What’s Your Imperative?

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I read recently of a minister, who serves a church in New England, who was counseled by the advisory committee of his congregation to keep his sermons to ten minutes, tell funny stories and help people feel good about themselves. Essentially, they wanted him to make it quick, make it funny and make it go down easy. I thought of something C.S. Lewis said about bland preaching. He described such preachers as “mild mannered people exhorting mild mannered people to become more mild mannered.”

I ascribe to the “comfort the afflicted and afflict the comfortable” school of preaching. Back in the 1930s, Peter Dunn coined the phrase “afflict the comfortable and comfort the afflicted” with regard to newspaper journalism. I regard it as a preacher’s job to comfort the afflicted and to afflict those among us who have become too comfortable.

Our sermon series this summer is designed to help people create a vision for “The Life You’ve Always Wanted.” The Scripture passages which accompany this series are each intended to paint a picture of this kind of life. It’s a life where people love and care for each other. It’s a life where people treat one another with dignity and respect. All of us yearn for this kind of life. It’s the life you’ve always wanted.

Paul depicts this kind of life in 1st Thessalonians with a series of 13 imperatives. I count 13 imperatives in a span of nine verses to describe this life. You may recall that English verbs have three primary moods: indicative, subjunctive and imperative. The imperative mood expresses a wish or a command. In the imperative mood, the verb is placed first in the sentence to express emphasis. The subject of the imperative doesn’t normally appear. Rather it is implied by the imperative itself.

Allow me to illustrate. When you leave worship and drive home this morning, you will undoubtedly encounter an octagon-shaped sign. This sign has the word “Stop” printed in big, bold letters so you don’t miss the point. Stop expresses an imperative mood. It doesn’t mean to slow down or coast through an intersection. Some of you have learned this lesson the hard way from law enforcement officials. It means exactly what it says—Stop! The subject is contained within the imperative—(You) Stop! It’s
How do I preach a sermon on 13 imperatives?

Paul speaks of such people, in his second letter to the Thessalonians, he uses the pejorative word “busybodies” (3:11). It’s not a flattering quality to be called a busybody. Such people are disruptive to the body of Christ. Are there people in your circle of friends and family who fit this description? Warn such people with kindness. Do you fit this description? Then add it to your list.

As for this second imperative, “encourage the faint-hearted,” this is the only instance in the New Testament where this word “fainthearted” appears. It literally refers to “little-hearted” people. Paul utilizes this word to describe people who are prone to discouragement. Are there people who need your encouragement right now? Do you need encouragement? Put it on your list.

The third imperative, “help the weak,” is a reference to people who are susceptible to temptation. You may know people who are especially vulnerable to an addictive or destructive behavior. Help such people. Maybe you are vulnerable to temptation. If so, put it down.

The fourth imperative on this list, “be patient with everyone,” serves as something of a catchall phrase. Be patient with the idle, the faint-hearted, the weak or anyone else who tries your patience.

not meant only for other people to stop but for you to stop.

Let’s take another imperative—Do your homework! Some of you will grow to despise this imperative in a little while. Is there any doubt about the subject of this imperative? (You) do your homework.

These 13 imperatives may seem like a grab-bag list of commands in no particular order. Don’t be fooled! Paul arranges them in logical sequence to prove a point.

Early this week, I was stymied on how to preach a sermon with 13 imperatives. Do I single out a few of them or preach all 13? Since each one is worthy of your consideration, I decided to preach on all 13. Don’t roll your eyes at me—this will be fun! As I work through these 13 imperatives, pick out two or three that speak into your life. What’s your imperative? Enter them into your Smart Phone or underline them in your Bible or write them on your bulletin or make a mental list of them.

The first three imperatives in verse 14 specify three categories of special consideration in this early church: the lazy, the easily discouraged and the weak.

The first imperative, “admonish the idlers,” is addressed to people who have become lax about important matters and fastidious about inconsequential things. When
The Greek word for patience literally translates “long-tempered,” the antithesis of short-tempered. I’ll wager impatience will appear on quite a few of our to-do lists.

The fifth imperative, in verse 15, “See that no one repays evil for evil,” appears alone on our screen since it seems to be in a category all by itself. Old Testament law specified that any act of revenge could not exceed the crime. That’s why the Torah specifies an eye for an eye and a tooth for a tooth (Leviticus 24:19-21). But Jesus blows everybody away when he calls his followers to turn the other cheek and walk the second mile (Matthew 5:38-39). Paul underscores Jesus’ point in his letter to the Romans when he writes, “Beloved, never avenge yourselves, but leave room for the wrath of God for it is written, ‘Vengeance is mine, I will repay,’ says the Lord” (12:19). Are you harboring revenge toward someone else? Well, add it to your list.

The next three imperatives, in verses 16-18, go well together. The sixth imperative, “Rejoice always,” does not link joy to external circumstances. Instead, our joy is in the Lord. Some Christians are such Debby-downers! If you need a fresh infusion of joy, add it to your list.

The seventh imperative, “pray constantly,” seems impossible to pull off. Yet, why not redirect your active thought life into the practice of prayer as you navigate your day. Offer flash prayers—Lord, remember me, help me, guide me, have mercy on me.

The eighth imperative, “give thanks in all circumstances,” may seem, on the surface, to be rather Pollyanna. Yet, the little preposition “in” makes all the difference. We are directed to give thanks in all circumstances, not for all circumstances. We can be confident, no matter what happens, that God has our best interests at heart. Maybe you are grumpy right now. You are struggling with irritability and find thankfulness in short supply. If so, add it to your list.

The final group of five objectives, in verses 19-21, forms another distinct unit. The ninth and tenth objectives, “do not quench the Spirit” and “do not despise prophecies,” references those who always seem to throw a wet blanket on what God is doing in the world. You may be resisting the Holy Spirit’s presence in your life or stifling those who bring a word from God. You may be running from God. If so, endeavor to work on these two imperatives.

The eleventh imperative, “test everything,” serves as a helpful corrective to the two previous injunctions about being open to the Spirit. This imperative cautions us against becoming gullible. Test everything by the plumb line of scripture. I think, in this
Grace is God doing for us what we cannot do for ourselves.

regard, of the Bereans in the book of Acts who examined the Scriptures daily to see whether what Paul taught them was actually true (Acts 17:11).

The twelfth and thirteenth imperatives, “hold fast to what is good” and “keep away from every form of evil,” are two ways of saying essentially the same thing. Some of us are giving inordinate amounts of time to destructive habits and inconsequential time to things of critical importance.

There you have it: 13 imperatives for your consideration. What are your imperatives? What begs for your attention? What imperatives jump out at you?

Please don’t conceive of this 13 imperatives oration as simply a brain dump. I want you to conduct a heart audit. Take an inventory of your soul. Ask God to gently bring to mind those imperatives that require your attention.

People will sometimes greet me after worship with the words, “I wish so and so was here to listen to your sermon.” It’s no use! He or she isn’t here. But you are! So, how does this sermon speak into your life?

Our goal this summer is to become more intentional about living the Christian life. Some of us have become altogether casual about living for Christ. We have constructed our lives in such a way that faith must compete for other things that vie for our attention. We’re asking you to bump your spiritual life up the page and give it first priority.

You may be thinking to yourself: this list is so unrealistic. How can anyone “Rejoice always, pray constantly or give thanks in all circumstances?” The simple answer is that we can’t accomplish these things by will power alone. We won’t be successful simply by marshaling our own resources to live this kind of life. This is precisely where grace factors into the equation. Grace is God doing for us what we cannot do for ourselves. God knows our unlimited capacity to veer off course and lose our way. That’s why God comes to us in Jesus Christ to help us live this life. We are not asking you simply to try harder and do more. We are asking you to trust Jesus Christ with your life. Christ can empower you through his Spirit to help you live the kind of life you’ve always wanted.