

A List for Life
I Thessalonians 5: 12-28

**First Presbyterian Church
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I've so enjoyed our weeks exploring Paul's first letter to the Thessalonian Christians. As perhaps the earliest writing in the New Testament, Thessalonians gives us a window onto the ancient church community. We saw that from the beginning the church was devoted to Jesus as to God. They found their lives transformed by the gospel, finding the meaning and forgiveness they never had in their paganism. They became a community of ardent love for each other, and Paul's tender, pastoral affection permeates this letter. They became a people living in expectation of the return of the Lord Jesus. Christ's mission became their mission, and they lived full of hope in spite of all opposition.

Having affirmed their faith and love, Paul closes the letter with some final instructions. Some simple, important things to do as believers to keep growing. I've organized the list into ten points. Ten great things to do as a Christian. Now I know you can't possibly remember ten things I rattle off in the next twenty minutes, but you can find them all in this chapter as you reread it all week long. And of course, you can grab a copy of this message on the way out. Here we go.

1) Esteem your leaders very highly in love. That's a very interesting way to start a list of final instructions. But actually very important for the flourishing of a community. We need leaders who set a tone and chart a path. We're so blessed with great leadership in this congregation. Every year the nominating committee realizes we have an embarrassment of riches in leadership. So many great people willing to serve. Consecrated leadership has meant an atmosphere of peace and harmony that has allowed us to focus on ministry and mission. But we cannot be complacent. We have to stay focused and on point. So, pray for your elders. Take a look at the poster by the Connection Center that has all their names and pictures. Pick one or two to encourage and up hold up before the Lord.

2) Be at peace among yourselves. Ours is a uniquely peaceful congregation. In fact, some people have come to First specifically because we don't fight. Church turmoil destroys mission. It makes cynics out of the searching. It saps the life out of Christians. By contrast, an accepting, peaceful church gives people a taste of heaven. There may be backstabbing at work, but not here. There may be turmoil at home, but not here. This house of God is a safe place to bring the broken and the

weary, the embattled and fatigued. Come find peace, because we are committed to pursuing it.

3) Admonish the idle, encourage the fainthearted, help the weak and be patient with them all. Life is hard. People are fragile. We get out of sorts easily. We get caught in patterns that are self-destructive. It's easy to project out your junk onto someone else and create some chaos. It's also easy to lost your nerve. Just thinking of the Baton Rouge traffic can make you want to hibernate. Paul urges the community of Christians to look out for each other. If you're in a season of being reasonably together, take some time to encourage someone who is sinking. Find ways to channel the energy of folks who are acting out. Call the people who are still opting out of church because online worship is easier. But remember to be patient with them all. Always give each other some room. Let a loving countenance and gracious words be your go-to attitude.

4) See that no one repays evil for evil, but always seek to do good to one another. As we've gotten more fragile, revenge has made a comeback in our culture. Saving face is a high value. Particularly if people have nothing inside them to prop them up, they have to get even, have to get back or they feel like they will be nothing. We know better. And one of the strongest witnesses to the truth of Christ is when his people imitate his willingness to take insults and blows without revenge.

Rather, we are to seek out ways to bless others. We are to be creative, not in dreaming up the right words with which to put people down in their place, but to build people up in the love of God. We are to look for creative ways to do good. I've learned so much about this from watching you. Our church is filled with people who creatively find ways to do good to people that become just what they need to receive.

5) Rejoice always. Joy is a theme that runs throughout Paul's writings. We note that rejoicing is not a feeling but an activity. He doesn't say, "When you feel joyful, smile and be glad." No, he commands us to rejoice. And joy is not dependent on circumstances. Joy is coordinated to the person and work of Jesus. Joy arises from what Jesus has accomplished and knowing we are joined to him. Look for joy in yourself, by yourself, for yourself and it will always elude you. Happiness comes and goes, often simply by the change in our biorhythms. I'm very happy when the pizza goes down, not so happy when it expands in my stomach. Rejoicing cannot be as tenuous as our physical or mental feeling of well-being.

Jesus said to his disciples, “In a little while, you will see me no longer, and you will have sorrow. But I will see you again and your hearts will rejoice, and no one will take your joy from you” (Jn. 16). Their lives were joined to Jesus. Their fate, and their joy, was hitched to Christ. He died and their world ended. Jesus rose, and their joy returned. Their joy was now connected to Jesus’ victory. The same is true for us:

As long as Jesus remains risen from the dead, we rejoice.

As long as Jesus stands at the right hand of the Father praying for us, we rejoice.

As long as Jesus has a resurrection body that is promised for us, we rejoice.

As long as Jesus is returning to set all things right, we rejoice.

Life in this world can and will turn hard. But we will rejoice because our joy is founded only and always in the victory of Christ. The act of rejoicing gets us out of ourselves and into Jesus.

6) Pray without ceasing. This encouragement coordinates with rejoicing. Prayer is essentially a movement out of ourselves towards God. I stop praying when I want to live for myself and not for what God has for me. I stop praying when I think God is mad at me and disappointed. I stop praying when I am tired and distracted away from my God and Father. But when I stop praying, I get stuck in myself.

Paul urges us to move out of ourselves and claim the story of Jesus: he died to take away our sin and he rose to overcome death. I take my place in Christ. I remain where he has put me, in Christ, in forgiveness, in loving trust.

Now praying without ceasing does not mean that you never do anything else but pray. Sometimes we have to concentrate. When my surgeon is operating on me, I really want him to focus. I hope he prays before he opens me up. I hope he sends up a quick prayer if he hits a snag. But I don’t want him to be working theology during my operation. Same with my accountant and carpenter and hair stylist. Focus, baby, focus.

We all have to concentrate on what we are called to do and that means sometimes thinking of nothing else but what is right before us. Praying without ceasing is as simple as having a running conversation with our Lord. Noticing people and linking them to God, even in passing. Checking in with Christ as we can during the day. Not hiding, but constantly referring life to him.

7) Give thanks in all circumstances. Mindfulness has become a popular word. I used to think it was kind of silly to make a big deal about just paying attention to what is going on around me. But during the worst of the pandemic, I read an article that suggested naming what is right here in the present greatly reduces the stress of uncertainty about the future. So I tried it while walking the dogs. I am walking. That means my heart is beating and my legs work. The sun is shining. I can feel warmth on my skin. Birds are singing. I can still hear and distinguish sounds. The leaves are full. I can see them and their colors. My little beasties are tripping along the path, interested in everything. The earth still spins and so the sun is climbing. As I named all these things, I found peace seeping into me. Mindfulness works. But as a Christian, I instinctively went to the next step. From being aware to being thankful. From mindfulness to gratitude. As we approach Thanksgiving week, we know that thankfulness is essential to contentment, health and flourishing at all levels.

Now in the moment, you may not be able to give thanks for the circumstance itself. Some things are truly horrible and remain unrelievedly hard. But we give thanks to God for being God even, even, even in the midst of the ruin. This only works for Christianity. Only a religion which has a God who suffered in our flesh and blood, who entered the agony and forsakenness of life on earth could ever possibly say this. But because we have a God who knows, in his very being, what it's like to be here, a God who is with us even now, we give thanks.

8) Do not quench the Spirit. There is perhaps a bit of irony in this command. Do not quench the Spirit. As if. As if I had the ability to douse the flame of the everlasting light of God. As if I had the power to stop the mighty flow of living water through the world. As if I could squelch the work of the Spirit who brought the world into being. That's funny. Do not quench the Spirit. But how it speaks to the great humility of our God! He has the power to overwhelm us anytime. In fact, he shows the greatness of his power in his restraint. God is constantly softening his might so that we are not blown away.

Even to the point that he allows our choices to matter. Our choices matter so much that we can quench his Spirit. We can muffle his voice among us. We can turn away his power. We can obscure his Word. Trivialize his truth. Thin out his worship with our anemic attention spans and our fear to sing or speak. We can make the worship in which the Almighty Triune God is present seem like an origami class.

Don't quench the Spirit. Stoke the flame. Open yourself so that you burn brightly and flow freely in the Spirit's power.

9) Hold fast to what is good.

Paul speaks specifically about taking what is true and good from what is taught in the Christian community and making it part of your daily life. Review the messages. Re-read the Scriptures. Note what practices of love you admire and remember to do them. Note the characteristics of the lives that follow Christ and imitate them.

10) Abstain from every form of evil. This last is the other side of holding fast to what is good. Drop what seems evil like you drop a hot skillet. Jump back from what appears to be harmful just like you jump back ten feet when you see a snake in the grass. Don't pick up dead things to see if there might be some life in them for you. That temptation to gossip or backbite. That temptation to shade the truth. That urge to lust. That indulgence, that turning aside from one in pain, that participation in cruelty, that connection to crooked schemes. You don't need it spelled out. You have a conscience. You have the Spirit. If it smells bad, looks suspect, sounds off pitch, don't flirt with it. Drop it.

These ten steps are meaningful ways you cooperate and participate in what God wants to do in your life. But in the end, this is more God's work than our work. I pray that he will keep on with the process of making you like Christ. That's sanctification, the holy-making of his people. I pray that God will work the gospel through you thoroughly. You have lots to do to work with him in this. But ultimately, this is God's deal. He has undertaken to save you. He has undertaken to bring you to himself. He has undertaken to use you in his mission to the world. He has undertaken to make you like Christ, a son or daughter formed in his beloved Son. As we'll hear next week, the one who calls you is faithful, and he will do it!