

Working in Peace

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[0 : 00] One of the big issues that I will face, I think, in my new job is the issue of encouraging healthy church. I suspect there are lots of churches that are unhealthy.

The last eight years that I was vicar here, I was also an archdeacon of this area. And so I had to deal with about 25 local Anglican churches. And many of them had deep problems in different ways.

And what is a healthy church? Maybe some of you are new here and you've been looking for a church. And you've thought, when you come here, there's something about this that you want to stay.

But you might have been to other churches. Or maybe you're here tonight and you think, no, I don't want to stay here. But what should you be looking for? What makes a good church? What makes a healthy church?

Or whatever adjective you want to use. What are the marks of what church life should be like? I think they're difficult questions to answer to some degree.

[1 : 04] We often look for all sorts of different things. We often look for people like us. Maybe we should look for people unlike us. We often look for good music. Or we might look for youth.

Or we might look for this or that. Or whether the tea or the coffee is good. I mean, this is Melbourne, after all. So unless you have the best coffee in the world, it's not worth going to church. Melbourne's the coffee capital of the world, they tell me.

Well, in this final section of 1 Thessalonians, Paul, in a way, is hinting, or hinting's a weak word, I think driving at what is church meant to be like?

What is good church or healthy church? What are the marks of that? The end of this letter is interesting in a way because Paul has dealt with different issues through Thessalonians.

And it's almost as if at the end he's running out of time. The post is about to be taken. And so he's scribbling down very briefly. I don't know whether you noticed that as the reading was read for us. But it's as if there's a whole range of slightly different topics, each sort of one sentence long or one verse long, as though Paul's saying, oh, I've run out of time.

[2 : 10] Quick, I better say this and this and this and this. It's sort of like an ancient tweet in a way. And then it gets sent off to be taken back to Thessaloniki. But actually there is some coherence here, even if it's a long list of short exhortations.

And I think around the theme of what makes a healthy church, I think we do well to think of it in that way. He begins this section. Now we ask you, brothers and sisters, I must say when Marty read verse one, I suddenly panicked and thought I'd been told and prepared the wrong passage.

Now we ask you, brothers and sisters, to acknowledge those who work hard among you. Now you look around here tonight, who works hard?

You might not know. But it's not particularly, you know, who are the hard workers in the church. In particular, what's thought of here are those who serve the church.

Those who are the leaders or the pastors. It's not necessarily the paid pastors. Maybe in those days in Thessaloniki, there wasn't a paid pastor. Those who provide the hospitality to the church.

[3 : 22] Those who teach the church. Those who exercise the administrative and the pastoral responsibilities. They're the ones who are in mind here. The leadership of the church.

So you are to acknowledge them who care for you in the Lord and who admonish you. Now that points us more directly to the teaching role.

So it's not just the people who, you know, tidy up the church and look after the grounds and maybe work hard. But in particular, those who are teaching, pastoral teaching, caring and admonishing.

That suggests somebody who's, it's not just somebody who gets alongside and comforts you, that caring role. But somebody who's bringing God's word to bear in your life.

Both to care for you pastorally, but also to admonish you. The Bible does both things. And so it's somebody who's bringing God's word.

[4 : 22] Now that may be in the sermon up the front. Or it may be the Bible study leader in a small group. Or it may be an individual in the church who works hard to care for you, but they're doing it biblically.

They're bringing God's word to bear in your life. So you are to hold them in the highest regard. In verse 13. In love because of their work.

So one mark of a good church is obviously good ministry. But good ministry being held in the highest regard.

People who are prepared to bring the Bible to bear in your life. Whether sermon, small group or one-to-one. Which may include admonition. Admonition means like rebuke.

Correction. Now that's not easy. Very hard to do. I remember when I was at university. And that mark was a long time ago. When I was at university, my best friend.

[5 : 27] We were in college together. So he lived opposite me in the university college. Started going out with a non-Christian girl. And I considered that that was wrong.

Certainly unwise and wrong. And it took me a few days to pluck up the courage to, in effect, admonish him. Doing so as gently as I could, but in a way as firmly as I could.

Bringing the Bible to bear. But that was very difficult to do. I'm glad I did it. But it was a very stressful thing. But thanks be to God, the very next week she became a Christian.

And now they've been married for more than 25 years. So it's wonderful. But I can think of many times like that as a pastor as well. Where, not just in the sermon, where the sermon is uncomfortable for us.

There are times like that. But in the one-to-one ministry, this is hard work. We're to hold those who do this in high regard. That requires us, I think, to have a degree of humility.

[6 : 36] That we're prepared to be admonished. Others have done that to me. And I'm thankful for that. At the time, I feel really terrible and occasionally angry and so on.

But as I reflect on it, I think, thank God for good enough friends or pastors who've been prepared to care for me in a way that I need by way of correction or admonition.

Now, I don't think that happens as much in church life as it should. It's not the responsibility only of the pulpit preacher. Small group leaders, but one-to-one.

It's our mutual responsibility. Paul puts it in Colossians. Let the word of Christ dwell in you richly as you teach and admonish one another. And we're to hold such people in high regard.

What that requires, then, is that a good church is one where the teaching or preaching, the bringing of God's word is valued.

[7 : 37] That is, it's not just somebody offering you nice advice. But it's somebody who's bringing God's word to bear. And that can be painful as well as comforting.

Is that held in high regard? I hope so. I suspect it is here. But is it held in high regard in our lives individually and in our small groups, in our community, our relationships with each other?

That's, I think, what a mark of a good church is. That's what Paul is commending here for the Thessalonians as well. When he says live in peace with one another, at the end of verse 13, we ought not to think of that as brush aside all differences.

Ah, you know, we're all one big happy family. But actually, underneath, we're burning with huge differences and opposition. I think here, this is Christian peace.

This is peace together with the gospel. It's not just, ah, well, let's have peace. And, you know, you put aside the differences like a family at Christmas. You know, most families have lots of differences and arguments.

[8 : 45] And at Christmas, we all pretend that we're all a happy family. That's not what Paul has in mind here again. But it's a peace that's gospel-based, that we're brought together with peace with God and peace with each other.

And that's the peace that we are to live in with each other. And in order for that to happen, God's word needs to be brought to bear in our lives. That we're brought under the gospel.

We're brought towards holy living together under the word of God. And so on. That's what Paul is speaking about. And peace with one another here is fellow Christians. So he's not talking about society in general or families in general.

He's talking about brothers and sisters in Christ. That is, God's church, because we belong together in Christ with God, we ought to be at peace with each other.

Not attacking each other or undermining each other or speaking against each other or gossiping or whatever that may be. You know, other things like that. We belong together. It matters.

[9 : 48] Now, that, I think, is a challenge to our Western individualism. Having been in Asia for seven years, this is not a part of me that's become Asian.

But in Asia, families and communities matter much more than they do in Australia. We're much more individualistic. There's certainly the individualism that's crept into parts of Asia and more and more so is.

But it's less so there than here. We need to guard that because individualism is not necessarily wrong. But when it means that we keep a distance from Christian community and responsibility and accountability to each other, then it undermines the peaceful unity of the church of God.

These words, I think, should guard us against society's trends of individualism. Individualism suggests that we claim our rights.

What is right for me and I'll do what's right. That's what we hear in the news all the time. But as Christians, we forego our rights for the sake of others. Live at peace with one another is how Paul puts it here.

[11 : 01] And we urge you, brothers and sisters, warn those who are idle and disruptive. Encourage the disheartened. Help the weak. Be patient with everyone. There are little tweaks there, aren't there?

It's as if Paul's quickly scribbling down a whole range of ideas that rush through his head, warning those who are idle. Maybe we could say lazy. It doesn't mean that at times in our life it's not right to rest.

But there are some people who are lazy and idle. They ought to be working and serving. It may be, of course, there are people unemployed and cannot get a job. But that's not what's meant here.

It's meant the people who don't want to do anything. They're prepared to just receive from others but never give and never serve. Perhaps in particular, Paul has it in mind, the community life of the church.

Those who are members of the church but are idle within the church. Warn them. Urge them. But notice he says those who are idle and disruptive. Now, it may be two separate groups of people.

[12 : 05] But maybe more likely it's one. Those who don't give but they actually disrupt. They're complaining or grumbling or mumbling or criticizing in some way.

They should be warned. That's not godly behavior within the church community. Some people are disheartened. Disheartened in life. Depressed. Discouraged.

Things have not gone well. Disheartened in their work. Maybe disheartened in church life. Encourage them. Or as it says here in this translation, yes, encourage them.

Help the weak. So often we boast about our strength and show disdain to the weak. But help them. The weak here is very broad. It doesn't mean weak physically necessarily.

But the weak believers is more likely the group of people being addressed here. And some believers are weak. Some people struggle for maybe years with confidence in faith.

[13 : 06] Plagued with doubts. Uncertain. Not growing deeply or maturely as Christians. We can lose patience with such people. But we're to keep helping them.

For as long as they need it, actually. We're to support them. And then finally at the end of that verse, be patient with everyone. Well, with some people it's easy to be patient.

But I'm not a very patient person. And this part of the verse is the biggest challenge, I think, in this verse to me. There are some people who I easily get irritated by and impatient by.

When I was a pastor, I had to consciously at times pray for patience with particular people. Notice how Paul says here, be patient with everyone.

I wish he'd said, be patient with 90%. That would be good enough. I'd find that easy enough. It's always the 10% at the end that's difficult. Be patient with everyone. Notice this everyone.

[14 : 08] So often in the New Testament we get all or every or everyone. That is, church life, church community is about everyone who belongs. It's not about me and my friends.

But it's about me and everyone or everyone of us with everyone else of us. Be patient with everyone. Those you don't know well.

Those you dislike. Those you find difficult. Be patient. Why be patient? Why patience? Well, we don't all get on with each other so easily.

We're not all going to be friends. We don't have to be friends. We can't all be best friends with each other. But we must all be patient with each other. That is not irritating others.

Not being irritated by them. Not pushing them or confronting other people sometimes. Not thinking here of sins. But thinking here of difficult personalities, for example.

[15 : 09] We are to live at peace. We're to cultivate peace. But not a peace that glosses over our differences or whatever. And certainly not a peace that ignores our sins.

That's where God's word is foundational to this block of verses. Christian peace grounded in the gospel. But we're different people. Some are weak. Some are strong.

Some are slow. Some are fast. Be patient with everyone. Live at peace with everyone. That's what a church is meant to be about. That's hard.

That's very hard. In a bigger church, in some ways it's a little bit easier. Because in a bigger church we cannot know everyone. So we tend to gather with people that we like and know.

We've got to be careful not to be sub-churches within a church. We won't know everyone. We won't be friends with everyone. But we're to be patient with everyone.

[16 : 08] Certainly. And then at verse 15, make sure that nobody pays back wrong for wrong. But always strive to do what is good for each other and for everyone else.

Notice how you're not doing what is good for you, but good for others. And in fact, everyone else amongst those others. So being patient means when you're wronged, don't wrong back.

That's hard to do. Sometimes we like justice, especially if we're wronged unfairly. But there are times where we forego our rights for the sake of the unity of God's people.

Under the gospel, it is about forgiveness. And we are to strive to do what is good. It's not that we just happen to do what is good for others sometimes. But we're to strive.

That's effort involved to do what is good for others and for everyone. This is a word for every member of the church. This is not for the pastor. It's not for the vestry.

[17 : 11] The parish council, I think it's called now, for the church wardens or leaders. This is for every single person. We're to do what is good for others. And that, I think, again, is a challenge to our individualistic, selfish, really our narcissistic, selfie world, which puts us first and ignores others so often.

Church life is to be very countercultural. The second paragraph, so the first paragraph, if I could summarize that, is about our unity around the word of God, that means that we act in godly ways to everyone who is a member of the church.

That's very demanding, not easy to see. The second paragraph picks up a slightly different theme. But again, we could say that Paul is describing here what church life should be like.

And here the obvious word is joy. Rejoice always. Pray continually. Give thanks in all circumstances. Rejoice always.

That's the hard word. Always. It says, and then two verses later, give thanks in all circumstances. Does that mean that when I lose a job, give thanks?

[18 : 39] When I'm bereaved or ill? Does it mean that when I fail my exams or only get a silver medal, that I give thanks and rejoice always?

In a way, yes. Whatever circumstances we face, because Paul says in all circumstances, rejoice always. That's stressed here.

We are to be joyful, thankful people. One of my fears of coming back to Australia is that I think Australia is affluently discontented.

We are rich, but not particularly happy or contented. One of the things that attracted me to Asia in the first place and has certainly continued to attract me is godly contentment.

So many of the people with whom I work or whom I teach are models of godly contentment. They have very little. A few of you know a friend of mine in China.

[19 : 45] His picture is actually on the back of the card. He's exceptionally poor, has virtually nothing, but loves Jesus. I remember in 2011, he was due to graduate with his master's degree from his seminary in Beijing.

It's not a great seminary. It's part of the state church and it's politically compromised, but there were some aspects that were good and some good teaching, some not so good. On the night before his graduation, Stephen asked, oh, where is my gown ready?

There was the rehearsal. Where is the gown? And he was told by the president of the seminary, oh, you're not graduating. You're getting a diploma instead. We're not doing the master's degree.

He passed everything. The only student who'd done that. It was a political battle in the seminary between the new president and the old. I went to Stephen's graduation, except it wasn't a graduation.

And so it's only when I arrived that I found this out. I said, how did you? What did you think? And he said, well, I was upset and angry, but I knelt at my bed and prayed that I would act as Jesus would act.

[20 : 55] And I said, Stephen, I couldn't do that. I'd be furious. But there's a godly contentment that he shows amidst all sorts of setbacks.

And there are others in his life as well. And others of my friends have had different circumstances and different situations, but show the same. Rejoice always.

Give thanks in all circumstances. So Stephen's attitude was, well, they wouldn't give me a degree. I don't have a master's degree, even though I studied for it and passed everything. But I've got Jesus and that's all that matters.

And I'm thankful for that. Now, I suspect most of us, if you're like me, would not have reacted in such a godly way. Not have had that thankfulness for Jesus at the root of our joy.

But that, I think, is what Paul is cultivating here. What Paul is saying is that we must be joyful people because we have the pearl of great price.

[21 : 56] We have the treasure of heavenly life. And nobody and nothing can take that away from us. Nothing can separate that from us. And that is to be a greater joy than anything else.

So many of us, you know, our joy is determined by the weather, which means it goes up and down all the time in Melbourne. By the football, which means if it's my team, you're always grumpy.

But too often, it's the truth. Seriously, it's the trivial things of life. In the end, they're trivial. That that God that that influences too much our joy or lack of joy.

But as Christian people grounded in the gospel of Jesus, the joy of the gospel will be there in all circumstances. It will be there always.

So if my team loses or I lose my job or I lose my health or I don't graduate or I only get a silver medal or whatever the situation may be, the joy of the gospel should predominate.

[23 : 01] It far outweighs the sad or bad things of this physical life. That's our priority, isn't it? The joy of the gospel. And that's why Paul can say this.

Rejoice or joy is not an emotion. It's not something that we just find unexpectedly in our hearts. It's something that we are to practice obedient to a command.

Paul says the same at the end of Philippians. Rejoice in the Lord always. And again, I say rejoice. He's not commanding an emotion. He's commanding an understanding of the gospel joy of knowing salvation in Christ in all circumstances.

That is, we practice joy by valuing the gospel of Jesus more than anything else. And that's what some of my friends in Asia do.

And it's a challenge to me. It's an excitement for me. One of my fears coming back to Australia, I've got many fears coming back to Australia, let me tell you. Huntsman spiders are one of them.

[24 : 01] But seriously, one of my fears is that I will lose something of the joy of Jesus coming back into a life's good society.

Where life is not so good, in some ways I see my brothers and sisters in Christ in different places in Asia more joyful in the gospel than I think on the whole I do in this country.

And I'm fearful that I will lose something of what has rubbed off from them onto me when I come back here. We are to be people of great, lasting, abiding, enduring and constant joy because Jesus matters to us more than anything else in this life.

More than our family, our job, our money, our security, our superannuation, our house, our car, our football team or the weather or whatever it may be. Jesus matters most.

And that is why we and the church are to be places of astonishing joy. That will be significantly different from our society around us.

[25 : 09] We're to be people unified together, godly, holy under the word of God, as the previous paragraph was suggesting. And as part of that, secondly, people of great joy.

A joy that can never be taken away. A joy in every and any circumstance because God is sovereign overall. God is not limited to a Sunday in one day of seven.

God's not limited to some aspects of our life and not the rest. He's sovereign over everything. God's not limited to a person. And the gospel is greatest and greater, I should say, than anything else we can ever get or want or aspire to.

Now, of course, that's not how our society thinks. So a mark of the church is joy. Giving thanks in all circumstances. This is God's will for you.

It doesn't mean that in the middle of a great catastrophe and you've lost all your loved ones. The house is burnt down. The job is lost. You say, oh, God, I'm so happy. That's not what it means. But what it means is that, God, I've lost everything.

[26 : 15] But I know that the gospel is not taken away. I haven't lost that. I'll never lose that. One of the great old hymns is well with my soul.

Whatever the circumstances of life, it is well with my soul. I'm not going to sing it for you. But the song, the hymn was written in the 1800s by a man whose wife and children were on a ship that sank or crashed across the Atlantic.

Children were lost. Wife was saved. It is well with my soul. He wasn't happy because his children all died. And he wasn't just happy because his wife was spared and they were lost.

There was a joy in the gospel of Jesus, even in the midst of that terrible tragedy. That great hymn is worth remembering in verses like this.

Paul goes on then into another paragraph. And again, to a degree, maybe these aspects look a little bit disconnected.

[27 : 23] But in fact, they're not. He says in verse 19, Do not quench the spirit. Do not treat prophecies with contempt. But test them all. Hold on to what is good.

Reject every kind of evil. Here may be more overtly. Paul is coming back to the ministry of the word of God. Don't quench the spirit.

Let God speak. Let the spirit of God speak through the word of God. It's not so much a charismatic experience here that he is encouraging.

Paul has a very right and strong view of the spirit and the word of God working together. Do not treat prophecies with contempt. It's not so much the prophecy that, you know, who's going to win the grand final or when's Jesus going to return in May 2023 or something ridiculous like that.

That's not what he means by prophecy here. But rather those who are interpreting or preaching the word of God in the power of the spirit. Don't quench that. Don't show contempt to it.

[28 : 25] Test what is said. See that what is said is faithful to scripture. That's our responsibility. Whoever is preaching or bringing God's word to us and hold on to what is good.

Hold fast. That's like a dog with a bone, basically. And reject every kind of evil. That is, there's a responsibility for us here to hold fast, to reject evil, etc.

But we are not to quench the spirit. We're to let God's word speak. But in the power of his spirit, whether that's in a pulpit, in a small group, one to one, as we bring God's word to each other, teaching and admonishing one another, testing what is said.

This is what church life is meant to be like. This is where God's word is governing over us, actually, in all of our relationships with each other. God's word is to be a mark of good church.

Now, many people don't look for that. Many people look for churches where God's word is sidelined. I was in a conference last month in Seoul in South Korea, a Bible conference.

[29 : 28] And one person from Korea was giving a paper where she said, our aim, of course, is to de-center the Bible. Well, some of my friends were horrified by this.

My Myanmar friends were with me and some friends from Thailand. And it was a terrible thing to de-center the Bible. What Paul is showing here is that a godly church, a good church, a healthy church has the Bible central.

And we've seen that in the way we understand all the expressions through this passage tonight. And so here as well. Don't think that quenching the spirit and the prophecies is separate from the Bible.

It's not. But in fact, the testing of it is where God's word has the authority. So when someone gets up to say this is a word of God or this is my sermon from God's word or whatever it is, you and we have responsibility to test that.

And what's good? Hold fast. If there's anything wrong or evil with it, reject it. Both morally and theologically. That's what good church is about. Where God's word matters, where God's word is not shown with disdain or contempt, where you value those who teach you and admonish you in the first part of this chapter or passage.

[30 : 47] And now we see that reflected in the way that we're not quenching the spirit. We're not stifling or disdaining or showing contempt of prophecies, but we're testing them. We're not taking them at face value and say any any word that's spoken up the front must be right and true.

Not at all. But we're showing that God's word matters. God's word governs us, basically. And holding on to what is good, rejecting every kind of evil is at both the level of truth, what is right and wrong, and at the level of behavior, what is right and wrong as well.

It's God's word that governs us. Now, of course, that's not always true in churches today in Australia. Where our society or culture's values predominate. What does our society say?

What does culture tell us? The Bible. Oh, no, we leave this bit out. We ignore this bit. We don't want to read that bit because our culture tells us other things. That's not what right church is about.

This word of God is what governs us. And we're to test our culture and our society as well as our preachers by God's word. And we'll find ourselves being very counter or a cultural, I think, in doing that.

[32 : 03] So Paul is saying here that a right, good, healthy church is one where God's word is governing.

It's the foundation of gospel joy. It's the foundation of the ministry of caring, teaching and admonishing one another. It's the gospel word of God that is the foundation for holy, loving, caring ministry and fellowship within the church.

Peace within the church. And we are to hold to what is good as we hear God's word explained or taught or brought to bear in different ways in a church life.

Paul finishes the letter by praying, as he always does. May God himself, the God of peace, so we live in peace. He's the God of peace, of course, sanctify you through and through, thoroughly making us holy.

If you notice those different things about the way the word of God is interacting with church life, its ultimate aim is to make us godly like Jesus, holy.

[33 : 09] May your whole spirit, soul and body, that is everything about you, be kept blameless at the coming of our Lord Jesus.

For now we're not blameless, but on that day, God willing, we will be. The one who calls you is faithful and he will do it. And then brothers and sisters, pray for us, he says at the end.

Greet all God's people. Notice the all God's people with a holy kiss. I haven't seen that practiced very much. I charge you before the Lord to have this letter read to all the brothers and sisters.

Again, the all, every person's included, young and old, men and women, everybody. The grace of our Lord Jesus Christ be with you. The letter began with grace.

Back in verse one. Grace and peace to you. And now in the very last verse, the same.

[34 : 12] The grace of the Lord Jesus be with you. Because the beginning and end of church life, of Christian life, of life with God together, is grace. It's grace that leads us to rejoice always.

It's grace that leads us to pray without ceasing. It's grace that leads us to give thanks in all circumstances. It's grace that leads us to peace with each other. It's grace that humbles us and unites us.

It's grace from beginning to end. An undeserved gift of God in the gospel of Jesus' death and resurrection for us. That's what it's about.

That's our greatest joy and our greatest treasure. And this letter begins and ends with grace. In the old Anglican prayer book, there's a prayer of thanksgiving.

And it prays and says, you know, we give thanks for life and health and safety and freedom. Good things to give thanks for. But over and above all of them, we give thanks for the grace of the gospel of the Lord Jesus Christ.

[35 : 20] This is what a good church should be like. This is the challenge for Holy Trinity to keep being more and more like this. And one of the great demands I will face in my new role to encourage churches to be more and more like this as well.

Let's pray. Our Heavenly Father, we thank you for the gospel of Jesus that unites us, that brings us peace, that gives us joy, that teaches and admonishes us.

And we pray, Lord God, that you will sanctify us through and through, that our whole spirit, souls and bodies will be kept blameless for the coming of our Lord Jesus.

We thank you that you will do this because you are faithful. And we give you thanks in Jesus' name. Amen.