

A LIVING COMMUNITY

SERIES: SEVEN CHARACTERISTICS OF A HEALTHY, GROWING CHURCH

By Danny Hall

The word “family” brings all kinds of things to mind. Some people have wonderful memories of family. For others it may be painful to even think about family. Some families are happy. Some families we would describe as dysfunctional; for whatever reason they can’t operate within relatively normal parameters, and people are wounded. The truth is that most of us are somewhere in between the extremes of very happy and dysfunctional, bouncing up and down the continuum at various points. But families are always challenging, because they are made up of people who have varied and often competing needs.

The church is often called a family. The analogy of a family is important for us to consider when we think about the church. Things don’t always work smoothly. Some people are very irregular. Yet when you are a family, there is a certain commitment to go forward, to work through the difficulties and make something of those relationships, to remain loyal.

We’ve been studying the book of 1 Thessalonians in a series I’ve entitled *Seven Characteristics of a Healthy, Growing Church*. We’ve looked at Paul’s relationship with these people, examining in particular the kinds of things that Paul commended them for and the things he commanded them to do. These have painted a picture of what made the Thessalonians a healthy, growing church that Paul loved dearly and was very excited about. In the final passage of the book Paul gives the Thessalonians a number of requests and commands. As we examine these closing verses we’ll consider what kind of family he is describing. Let’s read 1 Thessalonians 5:12-28:

But we request of you, brethren, that you appreciate those who diligently labor among you, and have charge over you in the Lord and give you instruction, and that you esteem them very highly in love because of their work. Live in peace with one another. We urge you, brethren, admonish the unruly, encourage the fainthearted, help the weak, be patient with everyone. See that no one repays another with evil for evil, but always seek after that which is good for one another and for all people. Rejoice always; pray without ceasing; in everything give thanks; for this is God's will for you in Christ Jesus. Do not quench the Spirit; do not despise prophetic utterances. But examine everything carefully; hold fast to that which is good; abstain from every form of evil.

Now may the God of peace Himself sanctify you entirely; and may your spirit and soul and body be preserved complete, without blame at the coming of our Lord Jesus Christ. Faithful is He who calls you, and He also will bring it to pass.

Brethren, pray for us.

Greet all the brethren with a holy kiss. I adjure you by the Lord to have this letter read to all the brethren.

The grace of our Lord Jesus Christ be with you.

In verses 12-22 there are two requests and fifteen commands. I call this section “Life in the Family.” I

want to give you some perspective on how to understand what Paul is laying out for them. Let's look at Paul's requests first.

Appreciating and esteeming leaders

He asks them to have respect for their leaders. Verses 12-13: "But we request of you, brethren, that you appreciate those who diligently labor among you, and have charge over you in the Lord and give you instruction, and that you esteem them very highly in love because of their work." As this community of faith grew, some stepped forward by God's call to be leaders, to give sacrificially to the body in order that the members might be taught, nurtured, and given direction from the Lord. Paul is saying to the Thessalonians, "You need to honor these people, and understand the sacrifice they're making in order for the church to grow up as the body of Christ, and for you as individuals to grow in your own spiritual journey."

We don't know what kind of structure that early church had, but if we try to apply this to our own church, perhaps it's obvious that the objects of such appreciation would be the elders and pastors. But it goes beyond that. We have deacons and Sunday school teachers and discipleship group leaders, and the list goes on and on. God has called some people into leadership and allowed them to build into other people's lives as mentors, instructors, and guides. We need to affirm that process in God's kingdom and honor those who are sacrificially giving in this way.

One of the joys of being involved in this congregation is that it is very encouraging toward its leadership. I have benefited greatly as I have been encouraged by so many people across my years here, especially in these last few weeks while I've been teaching. Many people have approached me and shared that they have been praying for me and that they have been encouraged by what has been going on here. Even this past week I received a lovely card from one of the families in our church. They had taken the time to go buy it, write a beautiful note in it, and put it in the mail to me. What a wonderful lift in the middle of my week to have someone from the congregation say, "We appreciate your teaching and the ministry that God has called you to here, and we are just delighted that you are a part of us." We have an incredible opportunity as the body of Christ to look around and thank each other for the input that we have in each other's lives.

Beginning in the latter part of verse 13 Paul starts this list of fifteen successive commands. The first seven have to do with commitment to each other's good in the family of God.

Being committed to one another's good

He begins, "Live in peace with one another." Right off the bat it gets pretty challenging. Peace is a harmony that results from authenticity of relationship. This command means to be committed to finding a place of real, deep relationship with one another. That requires honesty. Nothing leads to disunity and a lack of peace more than not being honest with each other and keeping relationships distant. There is probably no place on earth where we ought to be freer to be honest than in the family of God, yet, ironically, there is probably no place on earth where most people feel less free to be honest. We all know how to play the church game. I used to think of Sunday morning as game day. You put on your uniform. (In California uniforms are pretty laid back, but I grew up in a culture where uniforms were fairly well defined as a suit and tie.) You look the game. You get your game face on. You put on a façade that everything is going well. To varying degrees we break out of that, but isn't it sad that one of the places we are really afraid to be honest is in church?

Then Paul gives a series of admonitions that I love in verse 14: “We urge you, brethren, admonish the unruly, encourage the fainthearted, help the weak, be patient with everyone.” We have unruly people, fainthearted people, and weak people. Do you know what Paul is saying about the body of Christ? He’s saying we’re not perfect. At one time or another we probably all fit into one of those categories. God brings people in need of his saving and transforming grace into his family, and here we all are together. We all have things we’re growing in, and Paul is saying we have to deal with that. We can’t just shove it aside. So he gives some specific instructions.

The unruly we have to admonish. These people disrupt the fellowship, go off on a wrong tangent, and cause trouble. There is a place for people in leadership to admonish them, to confront them and draw them back into a life that is not unruly, but that fits into the pattern of following Christ.

We need to encourage the fainthearted. “Encourage” means to come alongside them and cheer them on. So many of us struggle and feel fainthearted in times of trouble, and what an encouragement it is for someone to walk alongside us and say, “I’m behind you. You can make it with God’s help!”

We need to help the weak. I love the word “help.” It comes from a root meaning to be loyal and committed. I’m like you, I’m sure; I have my moments when I think I probably do pretty well at helping people who are weak, but there many times when I just don’t want to be bothered. Some person comes to me, and perhaps it’s at a time when I’m struggling with something and I’m not really where I ought to be with the Lord, and one of my first thoughts will be that this person could really benefit from someone else’s help. (Sometimes that is the right thing, of course.) But to “help” the weak, to be committed and loyal to them, costs us something. Paul says this is part of being a family. People who aren’t superstars are not going to be left behind. We need to minister to them, draw them back into the fellowship, encourage them, and help them to walk closer to the Lord in their journey.

Finally Paul says, “Be patient with everyone.” We have to be patient because all of us are in process. None of us has arrived. We all have weaknesses and insecurities that we are dealing with. We all naturally want everyone else to grow quickly and we want everyone else to be patient with us while we grow slowly. But as we walk together as the family of God we have to allow God to work in each other’s lives, encourage that process, so that we all can indeed be transformed. It will take time and sacrifice and a great deal of patience.

Then Paul sums up in verse 15: “See that no one repays another with evil for evil, but always seek after that which is good for one another and for all people.” Paul understood that the natural fleshly inclination when we are wronged or we see a problem is to want to repay in kind. We want revenge. We want the scales of justice balanced. We talk about fairness. We get defensive and want our position to be acknowledged. But Paul is saying, “That must not be your objective.” That doesn’t mean that when there is injustice and wrong, we don’t seek to set things right. But our response needs to be led by the Spirit toward how this process can end up in good even for those who have hurt us, as well as everyone else. We need to see God work in each other’s lives, even when we are on the receiving end of pain, to ask God to give us a heart that says, “Lord, turn this around. Redeem this situation so that all experience good, so that you are able to transform the lives of all of the people in this process. It’s not about my winning or getting vengeance.”

The next eight commands have to do with the kind of people we have to be to live out life in the family of God. These commands all speak of our relationship with God. We are to be stable, growing people in our faith, which prepares us to be people who are contributing and living with one another properly in this family.

Growing in our relationship with God

Paul says first, “Rejoice always.” Don’t you hate verses like that? Okay, rejoice a lot, but can’t I whine sometime? No, Paul says, “Rejoice always—recognizing that God is at work.”

“Pray without ceasing.” This means to live in constant communion with God. It speaks of nurturing our fellowship with God, constantly saying, “God, show me your way. Teach me what you want me to know. I want to bless and honor and praise you.” It means living in fellowship with God that permeates every area of our lives.

“In everything give thanks, for this is God’s will for you in Christ Jesus.” Giving thanks in everything means believing in God’s goodness and love even when life is unfair or difficult or painful, as well as at the heights of great joy and blessing. We can give thanks for everything because we know God is at work in us and is committed to our good, just as he calls us to be committed to everyone else’s good.

When you put all that together, you have a disposition that says, “Lord, show me what you’re doing in my life. Help me to see the joy in all of life, even the hard things.” This is about believing in a sovereign God who loves us enough to die for us, who is also going to take the things that come up in our lives and continue the process of transforming us into the image of Christ.

Paul goes on to say, “Do not quench the Spirit.” God’s Spirit is seeking to work in us in all these circumstances. We can quench his Spirit through disobedience, whining, bad attitudes, failure to listen to him, or failure to seek him. But we must instead allow God to work, to teach us and transform us. What a wonderful gift that God’s Spirit lives within us, because that means God’s very presence never leaves us. He invites us to hear his voice and walk with him, to trust him day by day that he is working out his will for us.

Paul then says, “Do not despise prophetic utterances.” This is not so much about the spiritual gift of prophecy. But some will be called to speak the truth—perhaps a pastor or teacher up in front, or a Bible study leader, or we ourselves, one on one with each other. In the body of Christ we are called under the leading of the Holy Spirit to speak truth to one another. Paul is saying, “As people speak truth into your life, don’t despise that. Listen to it.”

But he follows that up with the admonition, “Examine everything carefully.” We are not to accept everything people say without thinking about it. He says to examine what is said carefully. Ask God, “Is this your voice, Lord? Show me the truth in what is being said to me. Let your Spirit guide me to understand it.”

I experienced this lesson early on. There was a man who felt he was called by God to straighten out everything that was wrong in my life. He was almost incessant in criticizing every move I made. After one particularly exasperating session with him, I had just about had enough, and was ready to tell him to just go jump in the lake. But as I walked out I felt God speaking to me. He gave me a new perspective. I was able to say, “Lord, here is my heart. It just seems this guy is out of line, he’s saying wrong things to me, and he’s certainly doing it in the wrong way. But is there some truth in what he says that I need to hear? Don’t let me miss your truth because I’m angry about the way he’s doing this.”

One of the things we can do when we hear truth is dismiss it because we object to the source. “Oh, that pastor doesn’t know what he’s talking about.” We find some miniscule doctrinal error and write him off as an invalid voice. Or some person will speak into our life, but we’ll say, “Well, their life isn’t all together. They certainly did that the wrong way. Therefore I don’t have to listen to them.” We miss a lot of what God wants for us when that’s our disposition. So we need to ask God to speak truth into our

lives and help us to discern it. We need to examine it carefully, but hear the truth. God can use that commitment to grow us up.

Finally Paul says, “Hold fast to that which is good; abstain from every form of evil.” This is the same idea. We need to ask God to show us what is good, to teach us.

Now Paul changes course. He prays a beautiful wish and encouragement for them, which I think becomes foundational for this whole process of being built up into a strong body of Christ.

God’s work of grace in our lives

Verse 23: “Now may the God of peace Himself sanctify you entirely; and may your spirit and soul and body be preserved complete, without blame at the coming of our Lord Jesus Christ.” Paul’s wish is for God to complete the process as he promised, to conform them to the image of Christ, to present them blameless when he comes again. Paul is saying, “I pray that God will just keep building you up.” The word “entirely” and the word “complete” are from the same root, meaning wholeness. The idea is to be a whole person. Paul’s prayer for them is, “May God, who is committed to you, continue to make you whole people, so that every part of you—body, soul, and spirit—is transformed into the likeness of Christ, so that you will be able to one day stand before Christ and worship him and praise him forever as you live with him.”

In verse 24 is the wonderful promise, “Faithful is He who calls you, and He also will bring it to pass.” Everything God calls you to be and to do, he promises that he will accomplish in you. It’s all the work of his grace. This is not a call for you to get out your to-do list and make sure you’re doing all your spiritual things. It’s a call to trust God’s work in your life and in other’s lives. He is forming us into the image of Christ, preparing us for an eternal life in his presence. So Paul says, “Just enter into that. Believe that the One who has called you to that end is going to do it.” What a faithful and wonderful God he is, and what an incredible promise that is! God supplies us with all that we need to grow and obey.

You see, living in the family of God is an act of faith, of believing that this is God’s way and that we can do this in him. It is an act of faith for us day by day to follow him and honor him and be conformed to his image, to live in the light of his glory. In the family of faith we contribute to each other’s lives, minister together, encourage each other, and learn from each other. So at the end of this beautiful picture of this church, Paul says, “Trust God. Walk in his way. Believe that his way is right, and you will find the fulfillment that God intended for you.”

Paul closes this wonderful letter with some words of personal greeting. Again we see his heart for them. “Brethren, pray for us. Greet all the brethren with a holy kiss. I adjure you by the Lord to have this letter read to all the brethren. The grace of our Lord Jesus Christ be with you.” Once again we are reminded just from these words how much he loved these people, how much he admired what God was doing in their lives. Paul comes to the end with the passion that God would continue his work in their lives.

We’ve been building a list of seven characteristics of a healthy, growing church. Obviously, these aren’t the only characteristics, but they are a good summary from this church in Thessalonica. Let’s review them:

1. We will have a vital connection to the living God.
2. We will have a deep reliance on the word of God.
3. We will persevere in the face of all obstacles as God matures us.
4. We will have an ever-deepening obedience to the Lord Jesus Christ.

5. We will live in the liberating hope of the Lord's return.
6. We will be alert to the times and seasons and authentically engage this world for the glory of Christ our Lord.

Now we see the final characteristic:

7. We will be a vital community where all participate and all are cared for.

Think about this in the Thessalonians' experience. This church was so in love with Jesus that people all around the neighboring countryside were hearing about what God was doing. They were committed to hearing and obeying God's word, and they were doing it in the midst of persecution and trial. And all through that persecution and trial God was maturing them and growing them up. They were already following Christ, loving him, obeying him, and Paul commends them for it and says, "Keep on going. Press on to learn more of what it means to walk in fellowship with Christ and to serve and obey him." And they did so, knowing that it was worth it to persevere in the midst of this, to continue to walk ever closer to Christ, because one day their Lord and Savior was coming again. That liberating hope that he was coming again and would set all things right and that they would live forever in his presence, meant that they could get up each day and live it to his glory. Not only that, but they could walk out into their world and engage it, as harsh and hostile as it might be, for the glory of Christ, and spread the gospel of Christ as they waited for his return. And finally, they did that not alone but as members of God's family, who were called together to be that witness.

That's the picture Paul paints of this church. It serves as a wonderful model for us. We can be like that, too, and continue to grow in that. That's the kind of people God calls us to be as we walk together to serve him.

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