

## God's Wish List This (Every) Year

1 Thessalonians 5: 12-28

I knew that the building would be decked out for the holidays by this first Sunday in December. It always is. So, I had a choice. I could pretend that I don't even notice the candles or smell the evergreen and just finish our series in 1 Thessalonians. I could jump right into Christmas messages and wait a month to conclude the series with a single message twenty-eight days removed from any context. Or, I could acknowledge the season and wind up the series. Of course, the problem with that idea is that this morning's text has nothing to do with Christmas.

But, the text is about what God wants from His children, and a question that surfaces around my house this time of year is "What do you want for Christmas?" If I sit down with my six-year-old granddaughter and a *Toys 'r Us* flyer, it is easier to just X-out the things that do not interest her than to keep track of what she wants. My wife, on the other hand, has been singularly focused. We have an unfinished project going on in our basement. She's been telling me and the kids that she wants drywall. I have never seen sheetrock on any list of gift ideas for the wife. So, how am I supposed to share that with people if they ask what I got her? "Drywall. It's what she wanted."

What we have before us in this final passage from 1 Thessalonians is a list of what God desires from His church. In fact, this is the oldest such list. Did Thessalonica ever deliver? I am sure they worked on it, but questions more pressing to us today are: "Does He still want these things from His church?" and "Are we willing to work on delivering what He desires in this place?"

Life confronts us with many choices, impressions, yearnings and challenges. The idea that we might find a way to discern God's will in such matters intrigues us. But, I believe that finding God's will for such mysteries (if that is even possible) means less to Him than giving ourselves wholly over to the things that He has already made known that He desires from us.

Paul lists as many as twenty items on God's wish list for this and every year that He would like to receive from His children. Some of you don't look like you can handle a twenty-point sermon, so I have categorized them down to five. That's still more than you're use to, but I figure with the cantata next week, I can still come in under my monthly allotment of twelve sermon points.

So, what does God want of us, the people of His pasture? First, He wants us to be ...

### I. Esteeming our Shepherds (11-13a)

<sup>12</sup>Now we ask you, brothers, 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.

#### A. Respect Them in their Roles

Paul is speaking of elders or overseers. It was his practice to establish overseers in the churches he planted. Because he had very little time in Thessalonica to set things in order, he now writes with a sense of urgency regarding the esteem in which the church should hold its elders.

An elder's work is toilsome even though his productivity is not so easily measurable as if he was engaged in a business with a fiscal bottom line or cranking out a specific number of widgets on an assembly line. Nowhere in the Bible is he asked to be a dreamer, a visionary or a person who makes things happen. That's the language of human enterprise. He is to shepherd the flock under his care; to see that they are fed what is good and true, to set an example for them, to guide them into lives of righteousness and purity.

How is that toilsome? He has no leverage, no whip to crack. He is "over them in the Lord" says Paul, but if certain people are too rebellious to honor that arrangement, what's he to do? He toils to influence those under his care to think and behave "Christianly" in a world that calls us to act selfishly, to react violently and to think according to the wisdom of the age. They "admonish you." That means literally that they "put sense in our minds." If we respect that role, we prosper spiritually. Those who resist are on their own. Even in a situation where church discipline is administered, the elders are only as powerful as the balance of the body is submissive to their judgment.

### **B. Lovingly Regard Them for their Work**

When a national election doesn't go the way we wish it would, we like to say, "I respect the office, not the man." In God's Kingdom, that is just pious rhetoric if you think it gives you a pass not to respect the men in the office. Because of the important nature of the work, Paul requires that the church love its elders. What do you do for people you love? You support them. You pray for them. You encourage them. You protect them. You lift them up when they get knocked down. A.T. Robertson observes: "We need wise leadership today, but still more, wise following."

We must also recognize that admonition from shepherds cannot possibly be the only admonition of believers that occurs in a church. While they are responsible for the health of the whole, we are each responsible for the health of those with whom we are in close fellowship. If a friend's sins, doubts or struggles are ignored until they become so acute that you think the solution is to call in the shepherds, then the situation has already arrived at a more critical juncture than was ever necessary. Paul turns his attention to the mutual responsibilities of the body corporate.

## **II. Edifying our Society (13b-15)**

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

### **A. A Peace worth Pursuing**

Peace is a complex topic in the Old Testament. It referred not only to the absence of strife but also to everything conducive to a man's welfare. Under God's covenant of Law with Israel, peace included overtones of physical wholeness and material prosperity. In the Psalms, it became more evident that true peace was rooted in one's relationship with *YAHWEH*. Such peace could not be taken from a man even in the absence of wholeness and prosperity. No wonder Paul eventually described peace as surpassing understanding, beyond any man's capacity to create or duplicate it.

In the New Testament, Jesus, the Prince of Peace is our peace and the Securer of peace. Peace is what He promised to the Twelve on the night before He died. This was a remarkable promise given the fact their world would soon be thrown into chaos, but Jesus was speaking of something beyond worldly peace which is just a temporary disruption of conflict. God's peace is abiding. We stand in the presence of the holy Creator from Whom we were by sin estranged. It follows that we stand in potential peace with all others that Jesus has brought into peace with God.

Obviously, wherever an atmosphere is poisoned by discord, bitterness, competition or hatred, the peace envisioned by Jesus cannot thrive. Here, Paul's instruction, "Live in peace with one another," is a general command, but it is not a call to passivity. Doing nothing never secures peace wherever it is not present. Our sinful natures are constantly at war against peace. So, inherent to the call that we live in peace is a call to confront whatever is not conducive to peace.

## **B. The Demands of Peace**

**Warn the Idle (unruly)** – The word refers to those who "break ranks" in a military unit. In Thessalonica, some had abandoned their normal duties to provide for themselves and from the normal activities church life. They were so certain that the return of Jesus was to be immediate, that they blew off all other concerns. What they thought was a spiritual outlook on the here and now, Paul judged to be foolish and irresponsible. When you see a friend or loved one pulling away from fellowship, involvement, duty and accountability, it is your place first, not the shepherd's, to warn them of the damage they are inflicting on their own spiritual development.

**Encourage the Timid** – Confusion over the Second Coming caused some to despair over the loss of loved ones, fearing they might miss out on something glorious. Paul assured them that sleeping saints will not miss out on a thing. By timid, Paul might have had in mind those who could fall away if recent persecutions were reignited. But, the burden of encouraging a timid soul with God's words and promises falls first to those who understand him best and care about him most.

**Help the Weak** – Paul had addressed the need for some in Thessalonica to sever themselves more thoroughly from their immoral pagan culture. Sexual purity was unappreciated as a virtue by the Greeks, and the adjustment for some would prove quite difficult. Paul said "Help them," not "Judge them." In our own day, it seems that some people have a greater propensity toward certain temptations than others. We do not always know what to make of the medical rhetoric of "predisposition" or "brain chemistry" because we rightfully want people to take responsibility for their actions. Nonetheless, some struggle with this and some struggle with that. The reality that levels the playing field is that we all struggle with sin in some regard. Grace helps. Judgmentalism does not.

**Be Patient with All** – Dealing with the idle, the timid and the weak will try your patience. People don't always respond to encouragement. They don't always yield to admonition from God's Word. Or, they do respond, but there is often a step backwards for every few steps forward. When you step forward to correct, rebuke, encourage or admonish someone, be sure to do so in humility and love. A one-shot drive-by effort is hardly ever sufficient. Know that you are probably making an investment of yourself for some time. Still, love is willing to do that.

**Forbid Payback, Promote Kindness** – This notion was foreign to Greek, Roman and Hebrew alike. The tenet of "eye for an eye" was a staple in the Law of Moses. It insured justice and limited retribution. In other words, the loss of a man's eye did not warrant the injured party's family to retaliate with a slit throat. However, the rabbis twisted "eye for an eye" into a demand for vengeance. So, when Jesus addressed the issue, He went all the way back to what God truly preferred, how He responded to His grievances against us; vengeance giving way to love.

<sup>43</sup>"You have heard that it was said, 'Love your neighbor and hate your enemy.' <sup>44</sup>But I tell you: Love your enemies and pray for those who persecute you, <sup>45</sup>that you may be sons of your Father in heaven." – Matthew 5:43-45

### III. Enjoying our Salvation (16–18)

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

#### A. Our Moods Fluctuate, Our Joy Should Not

Paul would never deal in any clichés so shallow as “Don’t worry, be happy.” Loss makes us grieve. Strife wears us down. Pain is painful. Still, he calls us to perpetual joy. Obviously, joy must be something more than a phony, plastic positivism that only masks our pain. Walter Frederic Adeney refers to Christian joy as something that is “deep” and “calm”:

“The surface may be ruffled while the depths are still; cross currents may vary while the undercurrent runs steadily on. Surface pain may conceal sacred joys which it cannot destroy.”

Jesus is the great Securer of joy. Our eternal salvation is the silver lining behind every cloud in life. God is with us. God works through us, and even when our efforts are rejected, He will one day honor us. He provides for us. He’s coming back for us. It is neither far-fetched nor pie in the sky for one believer to remind another, “Be joyful always.”

#### B. So, How Do We Keep the Bases for Joy Front and Center?

“Pray continually...” You cannot be on your knees 24/7 and fulfill your duties to God or to men. I understand Paul to be speaking of a devotional frame of mind where the heart is full of the presence of God. It means that all of the biblical instructions on prayer are observed. We keep our set appointments with God, but we also pray spontaneously. We pray through issues with perseverance. We think thoughts of God. We apply His truths to everything that we encounter.

“Give thanks in all circumstances ...” Whether we are in a season of delight or sorrow, health or pain, prosperity or adversity, our perspective on all things is governed by two abiding principles. First, our blessings in Christ always outweigh our hardships in this world. Secondly, even our troubles will be used of God to bring about His purpose of molding us into the likeness of Jesus.

### IV. Evaluating our Sensations (19–22)

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

#### A. This Was a Call to Balance

In Corinth, valid miraculous manifestations of spiritual gifts were creating controversy in the church because prideful debates over which gifts were best. This may also have been occurring in Thessalonica. When it comes to spiritual activity in a church, people tend to gravitate toward one of two extremes; explain everything as sensationally a possible *OR* explain away anything that remotely smacks of the supernatural. There were probably valid miraculous spiritual gifts on display in Thessalonica as in Corinth. They were not to be quenched by the overly cautious.

HOWEVER, in Corinth, those who celebrated sensational gifts like tongues tended to denigrate the comparatively more mundane gift of prophecy, or simply speaking God's truth, in a language that everyone understood. In Corinth, Paul defended prophecy as a more useful gift, in particular, than tongues. Perhaps, prophecy was being belittled by sensationalism in Thessalonica as well.

## **B. Our Quest Is for Truth, Usefulness and Beauty, *NOT* Sensation**

If the manifestation of spiritual gifts in Corinth or in Thessalonica was causing confusion or discord in those churches, then the folks in each of those places needed to look long and hard at whether they were truly the work of the Spirit. If a prophecy contradicted what was already known of Jesus, of the Gospel or of any other tenant of apostolic truth, then, it was to be cast off as spurious. We measure things because evil takes many forms. Evil can be the overt sin that blatantly grieves the Holy Spirit. Or, evil can subtly enter into a faith community under the guise of spiritual sensation. This becomes apparent when the fruit of faction or distraction appears.

## **V. Embracing our Sanctification (23, 24)**

<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. <sup>24</sup>The one who calls you is faithful and he will do it.

### **Sanctification Is our Calling, but God's Work**

The sanctification of a believer has two vital dimensions. First, he is separated for God so that God's desires become his desires. God's ways, his ways and God's will, his will. Secondly, he is purified. This is to be accomplished "through and through." Paul refers to the "whole spirit, soul and body." Some see Paul making a case for the three-fold nature of man. I don't know about that. The emphasis I hear is that in this matter of sanctification, God is not emphasizing our various compartments. Man is an undivided whole, and it all belongs to God.

To that end, Paul tells us elsewhere, "offer your bodies as living sacrifices ..." (Romans 12:1). James commands us: "Wash your hands, you sinners, and purify your hearts, you double-minded" (James 4:8). Peter puts it this way: "be holy in all you do" (1 Peter 1:15).

Of course, in this passage, Paul reminds us that ultimately God is the Accomplisher of our sanctification. It is God Who keeps us blameless, Who is faithful to finish the work He began.

## **Salutation (25-28)**

<sup>25</sup>Brothers, pray for us. <sup>26</sup>Greet all the brothers with a holy kiss. <sup>27</sup>I charge you before the Lord to have this letter read to all the brothers.

Paul closes with a personal touch. The great Apostle did not function beyond the need for the prayers of others. This alone should remind us that we really need to pray for those who shepherd us as well as for each other. That part about the "holy kiss" is interesting. We "shake hands" so that "kissing stuff" distracts us to the point that we miss the "holy" part. Regardless of how a culture greets one another – a kiss, a handshake, a hug, rubbing noses, a Vulcan salute – the fact that we are a holy people must govern even the way we greet one another.

I don't know if Paul knew that his letters would be preserved down the ages, but he seemed to sense that what God had led him to say in this one was important. In forceful language, Paul wanted this letter read. As I have said repeatedly, 1 Thessalonians is his earliest preserved instruction to any church. He sensed these matters were basic. I trust that you have sensed the same thing.

<sup>28</sup>The grace of our Lord Jesus Christ be with you.