



GUIDELINES FOR GODLINESS IN THE LOCAL CHURCH I THESSALONIANS 5:1-11

MAR 2, 2025
SAM STORMS

One of the things that I love most about the Scriptures, and especially the letters of the Apostle Paul, is how incredibly practical they are. Paul doesn't leave us guessing about what constitutes godly living. He pulls no punches when it comes to how we are to relate to one another in the body of Christ. And this especially extends to ***the way in which the leaders/Elders of the church relate to all the members of any particular local congregation and how the congregation relates to their leaders***. I am convinced that the advice and exhortations he gave to the Thessalonians apply with equal force to us today. In a time when there is ongoing tension, and even conflict, between church leadership and those in the local church, we need to pay close attention to every word in 1 Thessalonians 5:12-18.

How the Leaders of a Church and those who are Led Relate to Each Other

First, we note Paul's urgent request that the people in the church at Thessalonica honor those whom the Holy Spirit has raised up as Elders (vv. 12-13). We should take note of the word "request," as Paul does not command them as he will later in the subsequent verses.

Although the word "Elder" does not appear in the text, everyone acknowledges that they are the ones Paul has in mind. He specifically mentions four things about these men.

First, there was more than one. Note that Paul refers to "those" who labor among you. He doesn't say "he" who labors among you. Furthermore, all the verbs here are in the plural. Once again, neither Paul nor any other NT author ever conceives of a local church being governed or led by only one man. Plurality is absolutely essential to the life of the church.

Second, all Elders are spiritual "equals." No one has more authority or stature in the church than another. They each have a voice and a vote. However, that doesn't mean that all of the Elders lead and govern in the same way. In 1 Timothy 5:17 Paul says, "Let the elders who rule well be considered worthy of double honor, especially those who labor in preaching and teaching." So, all elders rule, while some "rule well."

Furthermore, in almost all cases, there is what we might call the principle of a ***"first among equals."*** Problems begin to emerge when emphasis is placed on either the word "first" or the word "equals," or when the word "among" is ignored. Listen to how Dave Harvey explains this in his excellent book, *The Plurality Principle*.

"Some churches err by throwing the accent on the first word of that phrase--the senior leader as 'first' among equals. His place in line is first, his opinion first, his preferences first, his needs are first. These first-driven churches can actually incubate celebrity pastors, or even entire leadership cultures, that are power-based and hardwired for command and control. For the plurality, the church staff, or the congregation, this can feel like heavy metal music at a funeral. Such an indelicate exercise of authority can relegate godly character and humble service to the margins, sentencing fellow team members to a fear-based and unsafe culture. The result may be a culture characterized by ministry silos, where each leader does their own thing rather than risking collaboration. At other times staff turnover happens, where team members leave because the senior leadership is no longer tolerable. Or worse, no longer respected" (14).

In the past, wherever I've served in pastoral ministry, there is only occasion when one Elder is given two votes on any particular issue. If the Elders find themselves tied, 5 to 5, or 6 to 6, there must be a way to move forward. In such a case, the Lead Pastor or Senior Pastor is granted an extra vote to break the tie. It's not unlike what happens in the Senate. When there is a tie, the Vice-President is called upon to cast a vote and break the tie. You should know, however, that in all my time as a lead pastor I have never made use of this extra vote. It seems to me that if an Elder board is so clearly divided on some issue, the best way forward is to suspend any further action and turn to prayer. I have never been comfortable in making an important decision when such division and disparity of opinion exists among the Elders.

Although all elders are spiritual "equals," it is only feasible that one of them will invariably be recognized as the "first" among them. The senior pastor typically has more education and experience in interpreting the Scriptures. He also exerts the greatest influence on the church by preaching and teaching in the corporate gathering. None of this is to suggest that the senior pastor is more important or more godly than the others. It simply recognizes that in any

group a leader will eventually emerge. His voice typically carries more weight. And even if it isn't a rock-solid reason, common sense itself suggests that someone has to be responsible for providing leadership and direction for all. That doesn't mean he is a dictator who always gets his way. What it does mean is that the other Elders need to proceed with caution and patience before they insist on their perspective in contradiction to that of the lead pastor.

It would seem that this was true in many cases in the NT. Peter was the first among equals in the company of the apostles. James was the first among equals in the church at Jerusalem. Timothy was the first among equals in the church at Ephesus. And Titus appears to be the first among equals in the church in Crete. I can't be dogmatic about this, but it seems entirely reasonable that in every church there was a recognized leader.

Finally, we must never overlook the word "among," for it suggests that all the Elders form a cohesive group of leaders. The one who is "*first among equals*" is not more holy or more greatly loved by God than the others. He is part of a group, all of whom are given the same mandate to lead the body. To speak of a "*first among equals*" does not mean there is a governmental hierarchy in the church. Neither the senior pastor nor the other Elders should ever lose sight that God intends for the Elders of the church to be a cohesive, unified group.

Though the authority for the church inheres in the entire eldership, a wise elder team will look for one among them with humble character, leadership gifts, and public ministry skills to fulfill the role of senior pastor. To this man they delegate the necessary authority to cultivate the unity and growth of the plurality, to lead the team into wise decision-making, and to help the elders assume proper responsibility and accountability for the varying ministries of the church

"Other elderships," says Harvey, "err by throwing the accent on the second half of the phrase. An idealism of interdependence levels the leadership field, so that team members begin to think that leadership and preaching is not a unique stewardship necessary for the team or church. In a world where authority is abused and increasingly disparaged, pares[equal]-driven models may grow more appealing. But alas, they too fail the church."

Paul then proceeds to mention three tasks undertaken by the Elders. **(1) *They labor among the people of God.*** To serve as an Elder in the body of Christ is hard work. The ESV translates this verb as "labor," which could also be rendered, "they toil" among you. This is similar to what Paul wrote in 1 Timothy 3:1 where he says that if someone aspires to be an Elder, he desires a "noble task," or more literally, "a good work." To be an Elder does not mean you get special privileges or perks or extra days off or a nice, comfortable chair while everyone else sits on a concrete floor. Although there is certainly a measure of dignity and honor in the office, this is only because those who are appointed to it expend themselves in selfless labor and toil and hard work. This is reaffirmed toward the close of v. 13 where Paul exhorts people to esteem them because of their "work."

But we must not think that this is a task reserved solely for Elders or Pastors in the church. The word translated "labor" is used elsewhere in the NT to describe a variety of people who don't serve as Elders. In 1 Corinthians 16:16 Paul describes average believers as well as a man named Stephanas as those who are "workers" and "laborers." He does the same thing in Romans 16. All of us, then, are to "labor" and "work" in ministry to the building up of the body and the glory of Christ.

(2) *They are over you in the Lord.* This is the rendering of one verb that simply means to preside, rule, govern, to set over, to appoint with authority. This does not mean that Elders are to be dictators or to lead with a heavy hand. Here is how Paul described it in 2 Corinthians 1:24. There he assures the Corinthians that ***we do not "lord it over your faith, but we work with you for your joy."***

Neither does this mean that whatever the Elders decide is always and invariably right and good. They are human, just as are all the others in the body of Christ, and they can make mistakes, sometimes serious mistakes. Paul does not leave us without counsel on what to do when this happens. He writes this in 1 Timothy 5:19-20,

"Do not admit a charge against an elder except on the evidence of two or three witnesses. As for those [elders] who persist in sin, rebuke them in the presence of all, so that the rest may stand in fear."

Clearly, Paul envisioned a situation in which either one elder or several "persist" in their sin and stubbornly exert an authority that runs contrary to the welfare of the church as a whole. What is the response of the body of Christ when this happens? You must "rebuke" them publicly, so that the others will stand in fear of incurring the same judgment.

This principle applies in all areas of life. *Being in authority over someone does not give that person a right to abuse their power and take advantage of those they lead.* I find it interesting that a number of scholars translate the verb rendered “are over you” (ESV), “to care for,” or “to protect,” with an emphasis on love and compassion in dealing with others in the church. In any case, if a parent insists that a child sin, the child should respectfully decline and say No. If an elected official persists in enacting evil laws, the people are responsible for voting him/her out of office. Although husbands are the head of their families, if a wife is told to join him in watching pornography or sign her name to a fraudulent income tax return, she must respectfully say No. In all relationships, look to the example of Jesus, who in the exercise of his being Lord served and sacrificed for those who followed him.

(3) They admonish you. This word could be translated, “warn” or “rebuke” or even “instruct.” It isn’t a word that justifies being mean and inflexible and overbearing. It simply means that Elders are to provide godly instruction and guidance and are to warn of impending danger that follows certain sinful or unwise actions.

Two Responsibilities all have toward their Leaders

So, then, what is the responsibility of the people in a local church? How are they to view their leaders? Paul mentions two things. **First**, they are to “respect” them. This is an interesting translation, as the word literally means to “know” or to “acknowledge.” Most think that here it means something like “to regard with favor.” In other words, we should all be thankful for those who labor as Elders among us and show them the respect that their office warrants.

Second, we are to “esteem them very highly in love” because of the work they perform for our good and our spiritual growth. The word translated “very highly” means “beyond all measure.” It doesn’t mean to “exalt” them or that you are to worship them but simply that we must hold them in high regard, and to do it lovingly, not begrudgingly or hesitantly or with our fingers crossed behind our backs. It is, then, in a spirit of “love,” not resentment or slavish obedience, that should govern our esteem.

It may seem strange that the translators include this final exhortation in v. 13 – “Be at peace among yourselves.” I think the word “yourselves” includes both Elders and the people they lead. There should be a warm and conciliatory and loving relationship between those who lead and those who are led. This isn’t something that only one group is responsible for. All are included. We should learn much from the fact that the relationship between people in the church and those who lead them is “peace.”

Nine Exhortations Intended for Everyone

Following Paul’s instructions on how Elders and members of a congregation are to relate to one another, he turns his attention to thirteen tasks that everyone is to undertake. Today, however, we will only look at the first nine of them.

First, **“admonish the idle”** (v. 14a). This word translated “admonish” is the same verb used in v. 12. Just as Elders are responsible to admonish everyone, so too everyone is responsible to admonish those who are “idle”. The word literally means “out of line” and carries a pejorative sense of being disruptive and “disorderly” with emphasis on their refusal to work or to fulfill the responsibilities assigned to them. Paul may also have in mind their disruption of the “peace” that he has just exhorted all of us to pursue. If any of you see a brother or sister neglecting their responsibility to work and to provide for their needs and those of their family, you must go to them and lovingly admonish them. Sometimes this can be done with gentleness. Sometimes it requires a much stronger exhortation.

Second, **“encourage the fainthearted”** (v. 14b). Perhaps a better translation would be to console or to comfort. We don’t know why they are “fainthearted” or “disheartened.” It may be that their expectation of the return of Christ has led them to lose hope. Or it may simply be that the constant opposition they experience from the surrounding non-Christian community has worn them down.

Notice the difference in how we interact with one another. You can’t afford to adopt one attitude and think it applies to everyone. For people who are idle and lazy and refuse to carry their own weight, admonish them. But for those who, through no fault of their own, are weak and fainthearted, speak words of consolation and encouragement. The word translated “fainthearted” is literally the “small-souled.” These are people who are discouraged and despondent and on the verge of quitting the Christian life altogether.

Third, **“help the weak”** (v. 14c). The “weak” are not the same as those who are fainthearted. Paul has in mind primarily those who are physically sick. Help them, primarily by praying for them. But we must also be quick to do for them those demanding tasks that they are unable to perform because of their physical condition of weakness.

Fourth, ***“be patient with them all”*** (v. 14d). This is especially important when those you admonish and encourage and try to help don't respond as quickly as you might wish. It's easy simply to dismiss such people as not worthy of your time and effort. They can truly be exasperating. But Paul's counsel is to persevere in your kindness and encouragement. The verb itself has the idea of “suffering long” or enduring the shortcomings of others.

Fifth, ***“see that no one repays evil for evil”*** (v. 15a). This is a consistent theme in the NT. In 1 Peter 3:9 the apostle says, “do not repay evil for evil or reviling for reviling, but on the contrary, bless [them].” Paul said much the same thing in Romans 12:17 – “Repay no one evil for evil, but give thought to do what is honorable in the sight of all.”

This is truly hard to do! When your best efforts to be kind and affirming and consoling and helpful to someone else prompt them to treat you with contempt and disdain, the natural instinct in all of us is to respond in kind. No. So, if we can't do what it takes to get even, what is our response? The answer comes in the second half of v. 15.

Sixth, ***“but always seek to do good to one another and to everyone”*** (v. 15b). If you are wondering what difference there is between “one another” and “everyone,” my guess is that “one another” refers to others in the body of Christ and “everyone” refers to those outside the local church body.

Seventh, ***“rejoice always”*** (v. 16a). Paul isn't calling on us to be masochists and to find pleasure in pain. Nor does he expect us to live in a constant state of emotional euphoria. “This is not a sugar-coated call for putting on a happy face in the midst of difficulties” (Fee, 214-15). Think back to 1:6 where Paul says the Thessalonians “received the word in much affliction, with the joy of the Holy Spirit.” In 2 Corinthians 6:10 Paul speaks of the believer “as sorrowful, yet always rejoicing.”

How is this possible? It only comes to the extent that we recognize several truths. **(1)** When we rejoice in the midst of adversity and pain, it draws attention to the all-sufficiency of Jesus. We find such satisfaction in him and all that he has done for us that no amount of discomfort or affliction can lead us to abandon him for the sake of finding comfort. People look at how we react under difficult and distressing circumstances and marvel at what our God must be like to warrant such faithfulness.

(2) To rejoice on all occasions is rooted in our belief in the truth of Romans 8:28. Do we really believe that God is at work in “all things,” even painful and distressing things, to increase our conformity to the image of Jesus? Do we really believe that this sort of response redounds to the glory of God? If we do, if we truly believe that God works all things together for our good, then we find the strength to rejoice when we might otherwise gripe and complain and abandon our faith. **(3)** This is similar to what Paul wrote in Romans 5:3 – “we rejoice in our sufferings, knowing that suffering produces endurance, and endurance produces character, and character produces hope” (see also James 1:2-4).

So, Paul is not telling us to treat pain as though it were pleasure, or to regard evil as if it were good. He is telling us to look through and beyond the adverse circumstances we face and see the hand of God in it all as he uses it to make us more and more like Jesus.

Eighth, ***“pray without ceasing”*** (v. 17).

Paul used almost identical language in Ephesians 6, “Continue steadfastly in prayer,” and in Colossians 4:2, “Pray without ceasing.” He didn't mean that we are to do nothing else but pray, but that we are to do nothing without praying. Prayer must be a constant, recurring experience.

I'm certain someone will push back against this, saying: “How can I pray without ceasing when I'm at work or with friends or watching my kids' soccer game?” But for prayer to be fervent and faithful it doesn't have to be lengthy and out loud. God delights to hear the prayerful sighs of our heart or the groans that erupt from deep within our souls. Short, pungent prayers thrust heavenward are as effective as extended, sustained periods of vocal prayer. You'd be surprised how powerful these direct, solitary, instantaneous utterances of the heart in the midst of a busy and nerve-wracking day can be.

Jesus understood all too well the temptation to quit, which is the primary reason why he told his disciples “a parable to the effect that they ought always to pray and not lose heart” (Luke 18:1).

"He said, 'In a certain city there was a judge who neither feared God nor respected man. And there was a widow in that city who kept coming to him and saying, "Give me justice against my adversary." For a while he refused, but afterward he said to himself, "Though I neither fear God nor respect man, yet because this widow keeps bothering me, I will give her justice, so that she will not beat me down by her continual coming"' (Luke 18:2-5)

As you can see, there are two people who play the principal roles in this parable, and they stand at opposite ends of the social, educational, and economic spectrum. Consider first of all this judge. Only two things are said of him: he did not fear God nor respect man. No, better still, this isn't what is said about him by others. This is his own personal confession! What a way to be remembered! He couldn't care less what God or other people thought about him. He doesn't deny this assessment of his character. He openly affirms it!

The judge in our story was a man utterly devoid of shame, a man whose conscience had become dull and insensitive, a man who lacked that sense of honor to which someone might appeal in the pursuit of justice. His heart was as hard as a rock. He was apparently incapable of recognizing the evil in his actions, and even if he did see the wickedness of his decisions, he couldn't have cared less. People could have stood outside his house (or courtroom) and shouted, "Shame! Shame!" and he would have remained unmoved. He has no sense of shame.

The reason why Jesus exposes this man's character is to highlight the improbability of anyone, least of all a helpless and dependent widow, ever receiving a fair and equitable hearing in his court. The odds against her getting anything remotely approximating justice are astronomical. She couldn't even appeal to him "for God's sake," as he was utterly indifferent to God and cared only for his own sake.

Let's not forget who this woman is. She is not a prominent figure in the community. The judge likely didn't even know her name or bother to ask her. Along with the orphan, the widow in Scripture is portrayed as representative of the innocent, powerless, and dependent. She is oppressed with no recourse other than the Lord. Her problem was not unlike that of many widows, then and now. Her legal rights were being violated. We hear almost every day on the news of yet another elderly woman or man being scammed out of their life savings by some unscrupulous con artist. They have no one to protect them or fight for their vindication. This widow in our story could not afford legal counsel. She was evidently without friends or relatives who might intercede on her behalf, or at least stand beside her as he made her plea. She was altogether alone.

Some think her request of him is that he execute punishment on her oppressor. Others insist that she was merely asking that she receive what was rightfully hers under the law. In either case, the judge was unmoved. He wasn't impressed with her as a person and didn't want to be bothered by someone so insignificant who was in no position to be of any benefit to him. He knew he couldn't profit monetarily from hearing her case. A few have even suggested that his refusal to vindicate her cause had been purchased by a bribe from her oppressor.

Whatever the cause for his resistance, Jesus informed us that "for a while he refused" (v. 4) to help her. He is even portrayed as conceding the accuracy of the judgment passed on his character. When you and I are accused of being evil and insensitive and cold-hearted, we tend to get defensive. "No, that's not me. I'm not indifferent to God and other people." But not this judge! His confession in v. 4 tells us that his character didn't change. He makes no bones of the fact that he is unashamed in his hard-heartedness. It almost seems as if he's proud of being shameless. His ultimate decision to give the widow what she asked was not the result of any transformation in him. It was her character, not his, that ultimately brought her vindication. Nowhere do we read that the judge responded to her by saying, "Oh, my. I've been such a jerk. I've been so calloused and uncaring. Shame on me. I repent." Her persistence didn't transform him. He's just as shameless at the end as he was at the start. This guy remained a jerk throughout the process!

The judge himself declared that he would acquiesce to her demands for only one reason: she kept "bothering" (v. 5) him and he feared that she would "beat" him "down by her continual coming" (v. 5). The word translated "beat down" conveys a sense of pugilistic violence (cf. 1 Cor. 9:27). It could even be translated, "blacken the eye." Now, I don't think the judge was afraid she might be provoked to attack him physically. And it certainly can't mean that he feared she would destroy his reputation. Remember that he cared nothing at all what others might think of him. It was her persistence that wore him down.

We now come to the point of the parable and its application to the practice of prayer. Jesus is reasoning from the lesser to the greater. The contrasts are shocking and constitute the message of the parable. The contrasting parallel is of an evil judge and a good and gracious God, on the one hand, and a strange, unknown, helpless widow and us,

God's chosen children, on the other. Many have missed the point of the parable by thinking that God is like the judge and we are like the widow. No! God is *not* like the judge and we are *not* like the widow.

Unlike the judge, God is good and gracious. *Unlike* the widow, we are God's beloved and adopted children. His point is that if a wicked and shameless judge grants the request of a helpless and hopeless widow, *how much more* shall a gracious and loving Father grant the requests of his precious and forgiven child! If she, through persistence, obtained from the judge what she desired, how much more shall we, through persistence, receive from God what we need.

The lesson of Luke 18 is simple and direct. We should persist in our prayers because God, unlike the judge, is good and gracious. If you are inclined to think that God is like the judge, you will mistakenly conclude that the quality of a prayer is dependent on the quantity of your words. Do you repeat a request because you think God is ignorant and needs to be informed, or if he's not ignorant he is at least unconcerned and needs to be aroused to give us an answer? Do you pray thinking that your words will prevail upon God and transform a hard-hearted God into a compassionate and generous one? Do you really think that God cannot see through the veil of our hypocrisy and will be swayed in his decision? The conclusion of Luke 18 is clear: we should persist in our prayers because God, unlike the judge, is good and gracious.

This story from Jesus was designed to be a massive encouragement to us all never to give up, never to quit or conclude that prayer is a waste of time and energy. I trust it will serve to bless and encourage you as well. When you draw near to the throne of grace, never think of God as a grouchy, selfish, uncaring bully who only answers our requests when they serve his interests. God is altogether other than that judge. He is in no way similar to him. And you and I are entirely different from the widow. We do not come to God alone, helpless, with no status in the eyes of the judge. We are the blood-bought children of our heavenly Father whose love for us is so giving and generous that he spared not his own Son but delivered him up for us all.

As you pray, envision in your mind's eye an abundant, effusive, incredibly generous God who smiles as he meets your deepest and most pressing needs. He may not always do so in the way you think is best. But whose wisdom and insight do you trust more? Yours or God's? Come to him, confident that he always answers us in accordance with what he knows is in our best, long-term interests. Come with the unshakable assurance that your Father looks on you with compassion and delight. Come again and again and again, persistent, yet humble; relentless, yet submissive; determined, yet resolved to take comfort in knowing that Father knows best!

Ninth, *"give thanks in all circumstances, for this is the will of God in Christ Jesus for you"* (v. 18).

First of all, don't misread this exhortation. Paul is not saying give thanks "for" all circumstances or "for" all things. But rather, "in" the midst of walking through hardship and disappointment, let your heart be filled with gratitude for what God can accomplish in you by means of such challenges.

What, precisely, is the "will of God" for us that Paul has in mind? Is it the "circumstances" or the "all things" that we experience, or is it God's will that we "give thanks" at all times? Or could it be that the word "this" refers back to rejoicing and praying without ceasing and giving thanks? Regardless of the answer, we know that there are some "circumstances" in which we find ourselves that simply cannot be the will of God. Sin is the first thing that comes to mind. Surely Paul doesn't mean that it is God's will for a Christian to live in sin, perhaps by committing adultery or constantly lying or stealing.

Conclusion

Every time I finish reading a paragraph like this with a long list of exhortations and responsibilities, my immediate reaction is to fall into despair and hopelessness, as I reflect on the weakness of my heart and the sluggishness of my will. It is then that the Spirit directs me once again to Hebrews 13:20-21. Apart from the truth of this passage none of us has any hope of abiding by the commands of the apostle.

"Now may the God of peace who brought again from the dead our Lord Jesus, the great shepherd of the sheep, by the blood of the eternal covenant, equip you with everything good that you may do his will, working in us that which is pleasing in his sight, through Jesus Christ, to whom be glory forever and ever. Amen"