

The child dedication ceremony earlier is the perfect intro for today's text. That ceremony makes no sense unless certain things are true about what we are as a community—what it means to be a church and not merely a gathering of Christian friends.

- Committed to each other and the Lord in love and loyalty
- United by a common purpose and values
- Bound by a sense of mutual obligation to watch over one another's souls and do all we can to make sure it goes well for our fellow church members on the day of their accounting
- Dependent on each other in humility and transparency
- Creating a safe environment through trust and trustworthiness
- Boasting only in the cross and rejoicing only in knowing Christ

This is the kind of community the gospel creates, and that's precisely Paul's concern in the closing verses of 1 Thessalonians. This book is all about what happens when the gospel takes over; and in chapters 4 & 5, Paul gets specific and practical about it. He names several key areas that demonstrate the transforming effects of the gospel: sex, love, work, death, judgment, and now community. What does a group of people look like when the gospel takes over their relationships, their meetings, their community ethos? That's Paul's focus in 5:12-28. What is a gospel-shaped church?

The first thing you notice in these verses is how often he uses the term "brothers." He's been saying it all through this letter (1:4, 2:1, 3:2, 4:1, 5:1, etc.) – 19x total, but over ¼ of them are in these closing verses:

v12 *We ask you, brothers...*

v14 *And we urge you, brothers...*

v25 *Brothers, pray for us.*

v26 *Greet all the brothers with a holy kiss. [family affection]*

v27 *...have this letter read to all the brothers.*

What's Paul's point? The gospel makes us a family.

Thanksgiving is just a few days away, and for most of us that means extra time with family. For some people, that's a mixed blessing at best. Family gatherings can be tough.

ILLUS: The Mix100 Mindbender last week: "5 year olds were asked to name what they least liked at Thanksgiving. And almost 20% said "All the yelling and fighting."

The gospel creates an entirely different kind of family, *to the extent that we are living consistently with it applying it and growing in it.*

Look again at our text—let your eyes run down through these verses and notice how Paul describes the Christian family. It seems a little like Paul is all over the place—a random spray of rapid-fire commands: "Respect your leaders, admonish the idle, help the weak, seek to do good, rejoice always, pray without ceasing, give thanks, don't quench the Spirit, test everything, abstain from evil." There actually is an order here, and I'll point it out in a moment.

First, though, I want to warn us against a couple common ways to misapply these verses:

- Work them out in individualistic, isolated ways, rather than in the community context in which they were given. Verses 16-18 for example: "I need to rejoice more, pray more, be more thankful." Very individualistic. That's not what Paul has in mind. He has group rejoicing, group prayer, and group thanksgiving in mind. And that's so helpful, because sometimes we don't feel able to rejoice or pray or give thanks. We can't overcome the grief or confusion or coldness. But when we gather with our church family, as we listen to others rejoice and pray and offer thanks, their words break through and carry us along on their swelling tide.
- Get busy working on them without starting with the gospel. I do want to encourage you to note 1 or 2 family practices in this text that you will work on for the next several weeks. Compare your life honestly to the word. Let conviction arise in your soul. But don't immediately run out and get to work in your own strength. We need God's help, not just for forgiveness of our sins, but also for the daily power to overcome our sins:

vv23-24 *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. ²⁴ He who calls you is faithful; he will surely do it.*

v28 *The grace of our Lord Jesus Christ be with you.*

So as we go through this text and think about how to apply it, let's keep

in mind our need 1) for each other and 2) for God's grace.

Paul approaches 4 key areas—the 4 areas you might want to look at yourself if you were going to evaluate what kind of family this was:

- How do they treat their babysitters? (vv 12-13)
- What do they do with problem kids in the family? (vv 14-15)
- How do they treat their parents? (vv 16-18)
- What's their energy source? Is it sustainable? Is it going to fail in a crisis if the whole grid goes down? (vv 19-21)

The Babysitters (vv 12-13)

vv12-13 *We ask you, brothers, to respect those who labor among you and are over you in the Lord and admonish you, ¹³ and to esteem them very highly in love because of their work. Be at peace among yourselves.*

Two duties here: respect them and esteem them in love. But who's the "them"? Paul doesn't name anyone here, but he does describe what they do: they work hard among you, have charge over you in the Lord, and admonish you. In a church, these are the duties of the elders. Within the family metaphor, elders are not the parents. There is only one parent over the Christian family, and we'll talk about Him in a moment. Church elders are just the family caregivers who stand in for the parents. (BTW, of course, I mean no disrespect to the eldership or to the congregation by using this metaphor.)

Notice again those duties: work hard, have charge over, and admonish. Not all that different from the duties of a babysitter. Work hard—do whatever is necessary to keep the house clean, the kids safe, and the parents satisfied. Have authority over—recognize that the person in charge here, the one responsible now that the parents are away, is YOU! And admonish—remind the kids of their parents' instructions, make sure the homework gets done and baths get taken, correct misbehavior.

It's not always easy for kids to receive this kind of interaction from a babysitter, is it? The kids know, "This isn't my dad. They don't do it as well as my mom." That's why Paul says, "Treat your babysitters with respect. Hold them in the highest regard. Love them. Be at peace with them. Do it, not so much because they are great, but because their work

is important." In other words, Paul says, treat them like you would your own parents. They have parental duties. Give them parental respect. It's hard, but it's the kind of family the gospel calls us to be. Is that your attitude toward the babysitters in this family? Do you give them the respect and esteem you'd give the Father Himself? Do you hope and pray they say, "I love babysitting for that family! They are so great!"

The Problem Kids (vv 14-15)

v14 *And we urge you, brothers, admonish the idle, encourage the fainthearted, help the weak, be patient with them all.*

These are the problem children of the family. Or perhaps we should say, "these are the children who are currently struggling with certain problems," because we have all been this way at one time or another.

Three types of problem kids:

- "the idle" – probably better rendered "unruly, disorderly," those who were out of line in some unstated way. They need to be admonished.
- "the fainthearted" – those who are despondent, worried, insecure, anxious. Encourage them.
- "the weak" – not always physical weakness, those easily overcome, overwhelmed; need maintenance care. Help them.

Note that Paul calls the whole congregation to these duties. The church in Paul's mind was not an inert mass of people with pastors scurrying around, fixing problems and putting on cool weekend shows. Rather, the church was an interwoven, interrelated family with each member providing appropriate care for those in need. It's the older brothers and sisters helping out with the younger, less mature ones. Yes, these are ultimately pastoral responsibilities, but Paul is trying to get the whole family to function in pastoral ways.

Notice as well that Paul says: "Be patient." Why? Because problem kids usually don't grow, mature, or heal as quickly as we'd like. We want a quick fix, but people problems are almost never a quick fix! We want to touch a problem (at the most!) and have it go away. ***We want everything to be transactional, but God calls us to be relational.*** You can't order up growth for your fellow church members in the drivethru at Starbucks: "Yeah, my friend here needs joy, warm not iced, with 2

shots of faith, better make that a Grande, Soy, No Whip, Mocha.”

Have you heard the saying, “Hurt people hurt people”? It’s true. It’s easier not to help the problem kids in the family, because when you do, it will cost you: time, emotional energy, mental energy, convenience. And then, after all you give, the person you’re helping might lash out and hurt you. No good deed goes unpunished. And it’s exactly why Paul gives us verse 15:

See that no one repays anyone evil for evil, but always seek to do good to one another and to everyone.

Non-retaliation isn’t enough for proper family relations. The only way to overcome evil is to kill it with kindness. Doing active good, not just withholding revenge. Remember, this is how God overcame His enemies. He died for them instead of crushing them, even though they richly deserved it. He suffered abuse, ridicule, scorn, torture, and death; and then He rose again and invited His murderers to share His table.

The Parents (vv 16-18)

Actually, there’s only one Parent in the Christian family: God the Father. You can tell a lot about a family by how they treat their parents, can’t you? Imagine a family where the father is so kind, he wants only the very best for his children. He’s so wealthy and powerful, nothing can stop him from bringing about the best for his kids. And he’s so wise, he can envision what would be the very best ends for his children. And that’s the world those kids live in every day. How do you think those kids should act toward their dad?

They would probably be very, very happy. In fact, if they were gloomy, it would really be a sign of disrespect toward their father who had done so everything for their good.

They would probably be very eager to tell him their needs and wants, since they knew he wanted nothing more than to help them reach the goals he had set for them. In fact, if they didn’t ask him for help and instead always tried to go it on their own, he would be understandably insulted.

And they would be profoundly humble and thankful. In fact, if they

weren’t thankful, it would show the utmost presumption as though they felt entitled to all these wonderful things their father had done for them and given to them. Don’t you think that’s how these children would act, if they had a father like that? No surprise then that Paul writes:

vv16-18 *Rejoice always,¹⁷ pray without ceasing,¹⁸ give thanks in all circumstances; for this is the will of God in Christ Jesus for you.*

Friends, contrary to what it might seem, if you are a Christian, no matter what happens to you, “this is the will of God in Christ Jesus for you.” Nothing escapes His plan. All disappointments will turn out for our joy and blessing. God never wastes a hurt. Every trial serves a purpose.

Do we really believe that the salvation God has given us is worth more than whatever our particular experience of suffering, trial, pain is costing us? Do we really believe eternity will be better? Are we really persuaded that God works all things together for good? The gospel tells you it’s true:

Romans 8:32 *He who did not spare his own Son but gave him up for us all, how will he not also with him graciously give us all things?*

The Energy Source (vv 19-22)

What an amazing family! So kind to their babysitters. So helpful to each other. So appreciative of their father. But what if the whole thing collapses because some civil crisis befalls their area? What if the infrastructure of their society falls apart, the power goes down, and everybody around them is thrown into a panic? Will this family survive? Is their perfect little world dependent on some outside source for energy and sustenance?

v19 *Do not quench the Spirit.*

The NIV renders it: “Do not put out the Spirit’s fire.” That’s Paul’s point. The Spirit is a person (I don’t mean to convey something other than that by calling him “the energy source.”), but He’s also the dynamo, the energy, the fire that powers everything about this gospel-shaped family.

How might we quench the Spirit or “put out His fire”?

v20 *Do not despise prophecies.*

The most common way is by despising His work, neglecting it, minimizing it, denying it. It’s like unplugging your house from the grid or

shutting down the generator. Nothing works.

Paul doesn't define the gift of "prophecy" anywhere, but he comes close in 1 Cor 14. ***It seems it involved spontaneous messages, apparently from the Spirit, delivered orally to the assembly, intended for the edification and encouragement of the people.*** These prophetic utterances weren't viewed as on par with apostolic teaching or inspired Scripture. It's a human being reporting in human words what it seems God has impressed on their mind. Paul took it for granted that prophecy was a regular part of this church's (and presumably every church's) experience together, and I don't know any reason we should assume it should be different in our church.

It's possible the church was tempted to despise prophecies because 1) their former religious paganism involved similar ecstatic activities and this Christian prophetic activity was uncomfortably reminiscent of their former life or 2) the church recognized the risk involved in prophetic activity and chose to play it safe by eliminating prophecy altogether.

That's not the remedy Paul recommends:

vv21-22 *but test everything; hold fast what is good.* ²² *Abstain from every form of evil.*

Don't reject them outright, but don't accept them outright either. I'll admit, I'm not entirely certain how this would look in local church life, though I think I have an idea. But there's a larger take-away for us and that's this: we should never prohibit the work of the Spirit through any and all of our family members. In fact, we should expect it. We should pray for it. We should tap into it.

Let's strive for balance. To those who wish you could just cut loose with your prophetic utterances from the Spirit, don't be annoyed if the elders (or others) want to test your "word from the Lord." That's verse 21. And to those who wish confusing and unsettling passages like this weren't in the Bible, don't despise prophecies. That's verse 20.

CONCL:

This is what the gospel does to a community. It makes us a family, respectful of our leaders, helpful and caring toward strugglers, joyful and prayerful and thankful toward God, and powerfully energized by

the Holy Spirit as each member is encouraged to contribute in line with their own unique gifting. Wouldn't it be great to be part of a family like this? Could our church ever be like this?

vv23-24 *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.* ²⁴ *He who calls you is faithful; he will surely do it.*

v28 *The grace of our Lord Jesus Christ be with you.*

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