

“A Pastor’s Plea”

1Thessalonians 5:25-28

January 23, 2022

Today we are concluding our study in the book of 1 Thessalonians which we have entitled, *“Holy Anticipation: Living in Holiness, Hope, and Love Until Jesus Comes.”* Throughout this book, Paul has urged the first century believers (and us) to hold on to the hope of Christ’s return, while we walk this road of sanctification by pursuing personal holiness and love for one another.

In a couple weeks we will turn our attention to 2 Thessalonians, yet as we come to Paul’s concluding instructions to this first letter, once again we find that God’s providential hand has brought us to a particular text of scripture that is in season for our church family in 2022.

Before Paul gives his concluding benediction—a prayer for God’s blessing of grace to be upon them in vs. 28—he calls the Thessalonian believers to pray for himself, to express loving affection to each other, and to come under the unifying authority of God’s word together. So I will touch on verses 25-28, however, I asked Pastor Connor to only read vs. 25 as a matter of emphasis. We will spend most of our time considering the application of verse 25 before touching on the importance of vs. 26-28.

So why do I say that these often-overlooked verses are so in season for our church family? First, all Scripture is always in season those who have ears to hear. But more specifically, 2022 is going to be an unusual year for us for a couple of reasons. It is a year of transition to new leadership. Just last Sunday we installed Pastor Connor as our new Associate Pastor of Discipleship. He needs your prayers through this season of transition, adjustment, change, and growth. The learning curve to a new pastorate is immense. In fact, I have been on this learning curve for 20 years only to discover an unceasing need for wisdom.

Furthermore, 2022 is going to be atypical because I am preparing to undergo two spinal surgeries this year, which will place increased responsibility on our elder team and others for ministries of preaching and

leadership during seasons of recovery. As most of you know I have had some ongoing back issues and I am anticipating a fusion surgery later this summer. However, due to some complications with my spinal canal, I need to first have surgery on my neck, which is scheduled for late April, just after Easter. The neck surgery will require about six weeks of recovery while the back surgery will require extensive recovery. *Unfortunately, this means that there will be weeks at a time when I will be fully or partially out of commission.*

But I want to emphasize that while this season will be disruptive to the normal flow of ministry at one level, it is also good for the life of our church family. *First*, it’s good because it comes from the providential hand of God, and therefore is intended for His good purposes. *Second*, it is good for you to not overly rely on me as your pastor, but to be reminded that we gather every week to center our lives on Jesus Christ. *Third*, it is good because it will enhance the ministry of our elders and others to the body. We highly value the plurality of elders and it is blessing for you to hear the fresh voices of your faithful, shepherds from the scriptures. *Finally*, this season will be good in that it’s appropriate for your lead pastor to walk through seasons of weakness and suffering, to more fully identify with your own suffering and our need to humbly rely on the sufficiency of God’s grace.

So as we walk through this atypical year together as a church, I believe the best thing we can do together in the upcoming months is to apply Paul’s concluding instructions to the Thessalonians in our particular context. And so I call you to live out *4 practical responses to 2022*:

1. Pray for your pastors and elders (1Thess. 5:25).

Church, pray for us! Paul, as an apostle, was responsible to shepherd the Thessalonian church of new believers undergoing severe persecution. His role as an apostle and shepherd was to lead, feed, protect, correct, comfort, equip, and at times even discipline them through the Scriptures. Yet the church also had a responsibility to not only receive and support Paul’s leadership, but to also *pray* for him. Paul modeled fervent prayer for the church, yet here in vs. 25 He calls believers to reciprocate prayer for Himself along with his co-workers Silas and Timothy with this simple but earnest

plea: *“Brothers, pray for us!”* The apostle Paul and his fellow pastors needed prayer because their ministry was demanding and dangerous, liable to discouragement, persecution, and the dangers of travel in the first century—things like shipwrecks, exposure to the elements, and even hunger, not to mention mob riots). Add to that the fact that Paul himself was continuing his own road of sanctification. In all of this, Paul knew that he was unequal to the task apart from the Spirit’s empowering and the sufficiency of God’s grace. And so, he pleads for the prayers of the saints.

Pastors need prayer more than you may realize. Our need for prayer is not occasional but often exceptional. Connor and I and our elder team, plead with you to pray for us not only because Connor is in a season of transition, change, and growth; not only because I will be going through a season of healing and recovery; not only because of additional responsibilities our elders must carry, but because the nature of ministry combined with our personal inadequacy apart from the Spirit’s empowering and the sufficiency of God’s grace demands great need for prayer.

Church, pray for us:

- Because you need us to pray for you with spiritual fervor, faith, humility, and purity.
- Because we are mere men.
- Because as mere men, we are vulnerable to Satan’s attacks.
- Because as mere men, we need constant, increasing wisdom.
- Because humility is essential, yet contrary to the natural inclination of our heart.
- Because we need to constantly put to death the pride that opposes God. You need pastors/elders who persevere in the grace that God gives to the humble.
- Because as mere men, we are called to be mediators of gospel truth.
- Because as mere men, we are called at times to shepherd resistant hearts.

- Because we are called to steward God’s most precious earthly treasure—the body of Christ—which no human is fully adequate to do.
- Because our families need us to live grace-filled, God-pleasing lives.
- Because we are dependent on the Spirit’s power for any true spiritual impact. We plant, we water, but only God causes the growth.
- Because as mere men, we can be fainthearted, often in need of courage.
- Because of our great need to love God with our whole heart, and not the world.
- Because we are called to enter into conflict as peacemakers.
- Because we are prone to weariness and discouragement, but need to walk by faith.
- Because we are insufficient without you, the body of Christ.
- Because we are called to lead and serve you!
- Because God calls you to.
- Because God promises to answer your prayers of faith.
- Because you need good, faithful pastors and elders who stay the course.

Church, pray for us!

In the 1800’s a preacher by the name of Gardiner Spring, made this passionate plea for Christians to pray for their pastors:

“O it is a fearful expense that ministers are ever allowed to enter the pulpit without being preceded, accompanied, and followed by the earnest prayers of the churches. It is no marvel that the pulpit is so powerless, and ministers so often disheartened when there are so few to hold up their hands. The consequence of neglecting this duty [of prayer] is seen and felt in the spiritual [decline] of the churches, and it will be seen and felt in the everlasting [damnation] of men; while the [result of regarding this call to prayer] would be the ingathering of multitudes into the kingdom of God, and new glories to the Lamb that was slain.”¹

¹ As quoted by John MacArthur, *MacArthur New Testament Commentary: 1&2 Thessalonians*, pg. 212-213. Original citing: “A Plea to Pray for Pastors” [Almityville,

N.Y.: Calvary, 1991], 5-6; excerpted from *The Power of the Pulpit* [reprint of 1848 edition; Edinburgh: Banner of Truth, n.d.]

“We [pastors] are the dispensers of God’s truth and at best fall far below our [high calling]. The duties of our calling return upon us with every returning week...They often come upon us with many conflicting demands. They sometimes put a demand upon all our thoughts, and at the very time when we have lost the power of thinking; and sometimes they call for all the intensity and strength of our affections, just at the time that we are least capable of expressing them. There is also associated with these demands that pressing distress, and decaying anxiety, which exhausts our vigor, cripples our courage, and drains up our spirits. And then, in addition to all this, there are so many disappointments in our work, that we desperately need the...comfort of the prayers of God’s faithful people!”²

But lest we end on a negative refrain, oh church, we have been given the promises of God to be dispensed through the Spirit’s own ministry of intercession by our prayers of faith! So church, pray for us!

2. **Pursue the loving affection of fellowship with each other as the family of God** (1 Thess 5:26).

Paul goes on to instruct the Thessalonians in vs. 26 to “greet all the brethren with a holy kiss.” In the first century, a kiss on the forehead or cheek was a common way to show affectionate love when family members greeted each other. Outside of one’s biological family, the kiss of greeting represented honor, respect, or deep friendship. What’s essential in vs. 26 is not the kiss itself, but the loving, family-like affection it’s meant to display. Today, we may express the warmth of affection with handshakes or hugs. But here’s the bottom line: *The gospel of Jesus Christ unites into one family of God, people of varying social and economic backgrounds without discrimination.*

Galatians 3:28 says, “*There is neither Jew nor Greek, there is neither slave nor free man, there is neither male nor female; for you are all one in Christ Jesus.*” Paul is not saying that a person is no longer a Jew or Gentile, a servant or free man, or that a person’s gender is not to be distinct. Rather, he’s saying that in the church we don’t show partiality. We may have differing roles, but all in the body of Christ are to be accepted, loved, and honored as image-bearers of God, redeemed children of God, and brothers and sisters in Christ. Rich, poor, men, women, differing ethnicities; even the

unruly brothers or sisters of vs. 14—we are not to withhold our affection even when love requires correction—“greet *all*” the brothers with Christlike affection.

This kind of indiscriminate love and respect was unheard of in first century Greek and Roman culture. And still today, the church is the only context in which we can truly maintain God-given distinctions (such as the beautiful God-given uniqueness of male and female and their respective roles) without undermining the equality of person, dignity, and worth. Today our culture is drawing lines that God has not drawn and erasing lines that God has established. Our culture is making assumptions on the basis of color, yet seeking to abolish the God-ordained, biological uniqueness of men and women.

At first glance, vs. 26 may seem so culturally irrelevant, yet it is so deeply relevant especially today when the air waves are consumed with discussions of racism. Some today would claim that because I am a white man, I am hopelessly prejudice toward anyone who is not a white man—and this charge would be laid at my feet without any examination of how I personally think, believe, or act. That’s discrimination! And when we remove personal responsibility for who we think, believe, and act, all accountability and justice (at a human level) will be lost. Even many Christians today would call me to not only lament over racism but to repent of my “whiteness.”

Let me be very clear. The church must not tolerate legitimate racism, in which one person prejudices another on the basis of external features or background. But we must also recognize that racism is the result of a sin-sickened heart which the gospel has the power to change. The good news is that regardless of my color, gender, or environment into which I was born (whether considered privileged or not), I can treat others who are different with indiscriminate love and respect because God has calls me (and empowers me) to an obedient, God-pleasing heart that regards every single person with the dignity and sacredness of an image-bearer of God. This means that the church of Jesus Christ is the one place where we can

² Ibid.

demonstrate true, indiscriminate love for one another regardless of our social or economic status or ethnicity. The church is the one place where we can model the solidarity/unity of a singular human race, in which people of different backgrounds and ethnicities, male and female, can regard each other and all people with honor and dignity as image-bearers of God, and likewise extend the grace of Jesus Christ to all people. [testimony]

So church, one of the best things we can do in these days in light of both the cultural discussions that are taking place and the unique year we are walking into as a church family that will require greater flexibility, is to pursue the loving affection of fellowship with each other in our church family that demonstrates genuine Christian love. Be the church! Be hospitable. Take initiative as an individual or family to build genuine, caring friendship with others in the body—even outside the circle of those who are most naturally drawn to. You don't have to give them a kiss, just a genuine caring heart of Christlike love.

3. Prioritize the personal and corporate ministry of God's word (1 Thess 5:27).

Vs. 27: "I *adjure* you by the Lord to have this letter read to *all* the brethren." When Paul uses the word *adjure*, he is using the language of taking an oath. He is *charging* the Thessalonian elders with the responsibility to make sure that this Spirit-inspired letter of instruction and encouragement will be accessible to everyone. There were many illiterate people in the first century and only one copy of Paul's letter, so the public reading of Scripture was essential.

Yet I also urge us to prioritize not only the *public* but also the *personal* ministry of the word. Today we are privileged to have our own copies of the New Testament in our hands. We are not restricted to the public reading of scripture as our only access to God's word the Thessalonians were when there was only 1 copy of Paul's letter. And yet, our personal reading, study, meditation, memorization, and application of God's word must not be limited to personal piety, but brought into our public fellowship with one another.

I simply encourage us to not take for granted our core value to be a church of the Word. And one way for us to do that, is to not let our attentiveness (or attendance) be determined by which pastor or elder is preaching (or which person is leading Bible study), but to give our full attentiveness to the inspired, inerrant word of God that is being proclaimed and taught. Let's purpose to gather under God's word, as a means of centering our lives together on Jesus Christ.

4. Pray for God's grace to abound toward one another (1 Thess 5:28).

Paul concludes 1 Thessalonians with a benediction or prayer of blessing in vs. 28: "The grace of our Lord Jesus Christ be with you." The overarching motivation behind this letter is that believers would know, walk in, grow in, and be sustained and transformed by the grace of God. Paul opens this letter in 1:1 with the words "grace to you" and he ends with this benediction in 5:28 invoking the blessing of God's grace for his fellow believers. What happens when we walk in the grace of God? We are sanctified. We grow in obedience and holiness. We grow in our love for one another. We abide in the hope and peace of God.

This is why Paul prays in 3:12-13 that they would increase and abound in love for one another and all people so that God may establish their hearts without blame in holiness before God when Jesus comes. Again, Paul prays in 5:23, "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." *Beloved, this is God's intended purpose for this season of your life and mine—to walk in the sustaining, sanctifying, transforming grace of God that gives us enduring hope and peace.*

So, I conclude that there is no better way to pray for each other than to pray that the grace of God will abound toward one another so that God's sanctifying purposes will be fulfilled in our lives for our joy and His glory.

To that end, let's stand and pray together...

“Taking God’s Word to God’s Throne”

A Prayer Based on 1Thessalonians 5:25-28

Father, we come to you in Jesus’ name by the great privilege you have granted us to participate in the outworking of Your purposes through prayers of faith. We pray for our pastors and elders that you have entrusted to us, knowing that apart from You they can do nothing of lasting value, but that with You all things are possible. So we pray that you will bless our leaders with wisdom to do your will, grace to serve and lead with all humility, and protection from the flesh, the world, and the devil. Empower them with the Spirit as they hold out the word of God through the gospel. Teach them to follow Christ as good leaders and shepherds of their own families and the family of God. Strengthen their love for Jesus, their faith in Your promises, and their walk of obedience in the Spirit.

As we pray for your grace to abound toward our leaders and each member of Christ’s body, we ask that the Word of Christ would dwell richly within us, so that our lives will please You, and our fellowship with one another will be characterized by deep love, warm affection, and sincere care.

Father, grant us a holy anticipation for the great day of deliverance and the grace to grow in holiness, be steadfast in hope, and abound in love until Jesus comes. Amen!