




THE COMMUNITY

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What Do I Need to Know About the Passage?

I Thessalonians 4:13-5:11

The Christian life was designed by God to be lived within the context of a loving community. Actually people were designed by God to live within the context of a loving community. But for this community to function like the Body of Christ and not a dysfunctional family, certain attitudes are a prerequisite.

But its one things to stop stealing or drinking. A modicum of willpower that any non-believer can muster is sufficient to do that. But when you are required to be loving, respectful, patient, joyful, and submissive...well...good luck trying to “will” such behavior. Paul first lays out the prerequisite attitudes and actions that create godly community (vv.12-15), but he doesn’t just leave us with a list of do’s and don’ts. He doesn’t because the gospel doesn’t. In the second section Paul looks at how our hearts and minds are renewed and enabled to sincerely reflect such attitudes (vv.16-24).

There are several phrases found in Scripture for this renewing. You could call it “putting on the new self” or “cultivating the presence of Christ,” or being “Filled with the Spirit.” What is described is the Lord renewing our hearts, minds, thoughts and motivations. While it’s God’s Spirit that empowers us, we have a role to play. Always being joyful, praying continuously, being reflexively reliant and being thankful in all circumstances are among the ways we saturate ourselves in the Spirit and cultivate the presence of Christ.

The relationship between the do’s and don’ts and the empowerment of God to accomplish them is helpfully seen in the relationship between dancing and music. As we experience the presence, grace and empowerment of God (the music) the dance is reflexive. The rhythms of grace and God’s Spirit powerfully coursing around us make it all but impossible to sit still. But try to do the dance steps without hearing the music, well that’s going to be frustrating, awkward, rigid and forced.

So think of the conduct requirements in verses 12-15 as the dance steps: those attitudes and actions required. And think of verses 16-24 as hearing the music. Dance Steps (12-15): Actions and Attitudes of a Christ-centered Community Respect for authority and Leadership. There’s only one thing that keeps a Kindergarten class from unraveling into Lord of the Flies, and that is respect for the teacher. Without respect and submission to authority and leadership, the Community of God will have all the bickering drama and chaos of a Reality TV show.

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What’s the Big Idea?

As we continually cultivate the presence of Christ, God empowers us to live out patient, submissive, grace-filled and caring lives in the community of believers.

What’s the Problem?

While we can act holy (patient, joyful, loving, etc.) we can not be holy without God’s Spirit empowering us, filling us and transforming us.

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Those entrusted with the responsibility of spiritual leadership must enjoy the respect and cooperation of those under their care. God commands spiritual leaders to love those they lead sacrificially. Those under that leadership are instructed to support, respect, and hold their leaders in the “highest regard.”

We live in a time when authority – police, teachers, parents, government, preachers – is derided, scoffed, mocked, ridiculed and maligned in any and every possible way. We would be naïve to think that neither we nor our disciples are affected by this anti-authoritarian environment. It is the air we breathe, and so we must always check our motives and attitudes and check those for whom we are responsible.

Shepherding of the Flock. The next great need within the Christian community is for spiritual shepherding. The flock needs oversight. Notice, how this is addressed to all of the brothers and sisters. Discipleship and shepherding is not simply the responsibility of the leaders, but of the community as a whole.

There are four exhortations given as it relates to the task of shepherding: “warn the idle, encourage the timid, help the weak, be patient with everyone.” If there is a golden rule of discipleship, this is it. And that golden rule is that there is no single golden rule. Different people have different heart conditions and need to be motivated accordingly. Whether they need a hand to hold, a shove in the back, a kick in the rear, or an arm around the shoulder is a question of what is causing them to be resistant to Christ. It could be fear, discouragement, apathy or rebellion and a discipler must prayerfully make a diagnosis and motivate accordingly.

Patience and Grace. Next, Paul focuses on the spiritual environment of the community. You can tell very quickly within a community if the environment fostered is one of grace without truth or truth without grace. Without grace, and only truth, a community hardens into a legalistic regulatory body and the body of Christ turns into the marines. But without truth, and only grace, where everything is winked at and affirmed, there is neither standards or accountability, and Christian community lapses into group therapy. We need an environment of both grace and truth in order to spiritually thrive. Being patient (verse 14) is the opposite of paying back wrong for wrong (verse 15). Patience creates an atmosphere of grace without a fear of failure, while “paying back wrong for wrong” creates an environment of justice and judgment.

But the grace afforded by patience does not imply a lack of truth or standards. Again, we need both grace and truth. You can hold up high standards and still be very gracious and patient when someone fails. That’s what Christ does with us. **The music (5:16-24): The Transformed Heart of the community member.** Now, as we said, Good luck trying to make yourself more submissive and patient. You will need God’s empowerment. How do we get it? 1 Thess. 5:16 tells us to always be joyful, praying continuously, reflexively reliant, and thankful in all circumstances. These could seem like more things to do, but it’s not. They’re actually the major ways that we cultivate the presence Christ, walking with Him throughout the day. Notice a similar description is found in describing being “Filled with the Spirit” in Ephesians 5:18-21 (Do look this up).

This continual worship rinsing through our hearts is how our thoughts and attitudes are renewed, and how we are empowered. When you’ve cultivated the presence of Christ in your heart (walking in step with His Spirit) it’s not just you who shows up for Bible study or at church, but Christ and you. And He is able to bless and encourage others through you. And so we are clear on what Paul is talking about: that it is God who transforms, empowers and breathes new life into our thoughts, actions, attitudes and motivations. He states it explicitly, “May God himself, the God of peace, sanctify you through and through” (5:23); “The one who calls you is faithful and He will do it” (5:24). You can’t really do the dance steps without the music.

What’s Our Response?

First you want the group to see what attitudes and actions are involved in creating Christcentered community.

The impossible task of making ourselves more loving, patient, kind, etc., leads to the next response:

You want the group to understand how God empowers us, and how we access that empowerment which is by...

Being joyful, praying continuously, reflexively relying on God and being thankful in all circumstances. These, amongst those found in Ephesians 5:18-20, detail how we cultivate the presence of Christ in our life continually throughout the day. This cultivation of Christ’s presence is also referred to as being “Filled with the Spirit.”

This empowered, Christ-saturated, Spirit-filled life is what energizes and animates true Christian community. It’s what causes the community to manifest Christ.

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What Are the Questions?

I Thessalonians 5:12-28

Launch

If someone were to say to you that Christianity is just a list of “do’s and don’ts” what would you say? Are there do’s and don’ts? In the partnership for our spiritual growth, what’s God part, and what’s our part?

Explore

Read I Thessalonians 5:12-28.

1. What would you say is the overall theme or subject of this passage? What is Paul trying to address?

Attitudes and Actions of a Christ-Centered Community

2. In 5:12-13, How are believers supposed to relate to those in authority over them? How well do you relate? What should you do if a leader is lousy at his job?

3. Having grown up in such an anti-authoritarian age and culture, how has God had to change your thinking about authority and leadership?

4. In what practical ways have you shown respect for those in leadership/authority? Is there an authority in your life that’s very difficult for you to respect? Why?

5. What are the four admonitions in 5:14 and what is the reason for them? Who is this addressed to?

6. How can you tell the difference between a person who needs correction and a person needing encouragement?

7. Have you ever misdiagnosed what a person needed most in their particular state? What happened?

8. Without naming names, what relationship requires the most patience from you. What does it look like to be patient with that person? What makes you impatient?

9. In v. 15. What does it look like to repay evil for evil? And, what’s the motivation behind it?

10. What would it be like to be in a church or family where justice (and with that, judgment) is more valued than grace and patience? How would it make you act? Have you ever been in an environment like this?

11. It’s said that we either err toward being too truth/ justice oriented or too condoning/gracious. Which side do you err on? How do you see both balanced in the ministry of Jesus? How do you try to reflect both to other believers?

The Transformed Heart of the Community Member
Love, respect, patience, grace...it’s impossible to manufacture such godly behavior. To do so we need God to empower us and to transform our attitudes, thoughts and actions which is what Paul turns to next.

12. In v. 19, what does it mean to quench the Spirit?

13. In the passage what is our responsibility in cultivating Christ’s transforming presence in our daily lives? Are there other things we do as well?

14. What connections do you see between vv. 16-18 and Ephesians 5:18-20?

15. Why do you think Paul included vv. 23-24?

Apply

16. In what ways do you find yourself trying to mimic dance steps in your relationships?

17. In your own words, describe what God’s role is in our sanctification and how we cooperate with Him.

18. What is the relationship between being empowered by the Spirit and cultivating Christ’s presence?

19. How do you think God might want you to be involved more in creating this kind of community on campus?

NOTES:

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What Are the Answers?

1. Community.
2. With respect for them, esteeming them highly in love. our respect for authority is not based on the leader's competence; we submit out of reverence for God.
3. This question is to make people aware of the way in which they are effected in this area by the culture.
4. Allow the group to discuss.
5. The admonitions are all in the verse. It is addressed to everyone not just the leaders. Everyone has a role in discipleship.
6. Allow the group to discuss.
7. Allow the group to discuss.
8. Allow the group to discuss.
9. It could be as simple as a glare, or as extreme as throwing punches in an elders meeting. The motivation is usually always the same: they deserve what they are getting.
10. See notes under "Patience and Grace." This creates an environment of judgement, fear, shame, and guilt. It can also spawn legalism, which is more concerned with outward behavior than it is with a change of heart.
11. Allow the group to discuss.
12. It means that, while the Spirit is moving one direction, we are moving another.
13. Always being joyful, praying continuously, reflexively reliant, and thankful in all circumstances: this is how one cultivates the presence of Christ, walking with Him throughout the day.
14. Ephesians describes very similar activities, but in Ephesians it is referred to as "Being filled with the Spirit." What is described in both is how the Lord renews our hearts, minds, thoughts and motivations. Neither list (giving thanks, being joyful) is comprehensive, but both paint a picture of the heart-worship that is taking place continually in our lives.
15. To affirm to us that it is God's empowerment we seek, and that He will continue to transform us until the process is complete.
16. Allow the group to discuss.
17. He is faithfully sanctifying us. God empowers, motivates and energizes us. We submit, pursue Him, cultivate His presence, obey Him.
18. They are really synonymous. The Spirit filled life is at the same time the Christ-centered and saturated life.
19. Allow the group to discuss.

Memorize

...Warn the idle, encourage the timid, help the weak, be patient with everyone.

1 Thessalonians 5:14



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