

The Right Attitude

Mark Heath, 29 Aug 2003

¹²Now we ask you, brothers, to respect those who work hard among you, who are over you in the Lord and who admonish you. ¹³Hold them in the highest regard in love because of their work. Live in peace with each other.

¹⁴And we urge you, brothers, warn those who are idle, encourage the timid, help the weak, be patient with everyone. ¹⁵Make sure that nobody pays back wrong for wrong, but always try to be kind to each other and to everyone else.

¹⁶Be joyful always; ¹⁷pray continually; ¹⁸give thanks in all circumstances, for this is God's will for you in Christ Jesus.

¹⁹Do not put out the Spirit's fire; ²⁰do not treat prophecies with contempt. ²¹Test everything. Hold on to the good. ²²Avoid every kind of evil."

1 Thess 5:12-22 (NIV)

Paul concludes his letter to the Thessalonians with this short section of exhortations. He barely spares any time to elaborate on each point, but fires them out. They are 'quick reminders' to the Thessalonians of things that they have heard many times before, and would surely agree with. So why does Paul feel the need to repeat them? Because they are exactly the type of things we are likely to forget. They essentially deal with our attitudes, and it is all too easy for us to slip into bad attitudes.

1. Our Attitude to Leaders (v12,13)

In verse 12 we are asked to respect those in leadership positions. Paul gives us three good reasons for doing this. First of all they are *hard working*. It should be apparent to all that people who work hard at their job deserve respect for that. Many in full time Christian work put in a huge amount of time, have to deal with many pressures and earn a much smaller salary than they could get in secular employment. Their humility also means that they do not seek to show off how hard they are working, and yet it deserves recognition and acknowledgement.

Secondly, they are over us *in the Lord*. It is not a self-awarded position of authority. They are specially chosen and anointed by God for the task to which they are called. We must remember that the Scriptures are full of examples of God choosing unlikely people and raising them up to fulfill His purposes. He delights to display His glory by putting treasure in jars of clay. So we should not arrogantly decide that we will only respect those who we feel are "cut out" for leadership, but acknowledge that God has chosen to use these people. Refusal to respect them is therefore disrespectful to God as they have delegated authority from Him.

Thirdly, they *admonish* us. This word carries the sense of warning and advising, and even rebuke. Paul is saying that those in leadership have been given the task of warning us against sin. This is a difficult task for them to take on as correction, no matter how gentle, can often be received negatively. Yet God has given them this role and we should respect them for fulfilling this calling. More generally it teaches us that we should view them as having "something to teach us" and as being able to set a worthy example to follow. It may be that in some areas we hold differing opinions to them, or even have more theological knowledge, but nevertheless, we respect the role that God has given them.

In verse 13, Paul elaborates and takes it further. Not only are we to respect them "because of their work", but we are to hold them in the "highest regard in love". There should not be a distance between a congregation and its leadership, but a genuine sense of family. The leaders are to be loved, cared for, even sometimes forgiven and put up with, because they are members of the body of Christ just like the rest of us. They have feelings too and are regularly the objects of grumbling and complaining both to their faces and behind their backs. So we especially need to remind ourselves to love our leaders.

This verse is also warning against a superior attitude to leaders. Their high profile means that not only their hard work is visible for all to see, but also their faults and failures. They are an easy target for criticism. This can take an insidious form where we belittle them in our thoughts and speech. We caricature them as well-meaning but incompetent. Ten out of ten for effort, but if we were doing it, it would have been done much better. We would have done it the right way. But the New Testament warns us repeatedly against this proud attitude. Philippians 2:3 teaches that we ought to consider others better than ourselves.

Finally, the phrase "live in peace with each other" seems to be slightly out of place. Is Paul still on the subject of leadership or has he moved on already? Of course it is applicable to all members of the church, but I think that here Paul is particularly concerned with tensions that arise because of church member's bad attitudes to their leaders. It may well be that you have differences of opinion, and wish that some things were done differently, but there is no excuse for a hostile attitude. This often leads to gossip and slander and can even cause division in the church.

So let us each take time to consider our attitude to those who God has placed over us or with us in leadership. Is our attitude characterised by respect and love? Do we speak highly of them to each other, or do we criticise? We should all be working to build the church, but a wrong attitude to leadership will inevitably tend to tear it down.

2. Our Attitude to One Another (v14,15)

Now hopefully, all of us have a good attitude to those placed in leadership positions in the church. But this does not mean that we will always find it easy to get on with everyone else in the church. In verse 14, Paul specifies what our attitude should be to three distinct groups of people within the church that we may come into contact with.

First of all there are some who are *idle*. 2 Thessalonians 3 has more to say on the subject of being idle. Idle people are not necessarily lazy in the sense that they don't do anything. In fact they are often "busybodies" keeping themselves occupied with unproductive and even destructive activities such as gossip. They are idle in the sense that they are not doing the things that really matter. They are not working with their brothers and sisters Christ to see the kingdom of God come. Paul says that idle people need to be *warned*. What they are doing is damaging both themselves and the church. If they respond positively to the warning, and put their energies into serving God, then this will result in great blessing for the church. Of course, it goes without saying that we need to be aware that most people are not very receptive to receiving rebukes, so this has to be done with as much gentleness as possible.

Second, there are some who are *timid*. These people would genuinely love to be doing more than they are doing for God, but are held back by fear. They feel perhaps that they are not gifted enough, or not worthy enough, or that others are so much better than them that they couldn't possibly contribute. The correct response to these people, says Paul, is to *encourage* them. We need to get alongside people who we know have gifting but are timid and suggest to them ways in which they can begin to use their gifts to build the church. And once they have made a first step, then more encouragement is needed to let them know that what they did was appreciated. One wonders just how many unused gifts there are in the body of Christ because we fail to encourage the timid.

Third, there are some who are *weak*. Not everybody has the same measure of faith or gifting. Some Christians may be struggling with many pressures and difficulties that leave them in a state where they are simply trying to survive spiritually. This shows us that we need discernment. Don't jump to the conclusion that a person is idle, or timid without also bearing in mind the possibility that they may just be spiritually weak. We need to discern what the true cause of a person's lack of full participation in the body of Christ is, and deal appropriately. After all if we rebuke the timid we will make them even more so, and if we rebuke the weak we could end up crushing them altogether. The correct response to a weak person is simply to *help* them. They will need patient and practical help to slowly deal with the situations they are in. In due course, these people will themselves begin to be able to minister to others who are weak, and will have the benefit of being

able to understand and sympathise in ways that the "strong" can't.

Now before we rush off trying to sort everyone out by warning, encouraging and helping them, Paul needs to remind us that this will require patience. Firstly, patience is needed because they may take a very long time to change. You may need to warn the idle, encourage the timid and help the weak for many years before they change. Of course, not everyone will need a such long time, but we must not become disheartened when things don't change immediately. Secondly, we need patience because it is often these people who will, from time to time, wrong us in some way. In verse 15 Paul faces up to the fact that there are times in church life where people "wrong" each other. Two obvious examples are criticism and gossip. The immediate reaction is to repay wrong with wrong. To slander the gossip and to lambaste the critic. We are here told not only to make sure that we don't do these things, but to ensure that we do not allow others to act this way. Each of us probably can think of people who we struggle to get on with. Let us make sure that our attitude to them is right - not negatively focusing on their problems but positively considering how we can patiently help them.

3. Our Attitude to Circumstances (v16-18)

Paul now goes on to give three short and simple commands - always be joyful, always be praying, always be thankful. Yet it hardly needs pointing out that most of us struggle to even sometimes be joyful, sometimes be praying and sometimes be thankful. We will consider each command individually and try to answer the question of how we could possibly obey them.

The command to always be joyful causes us to immediately raise objections. How can I be joyful in difficult circumstances, or joyful on a boring Monday morning at work, or joyful when the kids are screaming? And does it mean that I have to be one of those really annoying overly cheerful people? The answer I believe lies in the source of our joy. For example, if my joy comes from my football team doing well, then when they are going through a bad period, I will be miserable. If my joy comes through being healthy and prosperous, when sickness or financial difficulty come then my joy is lost. But what if my joy came from God? What if the source of my joyfulness was in his goodness and greatness, from all that I have been given through Jesus and from the gift of the Holy Spirit? As we know, God never changes, so if our source of joy is him, then nothing can possibly steal it from us. This deep rooted joy will allow us to see the setbacks and mundaneness of every day life with a fresh perspective.

The command to always be praying is an interesting one. We know that it can't mean that literally every second we are consciously and actively praying. We all have other things to do that require our full concentration. What Paul is driving at, is that we should value prayer so much, that it is the most natural thing we do. Just like we will never go through a day and accidentally forget to eat anything, similarly we should be praying regularly throughout each day. Whenever we are happy, then prayer of worship should naturally flow out. Whenever we are in difficulty or then prayer should our first response, not last resort. And, as Paul shows in the introductions to his epistles, whenever you remember someone, then pray for them. Incidentally, this is an excellent way to cultivate a good attitude to someone. The more we pray for people, the more we are able to love them.

Finally we are asked to always be thankful. Our society seems to spend a lot of time focusing on what things we want that we don't have, and even what rights and privileges we deserve that we aren't being given. This can make us very ungrateful for the things that we already have. The phrase "count your blessings" is not heard so often these days but it is wise advice. When we meditate on all the blessings God has given us we cannot help but respond in thankfulness. We have spiritual blessings of salvation and the Holy Spirit, and most of us also enjoy rich blessings of family and friends, of employment, health and finance, We need to meditate more on God's abundant generosity if we are to fulfil this command to be thankful. And it's not only God who we should be thanking. Let's also make a point of expressing our gratitude to all the people who daily serve us in different ways.

Notice also that Paul speaks of this as being "God's will for you". I am not altogether sure whether he refers to all three commands or just the third, but it hardly matters. Most of us at some stage in our lives find ourselves wondering what God's will for us is. The way ahead seems unsure. I do believe that God is able to use a whole variety of means to help us know what path we should take, but let us not forget that we are *never* at a point where we do not know what God's will for us is, because we always know that his will for us is to be rejoicing, praying and thanking. If we keep ourselves busy doing these things, then it opens the way for God to give us the wisdom and insight necessary to determine the way ahead.

4. Our Attitude to the Holy Spirit (v19-22)

I wonder if you are feeling a bit depressed by now. We have had lots of commands that we need to obey and if you are like me then you realise that you have failed in many of the areas already discussed. Where are we going to find the power to obey? The answer is that we need to be filled with the Holy Spirit (see Eph 5:18). If we neglect this, then our attempts to live righteous lives will either end up in disillusionment or an external legalism.

Verse 19 warns us, using powerful imagery, that we can in some way put out the Spirit's fire. Paul does not go into detail of how, but I don't think it is too hard to imagine. A person who has bad attitudes to leaders and other people, and who doesn't rejoice, pray or give thanks is soon going to go spiritually cold. In Romans 12:10-12 where Paul gives a short series of exhortations very similar to the ones here in 1 Thessalonians 5, we are warned against losing our spiritual fervour.

We often hear talk in charismatic circles of being "open to the Spirit". It is vitally important that we have an attitude that openly welcomes his presence in our lives and in our churches and allows him to do in us what he desires. However, we need to remember that the Holy Spirit has many ministries. He convicts us of sin, guides us, helps us to live righteously, empowers us to witness and gives a wide variety of gifts for us to use to build up the church. While we may be pleased that we openly welcome many of these, let us always be on the guard against being closed to some of them. You may be open to the gift of tongues but not the gift of generosity.

In verse 20, Paul talks about another ministry of the Holy Spirit - the gift of prophecy. The attitude of treating prophecies with contempt is sadly still common today. Perhaps we are proud and don't think that God would use that person to speak through. Perhaps we even doubt God's ability or willingness to speak in such a direct manner today. Perhaps the prophet is not particularly eloquent and it seems a bit underwhelming. But we need to be people who are hungry to hear what God is saying and humble enough to take it on board. A bad attitude to prophecy is one of the ways that we can quench the Spirit.

But Paul feels the need to balance that in verse 21. Just because we are not to treat prophecies with contempt doesn't mean that we should swallow everything uncritically. It must be tested, and the New Testament gives us a good variety of principles for discerning the good from the bad (see for example 1 John 4:1-6, 1 Cor 14:29). It also contains a good number of warnings about both false prophets and false teachers. In context then, verse 22 is probably referring to false prophecy which is an evil that must be avoided. But his use of the phrase "every kind" suggests that this can also be a general command. In this case though it is being applied to the specific example of false prophecy.

Conclusion

These commands weren't written to make us feel bad about ourselves, but to inspire us to a better way of living. Now is always the right time for repentance. And repentance is basically a change of attitude - we think in a new way and consequently act in a new way. Why not pray right now that the fire of the Spirit would burn in you with a greater intensity than at present. And let us not be so blind as to think everything is alright if we are holding on to wrong attitudes to other people. Rather, let's be people who delight in God so much that it naturally flows out in constant prayer, rejoicing and thankfulness.