

Camille Cook Howe  
Paul Series Part 3  
Georgetown Presbyterian Church

October 9<sup>th</sup>, 2022  
Midterm Reports  
1 Thessalonians 5:12-28

*But we appeal to you, brothers and sisters, to respect those who labor among you, and have charge of you in the Lord and admonish you; esteem them very highly in love because of their work. Be at peace among yourselves. And we urge you, beloved, to admonish the idlers, encourage the fainthearted, help the weak, be patient with all of them. See that none of you repays evil for evil, but always seek to do good to one another and to all. **Rejoice always, pray without ceasing, give thanks in all circumstances;** for this is the will of God in Christ Jesus for you. Do not quench the Spirit. Do not despise the words of prophets, but test everything; hold fast to what is good; abstain from every form of evil.*

*May the God of peace himself sanctify you entirely; and may your spirit and soul and body be kept sound and blameless at the coming of our Lord Jesus Christ. The one who calls you is faithful, and he will do this.*

*Beloved, pray for us. Greet all the brothers and sisters with a holy kiss. I solemnly command you by the Lord that this letter be read to all of them. The grace of our Lord Jesus Christ be with you. The Word of the Lord. Thanks be to God.*

By the letter's own description, Paul is writing to his friends in Thessalonica after a period of separation from the church he founded there along with Silas and Timothy. These three missionaries visited this bustling port city and found a receptive audience who converted to Christianity. For reasons not entirely clear, they were forced to leave the city somewhat abruptly, leaving the new church on its own before it was perhaps ready to be launched. Paul was worried about how they would withstand the trials and temptations without him. Paul was not able to return himself but sent Timothy. Timothy's reports are good. And the first half of the letter is Paul's outpouring of relief, thanksgiving, and praise for the faithful work they had been doing and the ways they had been able to withstand obstacles and pressures. The second half of the letter is Paul's encouragements going forward.

Three of these phrases stand out and are a trio. Rejoice always, pray without ceasing, give thanks in all circumstances. Three pithy exhortations – all starting with a P in Greek. This was a common practice to offer short maxims for people who likely were illiterate to memorize. It reminds me of the reduce, reuse, recycle I learned probably before I could read. Three things with alliteration is an effective teaching tool. Rejoice, pray, give thanks. That was Paul's list for the Thessalonian's. Paul knew in year 50 AD, that these things were counter cultural and needed to be imprinted on their hearts.

It is amazing that they are just as hard for Christians today as they were in the time just after Jesus had walked the earth. Rejoice always is hard. Pray without ceasing feels impossible. Give thanks in all circumstances seems laughable. But Paul isn't listing requirements – Paul is setting out a framework for life.

Three pithy exhortations, which in Greek all start with a P. Paul writes to his friends in Thessalonica after Timothy has returned from the church and given Paul a status update. Paul, Silus, and Timothy had spent time in Thessalonika and found a receptive group of new converts. Eventually they were forced to leave town but Paul ways

In his *Church Dogmatics*, Karl Barth said, “To believe in Jesus Christ means to become thankful.”

in the Greco-Roman world. Short, memorable maxims were important in a culture where many could not read. Paul uses this technique in a creative way to address the Thessalonian church.<sup>7</sup>

*Rejoice always; pray without ceasing; give thanks in all circumstances.*

Commentators are nearly unanimous in urging readers and preachers to avoid a legalistic interpretation of these instructions; to guard against seeing Paul as setting up a series of requirements that the Thessalonian Christians must live up to if they are to be saved upon Christ's return. Two insights mitigate against this.

First, Paul's intent here--and indeed throughout the letter--is deeply pastoral. His main concern is to encourage the new Christian community in Thessalonica to adopt those practices that will enable them to persevere in their fragile state as a vulnerable minority group in a city dominated religiously by established pagan cults and politically by the demands of regional Roman bureaucracy. These instructions, then, are not so much about requirements for salvation but about those practices and basic orientations of common life that will foster a community of mature faith and resilience amid difficult and often hostile circumstances.

Second, these instructions are not directed at individuals, but are intended for the whole community. As Gordon Fee points out, *These instructions are not aimed primarily toward how individual believers would live out their faith, but to how the gathered community would respond to their present challenges.*<sup>8</sup>

Fee also speculates that this triad of rejoicing, praying and giving thanks may reflect Paul's own spiritual formation in the Psalter.<sup>9</sup> The psalmists repeatedly call upon the community of the faithful to do exactly these things. Just a few examples include:

#### ***Psalm 70.4***

---

<sup>7</sup> Thomas Currie, 1 Thessalonians 5: 16-24 in *From Text To Sermon, Interpretation*, October 2006.

<sup>8</sup> Gordon Fee, *I and II Thessalonians*, Grand Rapids: Eerdmans Press, 2009, p. 214.

<sup>9</sup> IBID

4in the Greco-Roman world. Short, memorable maxims were important in a culture where many could not read. Paul uses this technique in a creative way to address the Thessalonian church

First, Paul's intent here--and indeed throughout the letter--is deeply pastoral. His main concern is to encourage the new Christian community in Thessalonica to adopt those practices that will enable them to persevere in their fragile state as a vulnerable minority group in a city dominated religiously by established pagan cults and politically by the demands of regional Roman bureaucracy. These instructions, then, are not so much about requirements for salvation but about those practices and basic orientations of common life that will foster a community of mature faith and resilience amid difficult and often hostile circumstances

*In God we have boasted continually, and we will give thanks to your name for ever.*

Though the congregation in Thessalonica were gentiles and would not have made these connections, they nevertheless reveal something of Paul's own intent. These instructions were not meant to be legal requirements. They were meant as encouragement to adopt particular habits of the heart--or as Roberta Bondi might describe it, a new disposition. She writes: *A disposition is a cultivated, long term attitude of the heart.* Paul is not after a new legalism, but a new orientation for community life.<sup>10</sup>

This new orientation is closely tied to the work of the Spirit in the community.

*Do not quench the spirit*

*Do not despise the words of the prophets*

*But test everything.*

*Hold fast to what is good; avoid every kind of evil.*

It is the work of the Spirit within and among them that will form and shape them into a community of rejoicing, prayer and thanksgiving, a community already demonstrating the marks of the new age which is to come in and through Christ. Paul counsels the community to be attentive to the work of the Spirit both by being radically open to its work among them and by testing claimed manifestations of the Spirit by the whole community to see whether they tend toward the common good or toward any form of evil.

It is here that Jewett and others see strong evidence that Paul is attempting to curtail excessive practices by some in the Thessalonian community. Perhaps some were engaging in ecstatic trances or utterances, insisting that such experiences were self-validating and refusing any kind of accountability. Perhaps there were others in the community who were so turned off by these occurrences that they were attempting to suppress any kind of charismatic activity. Perhaps Paul's suggested two-pronged approach-- don't quench the Spirit or despise prophecy but test everything--is his attempt to guide the community into a more nuanced understanding of the way in which the Holy Spirit shapes common life in a Christian community.

---

<sup>10</sup> Currie.

9In God we have boasted continually, and we will give thanks to your name for ever. Though the congregation in Thessalonica were gentiles and would not have made these connections, they nevertheless reveal something of Paul's own intent. These instructions were not meant to be legal

requirements. They were meant as encouragement to adopt particular habits of the heart--or as Roberta Bondi might describe it, a new disposition. She writes: A disposition is a cultivated, long term attitude of the heart. Paul is not after a new legalism, but a new orientation for community life.<sup>1</sup>

It is a community shaped by the Spirit and marked by joy, prayer and gratitude; a community of expectation and hope.