

LIVING CHRISTIANLY

by Ray C. Stedman

I heard a man say, "The most important thing in learning to relate to others is personal honesty. Once you learn to fake that," he added, "everything else is easy!" Many people, unfortunately, seem to follow that philosophy. Perhaps one of the most discouraging aspects of modern-day living is not so much the moral collapse of leaders, such as we have seen many examples of recently, but the low level of ethical behavior on the part of many Christians.

I do not understand what has happened to the Christian community. Believers who go regularly to church, and profess to believe the Bible, often seem to go along with practices of the world around them with hardly any consciousness that what they are doing is unbiblical and really wrong. They lie without hesitation. They evade paying their bills. They cheat on their taxes. They ignore needy people. They fail to keep appointments. They freeload shamelessly. They lose their tempers. They grow critical and caustic. They desert their mates. If the Apostle Paul were here he would be very concerned about this. To him, the mark of true Christian faith is that it changes everything you do and say. It affects every area of your life. A Christian may no longer act as he did before he came to Christ. This is very clear in the letters of the apostle. Every letter that he wrote ends with pointed, practical applications to daily situations of the truth that he had set out.

The letter of First Thessalonians is no exception. The closing verses of Chapter 5, to which we now come, are wonderfully practical guidelines on how to live Christianly, in three areas of life. First, how to act toward the leaders of a church; we do not say much about this at Peninsula Bible Church, but it is part of the record of the New Testament. Then, how to live with other believers, whether at home, at work, or wherever. And finally, how to live toward God and respond to the situations where he puts you.

First, how to act toward the leadership of the church. We begin with Verse 12 of Chapter 5.

But we beseech you, brethren, to respect those who labor among you and are over you in the Lord and admonish you, and to esteem them very highly in love because of their work. Be at peace among yourselves. {1 Th 5:12-13 RSV}

I did not write that but I am certainly in favor of it! Paul intended that this word should govern the behavior of believers in the congregation at Thessalonica. A change needs to be made here, however. The English translators of the Scriptures were in a church that had a highly structured hierarchical leadership. Thus, many Scriptural references are translated in that direction. The phrase, "those who ... are over you in the Lord," is not a good translation. It reflects a relationship that Scripture everywhere speaks against. Jesus said to his disciples, "One is your Master, all you are brothers," {cf, Matt 23:8 KJV}. Christians are brothers. That is not practiced in very many places, unfortunately. What is really being said here in Thessalonica is, "respect those who labor among you and stand before you in the Lord." The apostle is referring to those who stand in front and lead the whole group. There is no suggestion of anyone being "over" others. Tradition has caused this proper translation to be lost sight of down through the years. It badly needs correction. What Paul is saying, therefore, is, "follow your leaders."

There are three things which church members must do with regard to their leaders:

First, they are to "respect" them. Again, this is not an accurate translation. The word really is, "know them." Recognize them. Be aware of them. Do not take them for granted. I know of churches where pastors are treated as hired servants; they are there to respond to the whims of the board of the church or the vote of the congregation. They are treated with little or no respect and at times are severely mistreated. That is a shame. Here the apostle is saying, "Get to know your leaders. Understand that they are people and do not ignore them."

Then, second, "esteem them very highly in love." Value them, in other words. Understand that though they may have their own personal idiosyncrasies that may be hard to handle on occasion (we all have those),

recognize that their work is important and they should be highly esteemed for that reason.

One of the ways in which the church through the centuries has tried to do this is by giving their leaders rather high-sounding titles. They often do not pay them much, but they give them a nice title, like *bishop*, *reverend*, or some other high-sounding word. But Paul is not talking about that. I have always appreciated the fact that during the 37-1/2 years that I have been here I have been called "Ray." Not Dr. Ray or even Brother Ray (I don't like that), but just Ray. I notice in the New Testament that the early church leaders, even these mighty apostles of our Lord, were all called by their first names. We find references such as "Paul answered, etc." They are not St. Peter or the Apostle John. There are references to "Peter and John." This was the way they were recognized. It is most appropriate that we call leaders by their real names and not try to glorify them by some high-sounding title.

To "esteem them very highly," is not only to regard leaders as valuable but also to express that esteem in a practical manner. This is why Paul wrote to Timothy, "If an elder rules well [actually leads well], he is worthy of double honor." The apostle meant that the leader should be paid twice as much salary! A double honorarium is the idea. I want to bear testimony to the fact that this church is an outstanding example in that regard. I have been here for 37 years and I have no complaints whatsoever about the way the congregation and the leadership of this church have treated me and my family. Our needs have been fully met. Every pastor of this church could say the same. You have been outstanding in this respect. I want to express a public word of gratitude for that.

Recently my wife and I have been engaged in fixing up our home (which was ready to fall apart following the seven years in which our three grandsons lived in it!). In early December a group of people moved in and before I knew it there were paint crews everywhere; people were laying new floors and new carpet, working on the fences, fixing up the yard, etc. It was marvelous! When my wife and I woke up this morning we thought the Millennium had arrived! What a wonderful way to be "esteemed highly in love."

Third, says the apostle, "Be at peace among yourselves." In context, that is related to his instructions on how to treat church leaders. It suggests a deliberate refusal to create factions over individual leaders of a church. Do not group around one person at the expense of others in leadership. Do not play favorites and attack others. In First Timothy, Paul admonishes that no one may bring an accusation against an elder except on the word of two or three witnesses. There has to be a careful, considered approach to that problem.

Paul gives three reasons for this care of leaders:

First, leaders are sent by the Lord. The apostle says, "We beseech you, brethren, to respect those who labor among you and lead you in the Lord." Leaders have been appointed by the Lord Jesus, regardless of the human process by which they were chosen. That does not mean that they cannot be changed or that in the course of events they will not go someplace else. What it means is that when they are in leadership they are to be regarded as the Lord's men and the Lord's women. He has sent them among us.

The second reason, is, "They admonish you." The word is literally, "to put in mind." They instruct and inspire you, reminding you of truth that is easily forgotten in these days.

The only voice that is speaking powerfully against the spirit of the age, the self-centered, self-sufficient, restless spirit of the Me generation, is the voice of the church. We need to be reminded continually of the danger in that kind of philosophy. This is done by the leadership who instruct, warn, and point out folly. They help us to keep our feet on the right path.

And third, says Paul, "they labor among you." They work hard. They spend hours toiling in difficult and sometimes demeaning work.

Contrary to what some people think, it is not true that pastors work only one day a week. The ministry is a very demanding job. I want to share with you a report that was made a couple of years ago by one of our pastors to the Board of Elders on what he had been doing in a year's time. As a pastoral staff we report to the elders every now and then on our ministries. I saved the report given by this pastor because it was so outstanding. The following are the problems that he recalled from memory that were representative of cases

that had been in his office or in his home over the previous twelve months:

There are all forms of anger, from long-standing resentment and unforgiveness, to rebellion, violence, child-beating, mutilating, wife torture, threats against life, murder for hire and Mafia-related revenge. There are the sexual offenses of rape, incest, sodomy, homosexuality, gang sex and swingers, bestiality, fornication, and the ever-present adultery. There are marital problems of every kind, attempted or contemplated suicide (and an occasional successful suicide), abortions and adoptions. I see many family problems between parents, or single parents, and children. There are also the addicts of every sort -- alcoholics, drugaholics, foodaholics, workaholics, sexaholics, spendaholics, etc. There are the institutionalized, either coming from or going to a prison, hospital, de-tox unit, mental facility. There is the psychotic to deal with or the quieter problems of legal, finances, career questions about a specific passage of Scripture or those simply wanting to know about PBC.

How would you like to run into that range of problems in a twelve-month period? That is why the apostle says we are to value our leaders and treat them with respect and love, for they work hard among us.

In the next section, Paul addresses our behavior toward one another in the body.

... we exhort you, brethren, admonish the idle, encourage the faint-hearted, help the weak, be patient with them all. See that none of you repays evil for evil, but always seek to do good to one another and to all. {1 Th 5:14-15 RSV}

How do you stack up on that list? Notice that this is not addressed merely to leaders. Every believer is to live like this in these days. The apostle points out, first, special behavior toward three distinct types of people: the idlers, the faint-hearted, and the weak.

"Warn the idlers," he says. The word is literally, "the disorderly," those out of step with the rest of the crowd. In Thessalonica, it meant those people whom he had referred to earlier who had quit working because they expected the Lord to come at any moment. These were living off the gifts of others, and were not willing to work and support themselves. "Admonish them," says the apostle. Tell them to mend their ways. Do not let them go on like that. He does not mean to do this in a mean-spirited way, but to point out to them that this kind of behavior is unacceptable.

Then, second, "encourage the faint-hearted"; literally the "small-souled" person, one who feels inadequate and ungifted. We would call them the introverts among us. "Help them find their place," says the apostle. This is addressed to everybody. People who feel out of it, who think they do not belong and cannot contribute anything, must be helped to find their place because they do have a place. In the wonderful picture of the body at work, in First Corinthians 12, the apostle says, "The ear cannot say, 'Because I am not an eye I am not part of the body.' No," says Paul, "even if it says that, it does not make it any less a part of the body," {cf, 1 Cor 12:16}. There are people who feel that way. They think, "I cannot do anything. I do not have any gifts." That is wrong thinking. God has equipped all his people with gifts. We are to help each other find our place, give them something to do and encourage them in the work that they are doing.

Then, finally, "Help the weak ones." This means especially those whom Romans 14 describes as being "weak in the faith" {Rom 14:1 KJV}; those who do not know very much about the doctrine of the Christian life, who have not learned the truth that sets them free and need extra help. Perhaps they are not sure of their salvation, or they feel guilty about the past and do not sense they have really been forgiven yet by God. Whatever it may be, the word is to help them, to hold them fast. That demands a little extra effort; a phone call perhaps, an invitation to lunch or a quiet talk about their needs. This is addressed to us all. We are all to watch out for one another like this.

Three special attitudes, Paul says, are required for this:

- First, "be patient with them all";
- Second, "see that none of you repays evil for evil"; and
- Third, "do good to one another and to all."

Patience is willingness to keep trying over and over again. Non-retaliation means that you do not strike

back and try to get even with someone who may have hurt you in the process of helping him or her. Helpfulness is a continual attempt to better a situation, to be part of the solution and not part of the problem.

In the last section of this chapter we find instructions on how to behave toward God. What is your attitude to be toward God?

First, in the circumstances where he puts you.

Rejoice always, pray constantly, give thanks in all circumstances; for this is the will of God in Christ Jesus for you. {1 Th 5:16-18 RSV}

First, be joyful: "Rejoice always." The word perhaps ought to be translated, "Be cheerful." Do not let things get you down. Society is filled with despair and gloom. I have had several phone calls this week from people who are at the end of themselves. The pressures under which we live today can do this. But a Christian has an inner resource. Therefore, we can obey the word of James, "Count it all joy, my brethren, when you encounter various trials and temptations," {cf, Jas 1:2}. Do not take it as an attack upon you. Do not moan and groan and say, "What have I done to deserve this sort of thing?" But rejoice, because it is good for you. Trials make you grow up, make you face yourself and learn things about yourself you did not know. That is what James goes on to say, "That you may be perfect and complete, lacking nothing," {Jas 1:4b RSV}.

At our Men's Retreat over the weekend Dr. Arthur Halliday told the story of his life. He is working with AIDS patients in this area and having a wonderful ministry doing so. He shared that as a young physician he thought the world was his oyster. He was cocky and self-confident; he thought he could do anything he wanted. Then things began to fall apart. His marriage failed; he lost his home. He had to put out hundreds of thousands of dollars and had nothing to show for it. As trial after trial hit, he began to realize that life was tougher than he imagined. He found he could not handle it. After two broken marriages he found a woman who knew the Lord, and she led him to a relationship with Christ. That is when he began to grow up. What a beautiful character he now displays as he labors so selflessly in this ministry of compassion and help to those who are victims of AIDS. It was the trials he went through that changed him.

That is why James says when trials come we should rejoice because God is going to teach us something that will be of great value in life. Many can testify to this.

Second, Paul says, be prayerful: "Pray constantly." That is the method of drawing on the inner strength that God provides.

My wife and I had dinner with a young pastor of a struggling church last week. He told us that one of the things that made life difficult for him last year was that all the literature he read on how to be a successful pastor said that he must have a support group of people to help him. I do not want to say anything against support groups; I believe in them. God has put us in a body, and we can profit greatly from a small group around us. But this man made the mistake of thinking that success was impossible without the support of a group, and he had no such group. He was unable to find anyone else who could help and pray with him. He and his wife were very discouraged. "What shall we do?" they asked.

We replied that a support group is not a necessity. God often removes the props from our lives in order to teach us that he himself is all we need. Have you been there yet? Have your props been taken away, and have you begun to learn that God himself can meet your needs? As you poured out your heart in prayer, sometimes in almost desperate prayer, you discovered that he had quiet ways of answering that taught you that he was El Shaddai, the God who is enough, the God who can meet your needs. When you discover that, then you have something to contribute to a support group that will be a help to others.

That is why Paul says, "Pray constantly." When you are under pressure and in trouble, be prayerful. Lean on that inner strength that God provides.

Then, third, be thankful: "give thanks in all circumstances; for this is the will of God in Christ Jesus for you." Why be thankful? Because when you are faced with a trial you are being given an opportunity to glorify God. If you never face trials or pressures, how could anyone ever see that you have an invisible

means of support, that you have a reliable source of strength that others do not know anything about? These are the opportunities that God gives us. So, be thankful.

When the early Christian leaders were arrested by the Sanhedrin, they were beaten for their faith, but they left the Council rejoicing that they had been counted worthy to bear suffering for His name's sake. That is a thoroughly Christian attitude, and that is how we ought to face our trials.

Notice how the apostle underlines this: "This is the will of God ... for you." The will of God is not to make some dramatic display of power or gift that is going to attract attention. It is the quiet response you make to the daily trials and circumstance in which you find yourself. Twice in this letter we have had this phrase, "This is the will of God." We had it first in 4:3, where Paul says, "This is the will of God for you, that you know how to preserve your own body in moral purity." That is the will of God for your body! But here is the will of God for your spirit, your inner life -- that you "give thanks in all circumstances." If you want to do the will of God there are the two areas in which his will is clearly set out for you:

- Moral purity for your body;
- Continual thanksgiving for your spirit.

The next section deals with how to react toward the guidance God gives you.

Do not quench the spirit, do not despise prophesying, but test everything; hold fast what is good, abstain from every form of evil. {1 Th 5:19-22 RSV}

Two simple things are here: Do not ignore the Spirit's prompting; and do not despise the Scripture's wisdom.

The Spirit's promptings always come in two areas:

- Stop doing what is wrong, and
- Start doing what is right.

If you are a Christian at all you are familiar with the inner feeling that says, "God wants you to do something," or "God wants you to stop doing something." We all have felt this inner guidance. What the apostle is saying is, "Give in to those feelings." When the Spirit prompts you to show love to somebody, do it; do not hold back.

I once heard of a man who said, "Sometimes when I think of how my wife works and blesses me, it's all I can do to keep from telling her that I love her!" There is a man being guided by the Spirit, but he is quenching the Spirit. Do not do that. Go ahead and tell her you love her. You may have to pick her off the floor afterward, but do not quench the Spirit!

Then, second, do not ignore the Scripture's wisdom: "Do not despise prophesying." Unfortunately, because of certain cultic tendencies in our day, we think of prophesying as some special power to predict the future either for ourselves individually or for the world at large. But prophesying was not that. Dr. F. F. Bruce, who is one of the great expositors of our day, says prophesying is "declaring the mind of God in the power of the Spirit." In those early days, before the New Testament was written, this was done orally; prophets spoke the mind of the Spirit in an assembly. But since the writing of the Scriptures we have very little need for any kind of prophesying other than that based upon the Scriptures. So prophesying really becomes what we call today expository preaching and teaching. It is what I am doing right now. It is opening the mind of God from the Word of God. Do not despise that, says the apostle. That is the wisdom of God. That is telling you how to act, how to think and how to order your life. Do not treat it lightly. It will save you countless headaches and heartaches if you observe it.

But, the apostle adds, "test it." It is easy to imitate this. Anyone can stand up and say in a deep tone of voice, "This is the word of the Lord." We must learn to test what is said from what has already been revealed. Paul commended the Bereans for this, saying they were more noble than those in Thessalonica because they "received the word with all readiness of heart and searched the Scriptures daily whether these things were so," {Acts 17:11}. Test it, is what Paul is saying. F. F. Bruce says there was a saying

attributed to Jesus that was often quoted by early Christian writers. It is not in the gospels, but it was a commonly attributed saying that urged, "become approved money-changers." The money-changers in the temple were occupied in changing various currencies and were constantly looking out for counterfeit coins. That is what Paul tells us to do about prophesying. People on every side are telling us what God wants us to do, but there is much that is counterfeit in that today. Become approved money-changers. Test what is said.

Then, third, with regard to the resources God provides, we have this wonderful closing verse:

May the God of peace himself sanctify you wholly; and may your spirit and soul and body be kept sound and blameless at the coming of our Lord Jesus Christ. He who calls you is faithful, and he will do it. {1 Th 5:23-24 RSV}

We hardly need to expound on that. Simply recognize that God is able to minister to the whole man -- spirit, soul and body. God can touch you in all those areas. Then you can rest on his faithfulness. He will do it! Choose to obey and he will give you power to perform; but he will not give you the power to perform until you make the choice to obey!

And always remember the end: it is "until the coming of our Lord Jesus." All through this letter this has been the great hope set before us. Jesus is coming again. God's kingdom will come on earth. There is only a limited time of testing to go through now. It cannot go on forever. One lifetime is very short. I often think of the motto that used to be prominent in many homes,

Only one life, 'twill soon be past,
Only what's done for Christ will last.

I would like to change one word in that: "Only what's done *by* Christ will last."

That is where the apostle leaves us, with the hope of the coming of our Lord, and the resources God has provided, so that we may live in a new and different way in the midst of this modern age.

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