

## 1 Thessalonians 5: 12-28

Well now just think – if you can think beyond Christmas just for a moment – just think – in 11 days time it'll be 2004. Four years already since the millennium began. And do you remember all that excitement at the millennium - it seemed such a significant date.

- There were crack pots predicting the end of the world.
- There were merchants of doom telling us the millennium bug was going to destroy all our computers.
- And there was a bloke called Scott Armstead who combined the both of them.

He's was computer programmer and he prophesied and predicted that the world would end at the stroke of midnight on the 31<sup>st</sup> December 1999 - due to the millennium bug. In fact so convinced was he that the end of the world was imminent that he took a chain-link fence and put it round his mobile house, he laid up a year's supply of non-perishable food and he bought his first ever shotgun to repel the expected looters. And he said this: I'm still not 100% certain that the world is coming to an end, but it's enough to make me want to prepare. Well he was wrong.

But as Christians - especially as Christians who've just been studying 1 Thessalonians - we are certain of the end of the world.

Of course we're not certain of the date of the end of the world – just glance back at v1 of chapter 5

<sup>1</sup> Now, brothers, about times and dates we do not need to write to you, <sup>2</sup> for you know very well that the day of the Lord will come like a thief in the night.

So we're not certain of the date – we don't know when it'll be. But we are certain that the end of the world is coming. Or as v4 puts it:

<sup>4</sup> But you, brothers, are not in darkness so that this day should surprise you like a thief.

Now that bloke Scott Armstead wasn't even 100% sure that the end of the world was coming – but he made dead sure *he* wouldn't be taken by surprise.

And Paul wants us to be sure that we won't be taken by surprise when the world does end – when Jesus does return.

- We don't know the date
- But we do know it's coming

So how should we prepare? What do you have to do if you're someone who knows that Jesus will return? Because that's what you are if you're a Christian.

Well just turn back with me to Chapter 1 and verses 9 and 10. Paul's saying news has spread about the Thessalonians faith, people have heard what happened when Paul preached the gospel in Thessalonica and so Ch 1 v9 –

*they themselves report what kind of reception you gave us. They tell how you turned to God from idols to serve the living and true God and to wait for his Son from heaven, whom he raised from the dead -- Jesus, who rescues us from the coming wrath.*

So there you are – if you know Jesus is coming back you should wait for him.

But here's the question – how should we wait? Because while your waiting you can waste your time. Or while you're waiting you can do something useful. While you're waiting for a bus you can stare at your trainers, or while your waiting you can read a book. While you're waiting for mum to come home you can watch Neighbours – for the second time that day – or you can do the washing up. But while you're waiting for Jesus – what should you do? What would be a waste of time? What would be a good use of time?

Well the very end of last time's passage tells us the answer. Chapter 5. It's three weeks since we looked at it – it was all about Jesus' return. He is coming back – we don't know when but he is – therefore v11 - *encourage one another and build each other up, just as in fact you are doing.*

So there's the answer. That's what we should be doing while we wait for Jesus: encouraging one another and building one another up. Because if we do that to each other well then when Jesus returns we'll still be waiting for him, we'll still be Christians, we won't have given up, we'll be ready to welcome him – because we'll have been encouraging one another and building each other up.

And it seems to me that verses 12 to 28 of chapter 5 are mostly about that – about encouraging one another and building one another up – they tell us what to do and how to do it.

And you'll be relieved to hear that unlike Scott Armstead there's no need to dig a bunker and lay up a year's supplies. No our preparation is very different and very practical - it's all about the nitty gritty of our relationships.

Which isn't that surprising really since while wait for Jesus, we're waiting together - we're a church family. Do you see that's how the passage begins, v12 - he says **we ask you, brothers**. And it's also how the passage ends - **Greet all the brothers with a holy kiss**. So the question is, as brothers and sisters in a warm and loving Christian family - how should we encourage and build each other up, while we wait for Jesus to return?

And I've divided the passage into 4 parts -

- Respecting leaders
- Relating to each other
- Responding to the Holy Spirit
- And Relying on God.

So first then:

### ***1. Respecting Leaders vv12-13***

Paul tells them that they are to respect their leaders, and even hold them in high regard. <sup>12</sup>**Now we ask you, brothers**, he says in v12, **to respect those who work hard among you, who are over you in the Lord and who admonish you.** <sup>13</sup>**Hold them in the highest regard in love because of their work.**

And I think Paul's words apply to anyone who is a leader at whatever level in our church. In other words anyone who fits the description in v12. There are 3 things there that Paul tells us about Christian leaders.

He says first of all that they are to be **hard working**.

Paul often says that about Christian work. It's a surprising phrase because the word refers to hard back breaking physical labour. But it's right: it

really is hard - it's hard work for example in a busy life to prepare a Centrepoint session - to struggle away at a Bible passage so that you can understand it yourself, and then to struggle away again so that you can explain it clearly - and then sometimes the work seems even harder when no one seems to take a blind bit of notice.

So Paul was clear in his mind, and we ought to be clear in ours too, that when we sign up to be a leader in a small group, at contact, or on a summer camp, or wherever - we're signing up for hard work. Or at least we ought to be.

Well - they work hard among you, but then second - still in v12 - they are **over you in the Lord.**

And to be over someone means to direct or rule them. But of course not like a dictator, rather the phrase is used elsewhere <sup>(1 Tim 3:5)</sup> in the context of family life - the father of a family is over his household - in other words it's a phrase which conjures up the idea of firm and loving care, of protection - someone who takes responsibility for you - someone who is over you in the Lord.

And then 3<sup>rd</sup> - the Christian leader is someone who **admonishes** us.

In other words someone who we ought to expect to confront us with what is wrong in our lives - someone who will teach us and warn us from God's word. And so we shouldn't be surprised if they do that. In fact if they don't - then they're not doing their job properly.

So that's Paul's brief description of a leader. But the thing he really wants us to think about is this - how should we relate to our leaders?

Well he says, we're to respect them. The Christian leader has a very responsible job - he's been entrusted with the care of God's sheep. As James says in his letter - **not many of you should presume to be teachers my brothers, because you know that we who teach will be judged more strictly.** Our Christian leaders have that kind of responsibility, that kind of accountability, and so it's appropriate that we respect them.

And not just respect, but look at v13: **Hold them in the highest regard in love...** Actually that translation is a bit weak - Paul's language is very strong here - it actually means esteem them super-highly-abundantly! It's strong language, but we need to notice that Paul's not talking about personal honour. It's not because of their own lives, or because of their

personalities; it's not because of their abilities or their sense of humour that we're to esteem them highly. But it's because of their work, v13. In God's view the work of teaching and preaching the Bible is of paramount importance - it is the way that the kingdom of God grows. In fact it's one of the key ways in which v11 takes place – as those who are over us in the lord teach and admonish the Bible – well then the rest of us will be encouraged and built up. And Paul is calling us to recognise the importance of that work among us, by highly esteeming those who do it.

So Christian leaders - don't miss the point here: it's not a personal thing about you – about us. It is the work you do which is so important. And the rest of us need to understand it too: because it would be very easy to have no respect for a leader on personal grounds - perhaps because we don't like their style or maybe our personalities clash. But those kinds of things are irrelevant - we're to **hold our leaders in the highest regard in love because...of their work.**

And if leaders and - for want of a better word - followers - if leaders and followers misunderstand this, then there'll be a breakdown in peace in the congregation. Leaders will become little dictators, doing their jobs in order to boost their own egos. And followers will become rebels - unable to support or encourage the leaders they don't get along with. But instead Paul says to us – v13 **Live in peace with each other.**

And again remember how this section begins and ends.

V12 – now we ask you brothers...

V26 – greet all the brothers with a holy kiss...

A church family, including it's leaders, is a family of brothers and sisters. And generally speaking *the world* will never care for it's leaders - it makes demands of them and expects them to be concerned for us. But in the Christian *family* it's a two way thing - **hold them in the highest regard in love.** Pray for them, look out for them, encourage them as they imperfectly do their work - their hard work of faithfully overseeing us and correcting us.

So respecting leaders, and then 2<sup>nd</sup>

## **2. Relating to each other, v14-15**

This passage has a number of wonderful balances in it and one of them is this - he's just told us that it's the leader's job to admonish us, and now

he tells us that actually it's not just the leader's job - all of us are to do it to each other, v14 **we urge you, brothers, warn those who are idle, encourage the timid, help the weak, be patient with everyone.**

We're all responsible for each other.

We're to warn the idle. That is those of us perhaps who lack discipline. Idle means slackness or laziness or shoddiness. And if that's the case then what we need is someone to tell us to get our act together.

And then we're also to encourage each other - especially the timid, or literally the small spirited - those of us who easily despair. Because any Christian family is likely to have a Sad Samuel, or a Gloomy Gavin, a Melancholy Melvin, or an Anxious Archibald. And we need to look out for these brothers and sisters and encourage them, encourage each other.

And then again Paul goes on and says we're to help the weak. Probably he means the particularly weak willed who find it hard to be disciplined in godliness. Of course we're not to let people develop an unhealthy dependence on us, but we are to be available to offer strength and support.

So the idle, the timid and the weak. And the bottom line is that all of us find it difficult to get on with certain people in the congregation, in our homegroup or in contact. All relationships are tricky some of the time, and so Paul says - well...be patient with everybody - because we're not going to change over night. And what will that patience involve? What should we do with somebody who drives us crazy? v15 **Make sure that nobody pays back wrong for wrong, but always try to be kind to each other and to everyone else.** In other words drop any idea of revenge, and pursue their good - there's nothing like praying for someone, for example, who you find a bit difficult.

It's a really proactive attitude to church, isn't it? Paul's asking us to stop merely being passengers at church, and to start being partners - to think about our friends and to have spiritual goals for them. In other words when we come to church we've got chapter 5 v11 in mind - why are we here? We're here to encourage one another and build each other up. You see I'm not to come to church to see who's going to speak to **me** this Sunday - I'm to come to speak to others, and not about myself, but about them.

So I wonder if we've come here to do that this evening? I wonder if you've looked around and wondered whether there's anyone here who you could help or encourage. And that's what we mean by Christian

fellowship. It's about helping each other to go on believing in God for one more week. And I for one definitely need your help to do that, and you probably need mine. And that's what our meetings like this are all about, encouraging each other as we wait Jesus.

Respecting our leaders, relating to each other, and then 3rd

### **3. Responding to the Holy Spirit, 16-22**

Now as I think about those verses we've just studied, to tell the truth my heart sinks a bit. Because I wonder how on earth I'll do it. And the answer is that we need to be in fellowship with Christ through his Spirit. And so at the heart of this little section, verses 16-22, right in the middle there there's that command v19 **Do not put out the Spirit's fire;** And in fact as you look through this passage it's no surprise to see how many fruits of the Spirit Paul mentions.

- In v13 there's love
- Joy comes in 16
- Peace - v13 again
- Patience - v14
- And then Kindness in v15

There's five fruit of the Spirit from Galatians chapter 5. And the point is that our relationships in church are spiritual relationships. We're Christians – we live life with the Holy Spirit. So don't be a wet blanket says Paul - don't put out the Spirit's fire, don't quench the Spirit. To live like this, with this kind of love and joy and patience and kindness – to live like this you'll need to be in fellowship with Jesus through his Spirit.

So v16 be joyful - always. Because whatever is happening to us we are always forgiven, we are always accepted by God because of Jesus. Our greatest problem has been solved - and so there's always a reason to rejoice.

And then v17 pray continually - to live like this we're going to need Christ's help - we're going to need him to cultivate the Spirit's fruit among us.

And whatever happens we ought always to keep our focus on God and give thanks in all circumstances. Not giving thanks necessarily for all circumstances, but in all circumstances. Because thankfulness keeps our church's eyes on Jesus - something we'll need to be doing if we're to relate to each other in the ways Paul has described.

Now it would be very easy to rip these verses out of their context. It's the sort of thing that you often see sown into those little samplers which hang on our walls home. Always rejoice, always pray, always give thanks. And put like that I imagine that these verses could easily lead to dishonest smiles or to desperate guilt.

So I think it's helpful to us to remember the context - they're not just unattainable high minded ideals - we need them as we wait together – Joy and prayer and thankfulness will stop us despairing of each other by keeping our focus on Jesus, and the work of his Spirit among us.

Which brings us back to v19 again: <sup>19</sup> **Do not put out the Spirit's fire;** <sup>20</sup> **do not treat prophecies with contempt.** Now the word prophecy in the Bible can refer to a number of things - and it's a little bit hard to pin down exactly what the nature of this gift of prophecy was. Listen to these words of John Stott as he has a stab at it. He says -

Once the uniqueness of the Biblical prophets (and apostles) has been conceded, we should be ready to add that there are today secondary and subsidiary kinds of prophetic gifts and ministry. For God undoubtedly gives to some a remarkable degree of insight either into Scripture itself and its meaning, or into its application to the contemporary world, or into his particular will for particular people in particular situations. It seems quite legitimate to call this insight 'prophetic' insight and this gift a 'prophetic' gift.

So my hunch is that that kind of prophecy regularly goes on among us here at St Nick's, but we just don't call it that. You know how sometimes someone will say something to you and it's as if the words have wings - they really strike home to you. For example, perhaps at smallgroup one week someone suggests an application from the Bible which is really relevant to you - some insight or suggestion which is really helpful. Don't put out the Spirit's fire, says Paul, and so it's vital in the context of Christian fellowship that we take those things on board.

Of course we're not to be unthinking - Paul says in v21 test everything. And I'd suggest we could do that in two ways - by the scriptures - does it fit in with what the Bible says. And also by whether it edifies people - in other words whether it produces godliness and Christlikeness.

And incidentally that's exactly what all of us should be doing as we listen to sermons - to be thinking to ourselves - has he got this right? Is this what the passage is saying? Is it building me up, is it helping me to be godly?

And when we've considered those things Paul says well then, v21 - hold on to the good. Not the fascinating, not the new, not the interesting or the things which tickle my ears. Not the humorous, not the brilliant communication, but hold on to the good. Avoid every kind of evil - anything which leads us into ungodliness, anything which isn't scriptural - bin it. But from any suggestion or comment or sermon - take what is good. Grip it. Grasp it. Hold on to it - and do it. Don't put out the Spirit's fire.

So there we are - three areas in which we're to be actively waiting together for the return of the Lord Jesus:

- Respecting leaders in love
- Relating to each other with care
- And responding to the Spirit with joy, prayer, thanksgiving and discernment.

And if we're doing those things well then we'll be well on the way to living out v11 - we'll be encouraging one another and building one another up.

But as I said, if you're anything like me, then you'll find a passage like that rather overwhelming. Paul has dished out 17 commands in only 11 verses. There's just so much to do. So it's vital that we see how Paul ends his letter - final point:

#### **4. He relies on God**

Verse 23: <sup>23</sup> **May God himself, the God of peace, sanctify you through and through. May your whole spirit, soul and body be kept blameless at the coming of our Lord Jesus Christ.** And then again in v28: <sup>28</sup> **The grace of our Lord Jesus Christ be with you. (NIV)**

The letter began with grace in ch1 v1 - and it ends with grace - just like the whole Christian life. Because do you see it's not possible to do v11 in our strength, it's not possible to do verses 12-22 without God. We can't do it. So Paul prays **May God himself, the God of peace, sanctify you through and through. May your whole spirit, soul and body be kept blameless at the coming of our Lord Jesus Christ.** The passage is wonderfully balanced isn't it? Because if we're feeling discouraged by 11 verses of hard work, then we ought to be encouraged by v 24 - which says that ultimately it's God's work <sup>24</sup> **The one who calls you is faithful and he will do it.**

I don't know if you've ever read Pilgrim's Progress by John Bunyan, but there's a bit in it where the Pilgrim is shown the scene of a fire burning against a wall. And someone is throwing - just chucking - buckets of water on to the fire. And rather than the fire going out, the flames burn even higher and brighter.

And it's explained to the pilgrim that this fire represents God's work in our hearts - which the devil is constantly trying to put out and quench by discouraging us and drawing us into sin.

But then the Pilgrim is taken around to the other side of the fire and now he can see why the fire never goes out - because there's a man there secretly pouring oil onto it - to keep it burning. And it's explained to him again that this man is Christ, who is continually pouring his oil of grace onto the work which he's begun in our hearts. No matter what the devil might do, no matter how hard we might find the Christian life - Paul is confident that God will keep us until Jesus returns. And it's on that note that he closes his letter **The grace of our Lord Jesus Christ be with you.**

Now I've just put down a few questions at the end of the sermon notes there...

Pray...