

I was working on my phone the other day and came upon this text thread with Martha. I marveled at the fact that, apparently, I sent her about eight texts in successive fashion, one right after the other, as if I kept remembering one more thing I meant to tell her. As I observed it, I had a couple thoughts. First was “Hey Kurt, get with it!” The second was a renewed recognition of the ease with which I could send Martha what was on my heart and mind. If I forgot to include something, a few movements of my thumbs and less than a second of time, Martha could know what I wanted to tell her. How incredibly efficient...and enabling! It would be a completely different story, though, if I had to communicate with her via a written letter, particularly if it had to travel hundreds of miles over land and sea. If that was my means of communication, I most certainly would take my time to include everything I wanted to say to her the first time.

We have come to the last Sunday in our series called *Last Things First*, where we’ve been studying the first letter of Paul to the Thessalonians. This morning we’re going to look at the last 17 verses of the letter, and we’re going to see Paul still had a few things he wanted to get across. But what might seem like a scattershot brain dump of final commands for this church is actually organized and pointed instruction. Paul’s closing thoughts, again given in the context of Christ’s return, presents four marks of a church who lives with the end in mind, the conduct of a body of believers committed to being found holy and blameless when Jesus comes back.

**Selfless Leadership.** A church anticipating Christ’s return is marked by sacrificial servant leaders and a congregation who follows and values them.

**[1 THESSALONIANS 5:12-13] <sup>12</sup> We ask you, brothers, to respect those who labor among you and are over you in the Lord and admonish you, <sup>13</sup> and to esteem them very highly in love because of their work. Be at peace among yourselves.**

Paul is likely referencing those who have emerged from the congregation through their work of ministry and he describes their work in three ways. First, they labor among their people. This is more than someone who is simply active. The idea of the word is laboring unto weariness. Leadership is more than a position, it’s a practice. A selfless leader in God’s church pours themselves out for their brothers and sisters in Christ, often to the point of exhaustion.

Selfless leaders are over others in the Lord. Our English translations make it sound as if they are domineering in their leadership, but the word Paul uses means to “stand before” or “be out ahead”. There is a pejorative phrase that derides poor leaders when they are said to be “leading from behind”. That would not describe these leaders. Selfless leaders lead from the front, they go first, and they provide spiritual leadership, direction, and care for their flock by engagement and by example. Hebrews 13 says leaders are responsible for keeping watch over the souls God has placed in their care. I have been so impressed by our elders the last couple years. In the midst of the changes that have come, each of them, to a man, has agreed that they need to go first. Whatever has been asked of the congregation, they have gone first.

Selfless leaders admonish others. Anybody wake up this morning hoping to be admonished? That feels like a harsh word but, if done, right, it’s an act of love. A selfless leader loves his or her people enough to instruct and correct their beliefs and behavior. To allow someone to proceed with false beliefs or unchecked disobedience would, in fact, be unloving. This can be

done in a number of ways. Think of all the words Paul has used in this letter: exhort, encourage, establish, build up. All of these represent the work of leaders to help others mature in their faith and live a life pleasing to God.

That's the work of servant leadership, and I'm thrilled to tell you that's the kind of leadership I see all over our church. But leadership extends beyond just those at the top of an org chart. So many of you have stepped forward to pour yourself out for the work of ministry, and I have been moved and motivated by it. One of the highlights of the year so far was our Volunteer Block Party we held a few weeks ago. 300 of our regular volunteers gathered to celebrate each other and what God has done through them.

If I said **you** could be a leader, would you believe me? Many of you hear the word "leader" and immediately disqualify yourself. You're not smart enough, gifted enough, courageous enough. But what does a leader do? Leadership comes in many forms. Some are visionaries. Some run organizations. Some drive others to achieve a goal. But that's not all there is. According to Paul, leaders go first, work hard, and call others to do the same.

I have challenged our staff to make FY 2018/19 a year of activation for leadership in our church. Our eyes will be open to see who's moving, who's laboring and influencing, and invite them in to be developed and to take ownership of the ministry of Fellowship. The only way we will accomplish what God is calling us to is if we all take an active role in living it out.

Paul also addresses how we should respond to these kinds of leaders. The word translated "respect" means "to know". We are called to acknowledge and affirm the leaders God has placed over us and follow them as they follow God.

We are also to esteem them. The language here is strong. The command is to hold leaders in the highest regard because of the work they have been called to. Leadership can be a lonely and thankless business. We are to lovingly value our leaders and appreciate their work in our church collectively and our lives individually. I am so grateful for the love that has been shown to me and to other leaders in our church.

The final way to respond to leadership is to pursue peace. This is a matter of loyalty. This is not a call to blindly follow a leader simply because they are in a position of authority. It is the right response to those leading in the way Paul describes. Disunity will kill a church. There are few things more painful for a church, or more detrimental to its reputation, than a split. The harmonious relationship between a congregation and its leaders is of utmost importance to carry out the mission God has given them.

**Compassionate Fellowship.** Each member of the family of God has a shared responsibility to maintain the wellbeing of the community by caring for one another. If you have said 'yes' to Jesus, you have said 'yes' to his body.

**[1 THESSALONIANS 5:14-15] <sup>14</sup> And we urge you, brothers, admonish the idle, encourage the fainthearted, help the weak, be patient with them all. <sup>15</sup> See that no one repays anyone evil for evil, but always seek to do good to one another and to everyone.**

The church should be known as a place where goodness thrives, and everyone is welcomed and treated with kindness, particularly those in a difficult phase of life. “Idle” does not necessarily mean “lazy”, but it refers to those who live a disorderly or undisciplined life and neglect their duties and responsibilities. They are to be stirred to action so as to be a productive member of the community and a positive and winsome witness to the faith.

We are to encourage the fainthearted. All of us know someone who is easily discouraged, those who are ready to check out and give up. Some Thessalonians struggled with it because they were under heavy persecution and, from chapter 4, we know there had been deaths within the community. There is plenty to make us fainthearted these days, even if we don’t have a bent that way. My heart sank when I heard of another school shooting on Friday, this one in Santa Fe High School. As the death count went from 8 to 9 to 10, it was enough to make me throw up my hands and say “I’m done.” But we can’t. We are called to be the light of the world, to push back against the darkness. And when we see someone ready to call it quits, we’re called to rush in and be ministers of comfort and encouragement, so they maintain the faith and press on.

We are to help the weak. Paul is not specific, but the call is to pay attention to those who are physically weak, those with no social status or power, or those who are weak spiritually. We’re motivated to do this when we remember that those who have been cast off by the culture are of invaluable worth in the eyes of God. We are to leverage our presence, our strength, our influence, and our maturity to help them flourish.

Now, we may think of the idle, the fainthearted, and the weak as somebody else. But all of us walk into this building, among this body, with something going on. We are all limping. Some are just more visible than others. And I am so thankful that you have made Fellowship Dallas a welcome and loving and safe place to land for the idle, the fainthearted, the weak, and for whoever and however else everyone in this room is broken.

We have a Care Team, led by Ali Congrove, full of some of the most merciful and compassionate people I know. They run in where so many run out. They pray for the hurting and discouraged, they minister to those in need and equip them to live a productive life, and they comfort those who have experienced loss.

We have a Guest Services team, really, we should just call them the welcome wagon, led by Dana Hentschel. It’s full of some of the warmest and friendliest people you’ve ever met. I talk to new folks regularly who are looking for a church home and tell me they go to some churches and no one ever says a word to them, but then they tell me they come here and they can’t get people to stop wishing them a good morning. I hope everyone in this room was greeted with a “welcome” or a “good morning” at least five times before you sat in your chair.

A characteristic of the Thessalonian church that jumps off the pages of Scripture is the intimate relationship between its members. We see evidence of that in v26 when Paul says [1 **THESSALONIANS 5:26**] <sup>26</sup> **Greet all the brothers with a holy kiss.** So, I’d like to make an announcement: starting next week...now a kiss may be cultural, but there is something about a practice set apart for the church that reflects our brotherly affection for one another and our unity

in Christ. There was a big wedding yesterday...and with all the pomp and circumstance, how did it end? With a kiss, a symbol of affection and unity, set apart for a bride and groom. We practice that by greeting each other at the beginning of each service. It's not to make introverts uncomfortable. It's a holy handshake, a holy fist bump, a holy hug, or a holy kiss, that signifies we are family and is intended to make everyone feel welcome and cared for.

I can't tell you how encouraged I was, and how proud I am of our church, because of a story I heard recently. One of our pastors was talking with a man who had spent some time in prison. The conversation got around to where the pastor worked. He told him "Fellowship Dallas", and the guy responded "You mean the one at Park Lane by the DART stop?" When our pastor confirmed that, the guy said "that's my church." He went on to tell him that, despite the guy's background, when he walked in these doors, he was amazed by how much respect he was shown, that he was valued as a human being. Every person who walks in our doors is a child of God, made in his image, and loved by him. We are to treat each other accordingly.

I don't know if you've noticed, but when we get together, it's clear God has assembled a rather eclectic group of people from all walks of life and all kinds of backgrounds at Fellowship. And it's not because of some formal initiative. It's because you have made it a loving and welcome place for everyone who walks through our doors. It presents its challenges, for sure. Homogeneity and perfect people would be a lot easier. But family is messy, and we're a family, so sometimes it's messy! That's why Paul says we are to be patient with everyone. But I know we are willing to do the hard work of making this a family that welcomes everyone with open arms, that makes this church a safe place to call home, and makes our people a reflection of the Kingdom of God and a taste of eternity to come. So, as Paul says, let us do this more and more.

**Dedicated Worship.** Our identity in Christ should result in a life that consistently exalts the person and work of God. A relationship with God is characterized by constant worship of him.

**[1 THESSALONIANS 5:16-22] <sup>16</sup> Rejoice always, <sup>17</sup> pray without ceasing, <sup>18</sup> give thanks in all circumstances; for this is the will of God in Christ Jesus for you. <sup>19</sup> Do not quench the Spirit. <sup>20</sup> Do not despise prophecies, <sup>21</sup> but test everything; hold fast what is good. <sup>22</sup> Abstain from every form of evil.**

It is God's will that the lives of his children be marked by the regular and consistent practice of worship. Paul's use of "always", "without ceasing", and "in all circumstances" is a reminder of the priority worship should take in our lives. It might sound as if doing anything other than these three things would be disobedient. If that's what Paul meant, you'd be disobedient right now as you listen to me...unless, of course, you're currently praying "God, when is this going to be over?!?!?" While he's not saying these should be done non-stop, he is saying they should be a frequent and regular practice in the lives of believers. To a great extent, this is a matter of time, and Paul's call should come as a challenge to our overly busy lives. The truth is, if we take the time to recognize who God is, what he has done for us, and what he has promised to do, these practices should become irresistible.

We rejoice when we delight in the presence and promises of God. While joy has an emotional quality to it, it's also a choice. Even in difficult circumstance, joy remembers and celebrates what

God has given us in Christ. What is your joy meter reading these days? A church focused on the certain promise of Christ's return will be a house of joy and a light in a dark world.

Prayer is the vehicle by which we remain in fellowship with God. If you think about who you talk to the most of any given day, it is likely the people with whom you have the deepest relationships. The God of the universe has made himself accessible for us to be in his presence and converse with him constantly. In a day where we don't answer our phones, God does not let any call roll to voicemail. He is eager to talk. He stands ready to avail himself to us so that we can know him intimately.

We give thanks in all circumstances when we remember that God works all things for the good of those who love him. One of the richest exercises in the Repurposed Training Experience is when we take to look back at our story and, given some time and distance, see the hand of God at work. This is particularly meaningful when considering the difficult times of our lives.

We will flourish individually and as a church when we commit to the consistent practice of worship. Worship is not a Sunday thing. It's an everyday thing. We can rejoice always because God is always with us. We can pray without ceasing because God is always available to us. We can be thankful in all circumstances because God is always working for us.

By contrast, Paul says we are not to quench the Spirit. This passage is full of the fruit of the Spirit: love, peace, patience, goodness, joy. The church Paul is calling us to be is one who lets the Spirit lead the way and pour out his grace as he sees fit. It is possible, though, to hinder the Spirit's work by resisting him. Paul uses a word that means "to extinguish". When you put out a fire, you are deprived of its heat and light. When we quench the Spirit, we deprive ourselves of his power in our lives individually and corporately. We can quench the Spirit when we work against his manifestation in the church (in this case by despising prophecies), or when we live in disobedience to his will, which is why Paul tells us to abstain from every form of evil. If you live a life of worship, your heart will yearn for the Spirit to do what the Spirit wants to do.

**Hopeful Reliance.** Paul closes this letter by praying a benediction over the church. Through it, he reminds us of the only way to live a life pleasing to God as we await the return of our Savior.

**[1 THESSALONIANS 5:23-24, 28] <sup>23</sup> 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. <sup>24</sup> He who calls you is faithful; he will surely do it... <sup>28</sup> The grace of our Lord Jesus Christ be with you.**

We are to take a posture of humility that confesses we are utterly reliant on God's grace to accomplish anything he calls us to. But we are also to take a posture of expectancy, of hope, that God will eagerly and abundantly supply that grace. We will become the people God wants us to be, and the church God calls us to be, by his power, and because of his faithfulness. Surely he will do it.

If you were a new 1<sup>st</sup> century Christian in Thessalonica, there is a promise of something at the end of this letter you'd really need: Peace. And if you are 21<sup>st</sup> century Christian in the city of Dallas, there's a promise of something at the end of this letter that we really need: Peace. The work begun thousands of years ago in the Garden, when God first promised he would redeem all of creation, will one day be fulfilled when Christ returns to make all things right. We can have peace now because we know Jesus is coming back. And we can have peace now because we know he will accomplish what he wills in us and through us so that we will be found holy and blameless upon his return. Jesus is going to finish what he started.