

## LESSON 7

### A PARTING PLEA (1 THESS. 5:12–28)

#### The Place of the Passage

Having discussed our hope in 1 Thessalonians 4:13–5:11, Paul now gives a flurry of parting instructions—17 consecutive commands—before concluding the letter with final comments and a benediction.

#### The Big Picture

The final verses of this letter feature an array of brief yet profound exhortations for the family of God in Thessalonica.

#### Reflection and Discussion

Read through the complete passage for this study, 1 Thessalonians 5:12–28. Then review the following questions concerning this concluding section of 1 Thessalonians and write your own notes on them.

How many times in this closing section of the letter does Paul address his readers as “brothers”? Based on other New Testament references to the church as God’s family (e.g., Matt. 12:48–50; Eph. 2:19; 1 Tim. 3:15), what can you discern about God’s design for the church?

In 1 Thessalonians 5:12–13, what are Paul’s two instructions for how church members are to relate to their pastors or elders? How does your culture’s view of authority differ from the Bible’s view of authority?

In 1 Thessalonians 5:12, Paul observes that the Thessalonians’ pastors are both “among” and “over” them. Why is this significant, and how do these two aspects of spiritual leadership counterbalance each other? What happens in a church when the “among you” emphasis begins to drown out the “over you” emphasis? What about the reverse?

In 1 Thessalonians 5:13, Paul tells the Thessalonians to respect and esteem their pastors “very highly in love.” This is a vital qualifier, for it is possible to respect or esteem others without loving them (e.g., a gifted politician). It is also possible to love someone without respecting or esteeming them (e.g., a difficult family member). What is one way you can begin to respect and esteem your church leaders with more intentionality and love?

To whom are the commands in 1 Thessalonians 5:14 addressed? Likewise, according to Ephesians 4:12–13, who is humanly responsible for doing the “work of ministry” in the church? Does this surprise you?

It is possible that the commands in 1 Thessalonians 5:14 correspond to previous discussions in the letter: “admonish the idle” to 1 Thessalonians 4:11–12; “encourage the fainthearted” to 1

Thessalonians 4:13–18; and “help the weak” to 1 Thessalonians 4:1–8. What can we learn about the breadth of ministry—and the wisdom it requires—from these commands?

Of all the commands in this section, which challenges you most? Why? How might you more deliberately cultivate a heart posture of obedience in this area?

Twice now Paul has directly answered the popular question, “What is God’s will for my life?” What was his first response (see 1 Thess. 4:3)? What is his second (1 Thess. 5:18)? Thinking of your own circumstances, what might it look like for you to carry out God’s will based on these two verses?

Where does the Trinity appear in 1 Thessalonians 5:12–28, and why is this significant? Although gospel-believing Christians disagree on the nature of the “prophecies” in 1 Thessalonians 5:19–22, what is clear is that we are to “test everything” we hear, especially words claiming divine origin. According to John Stott, we ought to subject such claims to five tests: (1) the truth of Scripture (Acts 17:11); (2) the nature of Christ (1 John 4:1–3; see also 1 Cor. 12:3; 2 John 9–10); (3) the gospel of grace (Gal. 1:6–9); (4) the character of the speaker (Matt. 7:15–20); and (5) the edification of the body (1 Corinthians 14). Which of these tests are you most inclined to value? Which are you inclined to overlook?

In Paul’s benediction (1 Thess. 5:23–24), he prays for the church’s sanctification as if it were a gift. Back in 1 Thessalonians 4:1–7, however, he discussed sanctification as if it were a calling. Which is it? Is our increasing conformity to Christ our responsibility (1 Thess. 4:1–7) or *God’s* (1 Thess. 5:23–24)?

Read through the following three sections on Gospel Glimpses, Whole-Bible Connections, and Theological Soundings. Then take time to consider the Personal Implications these sections may have for you.

## **Gospel Glimpses**

**BROTHERS.** This word appears five times in this final section of 1 Thessalonians, spotlighting the unique relationship enjoyed by Christians in general and fellow local church members in particular. Language denoting our sibling status in the family of God is not sentimental spiritual talk; it is at the white-hot center of the gospel. We have not always enjoyed this standing, after all. Our Maker once stood against us because of our sin. But through reliance on Jesus, our Judge has become our Father. Believers now have the same Father precisely because we have the same Savior—we are sons of God through union with the Son of God. As J. I. Packer writes in his classic book *Knowing God*, “‘Father’ is the Christian name for God. Our understanding of Christianity cannot be better than our grasp of adoption. To be right with God the Judge is a great thing, but to be loved and cared for by God the Father is greater” (201). The difference between justification and adoption, then, is the difference between a courtroom and living room. If justification is God’s declaring us righteous, adoption is God’s declaring us *his*.

**GRACE.** Final words are significant, and the end of 1 Thessalonians is no exception: “The grace of our Lord Jesus Christ be with you” (1 Thess. 5:28). Do you recall how the letter began? “Grace to you and peace” (1 Thess. 1:1). This framing is not accidental. Paul is ending where he started, and implying that everything in between—all 87 verses—are to be interpreted and applied in light of the bookends. What is the nature of the grace Paul prays would be *with* the Thessalonians amid their trials (1 Thess. 5:28)? It is “the grace of our Lord Jesus Christ”—God’s unevoked, unmerited favor purchased with the currency of his Son’s blood. This grace is free for us, but it was infinitely costly for Christ.

*Definition: Church member*

A Christian who obeys God by formally committing to a local congregation. God designed our discipleship to be anchored in a church, with our lives submitted to the oversight of elders and to the care and accountability of fellow members.

## Whole-Bible Connections

**REPAY EVIL WITH GOOD.** Old Testament law had enshrined a principle of retributive justice known as *lex talionis*; the punishment inflicted should correspond in degree and kind to the offense of the wrongdoer: “If there is harm, then you shall pay life for life, eye for eye, tooth for tooth, hand for hand, foot for foot, burn for burn, wound for wound, stripe for stripe” (Ex. 21:23–25; see also Lev. 24:17–22; Deut. 19:21). This was to limit revenge and vendettas. Yet, in the Sermon on the Mount Jesus declared, “You have heard that it was said, ‘An eye for an eye and a tooth for a tooth.’ But I say to you, Do not resist the one who is evil. But if anyone slaps you on the right cheek, turn to him the other also” (Matt. 5:38–39; see also 5:40–42). Jesus was not abolishing the law but rather going to its heart—love—in order to establish a radical new command (Rom. 13:8–10; Gal. 5:14; James 2:8). Citizens of his kingdom, he insisted, are to love their enemies and pray for their persecutors (Matt. 5:44)—unlike citizens of the world, who love only their friends (Matt. 5:46–47). Paul’s commands in 1 Thessalonians 5:15 to repay none with evil and to pursue all with good, then, are applications of our Lord’s own words. Indeed, the New Testament is filled with Jesus-echoing demands to do what is impossible without him: blessing persecutors, resisting revenge, and overcoming evil with good (e.g., Rom. 12:14–21).

## Theological Soundings

**FRUIT OF THE SPIRIT.** Written around AD 51, 1 Thessalonians is probably Paul’s second-earliest New Testament letter. His earliest is Galatians, written a few years prior (c. AD 48). In that letter Paul lists the fruit of the Spirit, against which “there is no law” (Gal. 5:22–23). Interestingly, in the final section of 1 Thessalonians he again highlights more than half of them: love (1 Thess. 5:13), joy (1 Thess. 5:16), peace (1 Thess. 5:13, 23), patience (1 Thess. 5:14), goodness (1 Thess. 5:15), and, on the part of God, faithfulness (1 Thess. 5:24). This makes sense, given the letter’s emphasis on holiness and sanctification (see especially 1 Thess. 4:1–7), right up to the final prayer (1 Thess. 5:23–24).

**WISDOM.** Although this word does not appear in this passage, our need for wisdom is evident: “We urge you, brothers, admonish the idle, encourage the fainthearted, help the weak, be

patient with them all” (1 Thess. 5:14). Paul is a physician of souls, prescribing different medicines for different maladies, and he expects ordinary church members to do the same. Discerning which kind of person you are ministering to (and thus which “medicine” is needed) requires profound wisdom—the skill of applying the principles of Scripture to the complexities of life. Daily living hinges heavily on such situational wisdom—figuring out what to do in the countless circumstances where simple moral rules do not immediately or obviously apply. Thankfully, God has given us an entire literary genre in Scripture (wisdom literature) devoted to making us wiser. And in the New Testament we encounter the embodiment of divine wisdom himself, Jesus Christ (Matt. 12:42; 1 Cor. 1:24, 30; Col. 2:2–3), who rescues arrogant fools and makes them wise (1 Cor. 1:18–31). Biblical wisdom is evidenced in action (Matt. 11:19), is vital for witness (Col. 4:5), and is received through prayer (James 1:5). Its character is “pure, then peaceable, gentle, open to reason, full of mercy and good fruits, impartial and sincere” (James 3:17). In other words, wisdom looks like Jesus.

*Definition: Wisdom literature*

A genre of biblical books including Job, Psalms, Proverbs, Ecclesiastes, and Song of Solomon.

## Personal Implications

Take time to reflect on the implications of 1 Thessalonians 5:12–28 for your own life today. Consider what you have learned that might lead you to praise God, repent of sin, and trust in his gracious promises. Note the personal applications for your walk with the Lord based on the (1) Gospel Glimpses, (2) Whole-Bible Connections, (3) Theological Soundings, and (4) this passage as a whole.

1. Gospel Glimpses
2. Whole-Bible Connections
3. Theological Soundings
4. 1 Thessalonians 5:12–28

## As You Finish This Unit . . .

Take a moment now to ask for the Lord’s blessing and help as you conclude this study of 1 Thessalonians. And take a moment also to look back through this unit of study and reflect on some key lessons the Lord may be teaching you.

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