

Taking care of each other

1 Thes 5:12-28

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In the calendar of most churches in the world, today is the first weekend of Advent. The season of Advent helps us to prepare for Christmas, to remember the coming of Jesus Christ, long ago. But this season also points us to the return of Christ in the future. Our Lord is coming! What a promise in the midst of the chaos of our days here in Cairo.

Holiness

Paul has spoken much about the need for a Christian lifestyle in the light of this return of Jesus Christ. And now, in the final chapter of his letter to the Thessalonians, he gives them a lot of short, quick, final commands.

Central in this is what he wrote in 1 Thes 5:23-24: **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. He who calls you is faithful; he will surely do it.**

God wants our holiness; Paul speaks of the need to be blameless. There are people who use this verse as proof text to show that man consists of three parts, spirit, soul and body. And some people think this is very important. I am not convinced that this is a correct way of handling the Word of God.

In Math 10:28 Jesus says: **'Do not fear those who kill the body but who cannot kill the soul.'** Should we use that as a proof text to show that man consists of two parts, body and soul?

Or listen to this one: Mark 12:30: **And you shall love the Lord your God with all your heart and with all your soul and with all your mind and with all your strength.** Should we now conclude that man consist of four parts, heart, soul, mind and strength?

Our Lord Jesus and the apostle Paul do not try to teach us psychology here. What Paul wants to express is that our whole being must be holy and blameless. In the midst of the darkness of our time, this is our Christian goal.

Nothing in our life is excluded – everything in our life is for serving God. No dark corners in our hearts. No little bad habits that we condone. Gods desire is that He will sanctify us completely.

Is this hard? Yes, of course. Who suggested that the life with Jesus Christ is easy? But with the command to holiness, our Lord also offers help. Paul does not speak of holiness as a command only; he also speaks about it as a promise. 'He who calls you is faithful; he will surely do it.' He will surely sanctify you.

Paul could be sure of this because Timothy has visited the church in Thessalonica and he had returned with good news; the congregation lived in faith, hope and love. If you believe in Jesus Christ, his Spirit is at work in you. Praise God!

How does God do this? Paul says: 'He who calls you is faithful; he will surely do it.' This does not speak of God who long ago, once, has called you – it speaks of God who continuously calls you. He impresses on us the whole time that He desires that we live for Him.

He reminds us all the time. It is God calling you through his word, when you read it. And through sermons. And He speaks to you through other believers. He reminds you all the time: Give all of your life to me. This is urgent.

This is urgent because of the return of Jesus Christ. Be prepared for Him to come. If he comes in this hour, in what state and shape does he find you? Are there things that need attention in your life? Don't postpone doing what must be done.

2 Leadership

'May the God of peace sanctify you', Paul said. In this same passage he writes: "Be at peace among yourselves.' (1Thes 5:13b). These matters are connected: God wants us to be as He is. He is holy; he wants us to be holy. This holiness is expressed very concretely. In praying, helping people, being patient with others, living in peace with all people.

Being peacemakers. What could that mean for us in these dark days in Egypt, when our people seem to be more opposed to each other than ever before.

In the church in Thessalonica there were people who did not maintain the peace in the congregation. This peace has to do with good mutual relationships, but also with something else we often do not connect with peace.

Peace, in the writings of Paul, is also related to orderliness and structure. Paul wrote many things about how church life must be ordered, and he wrote to the Corinthian church, about rules for church life: **God is a God of peace, not of confusion.** Peace and confusion are opposites; peace and orderliness are related.

And in the church in Thessalonica, there were disorderly people. For instance, people who did not respect the leadership of the church. Read 1 Thes 5:12-13: **We ask you, brothers, to respect those who labor among you and are over you in the Lord and admonish you, and to esteem them very highly in love because of their work. Be at peace among yourselves.**

Paul addresses the church as 'brothers'. That word does not suggest this is for men only. The believers are a family. And Paul gives us some guidelines here for how to live together as a happy family that loves the heavenly Father.

We are all one in our Lord Jesus Christ; we are all sheep of his flock. Some sheep have been called to be head-sheep. We are all priests before God our Father. But God has also given head-priests, in leadership roles. Respect them, esteem them highly, is the advice or Paul.

Could the order and peace in our societies also depend to a certain extent of how we treat our leaders with respect? Yes of course. Obey your leaders, for the welfare of the country... And if our leaders say: go and vote, we obey.

Of those church leaders, Paul says in 1 Thes 5:12-13 that **they labour among you**; they have to be esteemed for their work. Nor for being leaders, but for what they do. If they do not labour and work hard in accordance with the will of God, it becomes very hard to respect them and esteem them highly.

You as a congregation have the right to demand of your leaders that they live in accord-

ance with the will of God – holy and blameless, and that they work hard for the welfare of the congregation.

St Augustine in the *City of God*, 19.14 says about this leadership style:

Those who rule, they serve those whom they seem to rule. The reason for this is that they do not command out of a desire to be in authority, but because their ministry is to look after others; it is love, not pride, which leads them to look after others.

Leaders who do not serve their congregation, or their country, lose all respect. If you desire to be a leader, that is a good desire. But do it through serving others. And if you do so, it is not hard to win the respect of others.

3 Body life

In his letter to the church of Ephesus Paul wrote a few words about the task of leaders in Church. Ephesians 4:11-13: **And he gave the apostles, the prophets, the evangelists, the shepherds and teachers, to equip the saints for the work of ministry, for building up the body of Christ, until we all attain to the unity of the faith and of the knowledge of the Son of God, to mature manhood, to the measure of the stature of the fullness of Christ.**

Leaders do not exist to do everything in church; their role is to equip all people to work and minister in church. There are, sadly, many church leaders who like to do everything – just as there are many church members who prefer the priest to do everything. This attitude leads to very weak churches.

Our Lord wants all of us, every person here, to be involved in building up the body of Christ, the church. The priest's role is mainly to help each person to play his or her role in the life of the congregation.

A clear example of this we read in 1 Thes 5:14: **And we urge you, brothers, admonish the idle, encourage the fainthearted, help the weak, be patient with them all.** Paul does not say that the elders in church, or the deacons, or paid staff, must admonish the idle and encourage the faint hearted, help the weak. He addresses all people in church. 'We urge you, brothers...' Men, women, young and old have this duty to be a blessing to each other.

'Admonish the idle...' (1 Thes 5:14) The word 'idle' is 'a-taktos' in Greek. 'Not tactical'. This is used of soldiers who break rank. This creates the image of an army in disarray. An army that wants to be victorious must make sure its soldiers do not break ranks. They stand together. And people who rise up against evil regimes must not break rank – they must be united in order to be successful.

And in Church, if we want to reach our Christian goals, we must be one body. One people.

This is never to stifle the creativity and the uniqueness of each person – but the church is entitled to set certain rules. Come to church. Come in time. Have a friendly attitude. Come to prayer meetings. Help when help is needed. Like we do in every good family. And people who 'break ranks', must be told by others: 'come on, brother, sister, we love to see you in church, do not miss meetings, let us build God's work together.'

Fainthearted people need encouragement. Weak people need help. These are the people who always see the dark side of things; the people who are easily frustrated; they tend to quit when things get hard. If things seem a bit troubled, they will not go and vote. If it might rain, they do not come to church. You all have a task to encourage such people, to help them follow Christ.

St Clement of Rome wrote in his letter to the Corinthians, 2,17, in the year 95:

If we have a duty to draw pagans away from their idols and give them instructions in the faith,
how much more must we strive to ensure that no soul is lost who already has knowledge of God!!

Let us therefore help one another, striving to lead to virtue [holiness!] those who are weak, so that we may all be saved and may all help one another to be converted and corrected.

'Be patient with them all', Paul writes. Be patient with all fellow believers. No one is perfect. You are not perfect. Sometimes Christians do evil things. But the command is: 'Do

not repay evil for evil.' Break the chain of evil. If someone does evil to us in church – or outside church – consider how you can do good to that person.

The old law of an eye for an eye has been overtaken by the law of love. Misbehaviour of soldiers does not entitle us to misbehave to them. Misbehaviour of the people does not give the army the right to shoot at them. Committing further injustice can never solve wrongdoings by others. We are to even love our enemies. So be patient with each other. Let us begin practicing on each other.

Conclusion

How do we know the will of God? Through his word. That is why Paul urges, finally, that his letter will be read to all people in the church in Thessalonica. And this is what we have done in the past weeks as well!

And now, the issue is to not just listen, but to also do. To expect our Lord to return to make all things new... and to live a new life today!

The season of Advent has begun; we prepare for the celebration of Christmas. The feast of peace of God, as it is in heaven, so on earth. Let us also prepare for his return to earth by living for him today - in holiness, in peace.

Paul asked the church he wrote to, to express its unity and love by greeting each other with a holy kiss. As we greet each other with the peace of Christ before we celebrate communion.

In many churches people escape immediately after the final blessing. Impossible for us! We continue our communion service after the final blessing, by caring for one another today and throughout the week.

And we now finish this series on the letter to the Thessalonians with the last words Paul wrote: **The grace of our Lord Jesus Christ be with you.** And let us say these words once more – to each other. All: **The grace of our Lord Jesus Christ be with you.**

+In the name of the Father and the Son and the Holy Spirit, Amen