengthen, encourage and comfort’ the hearers, ‘edify the church’, bring a conviction of sin and an awareness of God, and be conducive to peace and order, and above all to love” (1 Cor. 14:3, 4, 24–25, 31, 33, 40; 1 Cor. 13; Stott, 129).

Lastly, Paul says to hold fast to that which is good; abstain from every form of evil. Some see this as an independent ethical principle, but that is doubtful. It is more probable that he is still referring to prophetic utterances. NT prophecy was of a mixed quality. After a prophecy had been put to the test and “sorted” Paul instructs the church to respond decisively. There should be no half-heartedness. If the prophecy is “good” (if it passes the test) they should hold fast to it. If it does not, they should reject it and in doing so abstain from every form of evil.

It appears, therefore, that the legitimacy of a New Testament prophecy was not always that easy to discern for what was said may not be blatantly heretical or even doctrinal in nature at all (see the examples in #4 below). The church needs to discern the true working of the Spirit from counterfeit activities. The things that were found to be good were to be held on to. Those things that were not were to be rejected.

If this interpretation is correct, it should be obvious that there is a distinction that needs to be made between prophecy in the OT and the NT gift of prophecy.

Grudem (summarized in Carson, *Showing the Spirit*, 94 ff.) distinguishes OT and NT prophecy in the following ways:

- 1) Prophecy presupposes revelation, but NT prophecy is not in the form of a direct quotation from God.
- 2) Those in the NT who had authority and status comparable to the OT prophets were not the NT prophets, but the apostles.

Once a prophet was tested and approved in the OT, God's people were morally bound to obey him. To disobey such a prophet was to oppose God. If a prophet speaking in the name of God was shown to be in error, the official sanction was death. But once a prophet is acknowledged as true, there is no trace of repeated checks on the *contents* of his oracles. By contrast NT prophets are to have their oracles carefully weighed (I Cor. 14:29; so also IThess. 5:19-21). The word διακρίνω (*diakrino*) suggests that a prophecy be *evaluated*, not simply accepted as totally true or totally false. 'The presupposition is that any one NT prophetic oracle is expected to be *mixed* in quality, and the wheat must be separated from the chaff.' Moreover, there is no hint of excommunication as the threatened sanction if the prophecy occasionally doesn't live up to the mark. More importantly, Paul places the authority of Christian prophets under his own (I Cor. 14:37-38); and to contravene apostolic authority may eventually bring enormous threat (I Cor. 4:21; II Cor. 10:11; 13:1-10; I Tim. 1:20) (Carson, *Showing the Spirit*, 94-95).

3) The NT does not see the prophet as replacing the apostle when the apostolic era ended (that is, when all the apostles died). Furthermore, if the NT gift was the same as OT prophecy then one would expect prophets to be the source of revelation and light to the church. Instead, the Bible says that the apostles filled that role.

- 2 Timothy 1:13 "What you heard from me, keep as the pattern of sound teaching, with faith and love in Christ Jesus."
- Jude 1:3 "... contend for the faith that was once for all entrusted to the saints."
- 1 John 1:1 "That which was from the beginning, which we have heard, which we have seen with our eyes, which we have looked at and our hands have touched-- this we proclaim concerning the Word of life."
- Acts 2:42: "They were continually devoting themselves to the *apostles' teaching*. . ."

One must conclude that either the prophets died with the apostles (which the NT never suggests) or that they did not share the authority that the apostles did.

3) That the NT prophets never enjoyed the authority of the OT prophets or NT apostles is also evidenced in other ways in the NT. The Thessalonians had to be told not to treat prophecy with contempt (I Thess. 5:20) and in Corinthians Paul had to do all he could to advance the gift of prophecy over tongues (I Cor. 13:9; 14:6; Rev. 1:3). The fact that at times prophecy was held in contempt and was looked down upon as a lesser gift shows that it was not viewed equal to the gift of apostleship.

4) There are instances where NT prophecies were thought to be genuinely from God but were not viewed with the authority of OT prophecies. In Acts 21:4 there were certain disciples who told Paul

not to go up to Jerusalem “through the Spirit” (which is almost certainly an expression used of prophecy, cf. Acts 11:28). But Paul goes anyway, believing that the Spirit was prompting him to do so. Likewise, the prophecy of Agabus (Acts 21:10–11) is only accurate in a limited sense. Agabus predicted that the Jews would deliver Paul over to the Gentiles with hands and feet bound. But strictly speaking, Paul was bound by the Romans not the Jews, and the Jews did not hand Paul over but sought to kill him. This is unlike the OT prophets who did not have such inaccuracy in the details.

5) The constraints placed on prophecy in I Corinthians 14:29, 30, 36 show that it is unlike the OT prophets, as well. Women were allowed to prophecy (I Cor. 11:5) in the presence of men, but not teach (I Tim. 2:11 ff.) or evaluate the content of prophecies (I Cor. 14:33b–36).

The subject of prophecy in the church has caused much division among Christians. Some believe that the gift ended with the close of the apostolic age; others believe it is still functioning. 1 Thessalonians does not shed light on this issue. It does help in understanding the nature of NT prophecy.

***5:23 Now may the God of peace Himself sanctify you entirely; and may your spirit and soul and body be preserved complete, without blame at the coming of our Lord Jesus Christ.***

***5:24 Faithful is He who calls you, and He also will bring it to pass.***

Verse 23 begins the closing section of Paul’s letter in which he gives a wish/prayer invoking God’s blessing.

God is called the God of peace. In Paul’s writings peace is most commonly tied to salvation (Ro. 2:10; 5:1; 8:6; 14:17; 15:13; 16:20; Phil. 4:7). God is the source of all well-being for His children forever.

Paul’s desire is that the believers in Thessalonica experience God’s sanctifying work in its entirety. This is something that only God can bring about when believers are resurrected in glory at the coming of Christ.

The next part of the verse repeats and expands upon the idea of total sanctification: “may your spirit and soul and body be preserved complete.” The most debated issue in this verse is that at face value the reference to the “soul and spirit and body” seems to indicate that man is made of three parts. The problem is that when the words soul and spirit are used in Scripture they are used interchangeably.

**Compare:** Gen. 41:8 **with** Ps. 42:6; John 12:27 with 13:21  
Matt. 20:28 (“life”= lit. “soul”); Ps. 31:5 **with** Matt. 27:50; Jam. 2:26  
Heb. 12:23 **with** Rev. 6:9  
Jam. 1:21 **with** 1 Cor. 5:5

When the doctrine of the nature of man is viewed as a whole, it is easier to assume that Paul is not intending to describe the constitution of man’s nature in 5:23 but is stacking expressions upon one another for rhetorical effect (called periphrasis) to stress the totality of the person. In a similar fashion Jesus said to “Love the Lord your God with all your heart, soul and mind;” the assumption is that He is speaking of the whole person, not trying to list parts of humanity. In other words, by writing, “may your spirit and soul and body be preserved complete, without blame at the coming of our Lord Jesus Christ”

Paul is praying that every part of us, the whole person, be preserved complete, with no part of us left untouched at the coming of our Lord Jesus Christ (Morris, 181).

Verse 24 shows that Paul's prayer was based on confidence that God would do what he asked. Paul had asked according to God's will and God is faithful at doing what He promises. God had called the Thessalonians to salvation (1:4) and He will ensure that their salvation reaches its end, that they would be completely sanctified and stand blameless before Christ when He comes.

***5:25 Brethren, pray for us.***

***5:26 Greet all the brethren with a holy kiss.***

***5:27 I adjure you by the Lord to have this letter read to all the brethren.***

***5:28 The grace of our Lord Jesus Christ be with you.***

Paul tells the church to "Greet all the brethren with a holy kiss" (5:26). A kiss on the cheek was widely practiced, especially among Jews. It was a sign of intimacy indicating reception and acceptance. However, this verse does not make kissing normative, it makes greeting normative. Kissing is culturally interpreted. Each culture views it differently. Americans do not readily kiss strangers, but we do have cultural expressions that make people feel warmly welcomed and accepted. The verse tells us to use these expressions often.

Paul had begun his letter by wishing the church grace; he ends it with the same desire.