

What a Finale

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[0 : 00] Okay, for the last time we're going to look at this letter which has taken us over the summer. A letter Paul, the Apostle wrote to a young church in Thessalonica, just a growing young church.

And the advice he gives, the encouragement and the challenges that he brings, which God has enabled us to breathe life into so that it continues to be relevant for us in our day. It's the last section and it's a great finale and it's very practical and very down to earth and maybe quite challenging for us. We don't really know specifically why Paul focused on these areas that he does.

We've got a good idea that most of them are just general points that he would repeat in different letters that he wants all the churches and us to know.

But there may have been issues as well within the church. Maybe they were struggling with the leadership, with God's pattern for leadership. I don't know.

[1 : 04] We don't really know. There's one or two hints that we have in these last few verses. But generally he's teaching them and teaching us about the kind of things that are important to God in the local church and in our Christian lives.

And I think what it reminds of, what I'm going to focus on today as a kind of broader theme, which is the beautiful impossibility of being a Christian and being part of the Christian church.

It's a beautiful and radical revolution that God is working in our lives. So if we talk about it spiritually, it's like God is doing heart surgery with us rather than just dabbing a little cut that we might have on our arm.

He's dealing with us in a really radical way to change us. And he is saying that individually for us. But he's also saying that for us as a church, belonging to the church, belonging to the God's family, the local church is something that is entirely different to anything else in the world and to any other community in the world.

And I think it's important for us to remember that, to remember the radical nature of being part of the church. So there's two challenges really from this passage that I want you to think about. I want you to really consider for yourselves, as I have to consider it for myself, the fundamental things that go deeper than just the passage here.

[2 : 26] One is your heart and one is your church family. So these two things, the heart and church family. So I'm going to ask you a question this morning, has Christ got your heart?

Has He got your heart, you know? There's a great challenge, a great part of the New Testament, the end of the New Testament revelation, where he speaks to the... God speaks to the seven churches. The first church is the church in Ephesus, and He says to them, Have you lost your first love?

And I think that's a very significant thing. I don't think that just means, have you lost the kind of love you first had for Jesus when you became a Christian? You know, like when we talk about, you know, that early love that we have in life and as Christians as well.

I don't think it's just first in terms of when it happened, historically as it were. I think it means more than that. It means first as in terms of priority.

Have we lost Jesus to the priority that He should have in our lives? And that's an ongoing thing, isn't it? Because some of us look back and think, I'm not sure how much I loved Him at the beginning.

[3 : 34] And maybe we're hoping that our love grows, don't we? So maybe it's not so much about our historic first love, but as much as that priority of giving Him first place. Because it's easy, isn't it, the longer we go on as Christians, I think the easier it can be to relegate Him, to not be excited by what Neil was talking about, the beautiful revelation and theology of God and of His truth.

It's easy for us, it becomes, I think, easier for us to keep Him out of our heart, in other words. And the heart, what is the heart? The heart's the seat of our will.

It's our control center. That's what motivates our life and what's important to us. And what is first place in our heart is what controls us and what motivates us and what moves us.

And so it's possible for us as Christians to come to an uneasy truth, to keep the Christian faith that we have manageable, just to keep it manageable.

And we do that by keeping Jesus at arm's length and not allowing Him free reign in our hearts. Too dangerous to give Jesus Christ all of your heart, because we don't really believe we're so bad.

[4 : 47] We don't really believe He's so good. And we certainly are not convinced of the depth of His love for us, so we keep the first place in our heart and our will to ourselves.

His love in our lives is not enough for us to pray, your will be done, not mine, which we prayed at the beginning and the Lord's prayer in many ways. So I'm just asking you, because I've had to ask myself and continue to, about our hearts.

You can only do that today. But also I'm going to ask you about your church family and your understanding of that. Other people, ug, messy, awkward, demanding, critical, unfriendly, failing, not my style.

They're not like me, the people in church. I can't do it. I'm tired of the church as a failed institution. It's just an added burden to my already complicated life.

Lord God, please take this cup from me of belonging to a church. Please make a disposable cup, because it's too hard to love like Jesus.

[5 : 58] It's too hard to give my heart and soul, not just to Jesus, but to others like me. And I'm saying that's good, that's good, that's impossible, isn't it?

It's impossible. If church is just for us that friendship circle with a common interest, then it's just like any other community. See, any other community has the same kind of characteristics.

But the hallmark of the church is we are people who recognize and are living out impossible grace not only by our love for God and giving Him our heart, but our love for one another.

And we need God for that. That's great. That's where we want to get to, recognizing we need God. So today what I want to do just for a moment is for us to reimagine the walk of faith in the light of giving God our hearts and our attitude to one another in Christian community.

And I want you to rethink maybe if you need to, because I know I need to all the time, like the walk or the race or the run of faith, however you want to describe it.

[7 : 05] Rethink it so it's not a solo hill climb, because you might think of the Christian walk as like climbing a mountain on your own with maybe some people around about also climbing, but you're aiming just to get to the top and you're focused on that.

Move away from that way of thinking about the Christian life to thinking of it much more like a tough mother, mother. You know, a tough mother event. You know, these are these events where there's a whole lot of physical challenges and things you have to do and you have to go through mud and climb up stuff.

But you do it as a team and you never finish it until everyone in the team is finished. So it's, you take away the kind of, there's a, at one level you take away the competitive individuality of it.

There's still individuals, but you're part of a team together. And I want you to think of the Christian life like a tough mother event, okay? Just a different illustration.

We do live in a relentlessly individualistic age and I think that's a challenge. Where Christianity is about our private piety. It's a solo run.

[8 : 11] When I was in school, it was many, many years ago, one of the English literature books that we read was the loneliness of the long distance runner by Alonzo Sletto.

And that's I think how we often think of the Christian life. It's a lonely individual race on our own. That is simply not a New Testament picture.

It's not the New Testament picture that we're given. And I want to challenge you and challenge myself from Scripture because we've relegated the idea of being individuals as part of a team.

We have institutionalized or formalized church into the long grass of our lives so that it's not significant. It's much more nuanced than that in the New Testament that we are definitely individuals.

It speaks a lot in this letter about you, you, you, you, you as individuals in the singular. But it also speaks all the time about brothers and sisters, about being together, about being part of a family,

about part of a community.

[9 : 14] Very central. Once we were not a people, now we are a people and we are a people moving forward together. He is the head. We're the body together of Jesus Christ.

Most of the letters in the New Testament are not written to individuals, and even when they are, they were written to individuals who were leaders in churches. Most of them read to churches. And I think that's a challenge, one that's exercised me as we come out of a pandemic where we've been forced kind of into an individualism, again, of watching things at home and being on our own as Christians and all of, all of, sometimes the comfort and the enjoyment of that.

Don't have to get up, don't have to dress up, don't have to go out to church. Don't have to find a different way to get to St. Columbus, which means avoiding 73 different roads and eventually getting there.

And it's challenging and it's attractive for us. But that whole idea of privatization, including privatization of religion is something we need to challenge from God's Word in many ways.

[10 : 21] And I think sometimes even repent of. So just breaking down this short section here, that was a really, really long introduction.

You'll be glad to know that the rest of it will not be quite as long. I'll only go until we have to pay for parking outside. Okay. So the practical implications that Paul brings out here to the church then and now are great.

I particularly love the first section, verses 12 and 13. And the command is, super love your leaders. Super love them.

Now, I actually hate this one because it's, I don't like preaching from it. But it says, we ask you brothers and sisters, respect those who labor among you and are over you in the Lord and in monashute.

And to esteem them very highly in love for their work be at peace among yourselves. So the command here is for the individuals within the church community to love their leaders.

[11 : 23] Know them, love them, take them into your heart. Understand them. And you have to understand your people. And it's not to be a kind of, I suppose if God says, I better do it.

It's not to be a grudging obedience. It's to be super highly, superlative that's used here. It says, esteem them very highly.

And the word that's used there has hyper at the beginning of it where we get hyperactive from, superactive or hyper, whatever else. And he's saying, be super, super loving and esteem them in a super way for the sake of the gospel, the sake of the gospel.

And you will know gospel peace. What can I say about that? That's impossible. It's impossible to do that normally and naturally.

Love them. And leaders, you've got an impossible task, we've got an impossible task also as leaders. And if we're not prayerful and dependent on the Holy Spirit and God's grace, we are nothing and all will collapse around us.

[12 : 38] We are desperately in need of God's grace as leaders. And as people, it's impossible to love your leaders. Sure it is. Sure it is. Your leaders are full of failure, are sinners saved by grace and preachers as preachers we fail.

And it's easy sometimes for I think congregations as well to project their unhappiness onto the people at the front, the people that make the decisions, the people that lead.

It's easy to do that. Those who are visible. And it's such a challenge this for us. Such a challenge for us to be so close as a people, leaders and people together, pastoral teams, city groups and everything that we do in order to be respectful and courageous and honest as leaders and people together with one another as we have in these words.

But that will lead us to a godly peace. It's different from the peace of the graveyard. It's not like that. It's a godly peace where not necessarily that we never have conflict.

You know, we can be terribly easily avoiding conflict but that we deal with it in a gracious and loving way. You know, sometimes when things go wrong with the church and with the leadership, you just walk away, don't you? Just walk away.

[14 : 01] Well, I might try somewhere else now. But the idea is not to do that and not to grumble about them with others but to love them and deal with issues if they are issues that need to be dealt with because we struggle as well and we know everyone struggles as leaders.

We struggle. You know, as a minister, I struggle. I'm always amazed at people think because I preach the gospel and study the gospel that I have no problems and difficulties and all that I preach, I've sussed out and got right.

You preachers battle, preachers are tempted and preachers fail. You don't realize how much I die every Sunday morning and how much weight I lose every Sunday morning before preaching with the fear and the trepidation of that.

So super love your leaders. And then the second thing in verses 14 and 15 is in our interaction with one another. So it's leaders then, one another, our dear brothers, admonish the idol, encourage the faint hearted, help the weak, be patient with them all, see that no one repays evil for evil but always do good, always do good to one another and to everyone.

It's amazing, isn't it? This picture he gives of individuals in community. What kind of Christian community do we need to be in Christ that will allow us to live like this?

[15 : 33] It's not easy, isn't it? It's not just saying have a cup of coffee together, go to the cinema together, do great things. All of these things, important though they are, they're reminding us of deep seated and committed relationships with one another.

The ability to give and take spiritual warnings, to encourage the timid and the worried and the discouraged and the fearful, those that are lacking in confidence.

Now how will we do that unless we know them? And if we know the difference between those who are maybe spiritually idle, careless, and those who are just struggling, we have to be patient with all.

Isn't that a great thing for a church community to consider when we're in a group to get how easy, isn't it for us? How easy, particularly maybe for ministers and leaders to be impatient, and yet we're asked to deal with that and repent of the impatience that must be in our lives.

And you know sometimes you'll look at a passage like this and you think, well that's for the really spiritually elite, the mature among everyone, but no, it's for absolutely everyone.

[16 : 46] There is no elite within the church. And one of the things I'm going to focus on between now and Christmas time I think is discipleship and that gospeling of one another, that ability to talk to each other about Jesus and about our what with Jesus and our battles and our struggles and our fears and our temptations in the way that we interact with one another.

So our interactions with one another. Then there's also our shared characteristics from verse 16 to 22, rejoice always, pray without ceasing, give thanks in all circumstances, don't quench the spirit, don't despise prophecies.

Test everything, abstain from every evil. It's just a waterfall, it's a smorgasbord of commands and encouragements that are coming out and we have shared characteristics in the way that we help each other live out God's will.

You struggle with God's will, what is God's will for me? What's God's will for the church? Well, we're told here, give thanks, among the other things, in all circumstances. This is the will of God in Christ for you.

So we have here God's will for us, not my will, but yours be done. And He wants us to be both individually and as we help one another, He wants us to be joyful in our lives.

[18 : 05] Now that doesn't mean slapstick smiles, it means a deep-seated recognition of who we are and where we are and who loves us. Now we've come out just over this like everyone out of the pandemic, it's been a difficult 18 months.

We've lost 40 or so people who have moved away and leaders and others and John and Thomas and their families and everyone else. And yet the general attitude that prevails is one of that God's with us and we're moving forward and we're not to grumble because of these things, we're to reflect joyfully that He's taken us through it and we're to be thankful even in difficult circumstances because we know that these are not the ultimate circumstances that govern our lives and we are to be praying without ceasing.

We all say that, how can anyone do that? It's an attitude of prayer but it's also this recognition that as a people, as a church, I don't care what else, if God allows me to go for another three years praise, praise be to God and unfortunate for the rest of you but all I want is this to be a prayerful church.

That's the really big thing. That's all I want is to be a prayerful, because if we're a prayerful church together, everything else will fall into place by God's will just to keep being a prayerful, not to think, well, I can pray in my own but to be a prayerful people together, to recognize we're a body together

and that we need the glue and the cement and whatever else you call it of the Spirit of God in prayer together because it's impossible to be a church without that.

It's impossible, we can't do it. And so that would be my plea, that you make that your absolute priority in church, that we are a people who are praying without ceasing and then we will begin to rejoice and also be thankful and that will be attractive in a world that is struggling and dark and individualistic and suicidal in so many different ways.

[20 : 19] And these are not unique characteristics to Timothy, to this letter in Thessalonica. You'll find them again and again throughout the New Testament.

So our shared characteristics are helping to live out God's will. This is God's will for you. But also by fighting, okay, fighting together spiritually.

You may think it's a bad use of word or bad illustration but we've got that 19 to 22. Don't quench the Spirit, don't despise prophecies, test everything, hold on to what is fast, abstain from every form of evil.

And there's that great picture of the Holy Spirit in our lives, in our community and talking about the fire of the Holy Spirit. Don't quench the Holy Spirit and that idea of God's fire in our bellies.

Now the Bible talks a lot about that, about the fire of the Spirit and the Spirit signifying His passion, His purity and His presence with us.

[21 : 24] And that's what we have as Christians. If you have, go back to the beginning and remember chapter 1 verse 5, the gospel came to you not only in word but also in power and in the Holy Spirit and with full conviction.

See, that's what He's remembering, that's what He's knowing and that's what He's asking them not to quench, not to resist and not to dampen that work of the Spirit.

And that's a fight. That's a fight for us. Why is it a fight? Because we still battle with the desires to go our own way and to fail without recognizing who Jesus is.

As we are contentious maybe of church or preaching or the Bible or the gifts of other people and their ability to speak into your lives spiritually, the advice they might give you and you walk away from it, the warnings, the encouragements, the challenges, that's where we're in danger of quenching God's fire among us when we're not willing to be sharpened as iron, sharpened as iron, not willing to be exposed.

Do you think you're maybe going the wrong way here? Do you think maybe this isn't the right path for you? But of course, doesn't that need to be done so sensitively and lovingly rather than a kind of pointing the finger which makes it impossible, which is why we need God and the Spirit in our lives.

[22 : 53] So there's that whole need not to dampen the Spirit's work in our lives by being critical of one another, distant, unloving, careless or disengaged from each other or from God.

And you might think how you live your Christian life away from the church doesn't matter or doesn't affect the church or your presence or lack of presence doesn't matter.

People don't notice or care, but it's about recognizing family together and the importance of what we gain from each other as well as what you give to other people in the Christian church.

Presence, passion and the purity of God through His Spirit don't quench it. So fighting, we've got to fight together because it's tough.

You know, we're in the trenches together. It's a tough mudder. There's some people who have probably done the tough mudder and know what it's like and know that we need to support and help one another to focus on God and His presence.

[24 : 03] And also, as we conclude, just to telling each other about God's purposes from 23 to 28, finishes with reminding us who God is. God Himself, isn't that great?

God Himself. It's not God's angel. It's not God's somehow other representative. It's not just a minister or it's not just a fellow Christian, but He says God Himself will sanctify you.

And that's what He's doing. That's what He's doing in our lives. And He will keep you. He'll keep you body and soul. And He'll keep you blameless because you're covered in the righteousness of Jesus as a Christian.

That is amazing truth for us. Until Jesus comes back, we sung about that earlier. Until Jesus comes back. And He says, Who has called you faithful? So you know, we think, oh, it's a struggle.

It's a battle. It's difficult. Yeah, it is. But it's not in our own strength. We're doing it. And it's, the end is guaranteed. How great would it be to do a tough mudder race if you could see yourself with your team at the end of it, having done it?

[25 : 08] Guaranteed. It would make the difficult bits a bit easier, I think. And well, we can do that as Christians because He says, look, I am faithful. I will surely do it for you.

He's going to keep us. And that's great. He's in the process. He's with us as a church. He's with us in our leadership and in our failures as we go to Him and seek to bring grace into them.

He's covered us and we're safe with Him. And it's great truth. And tell one another these truths. We need to hear them. We need to build one another up with these truths.

With these truths. So, what's the conclusion of it all? Well, I'm on a WhatsApp group with the Winchborough core team because I was helping over the last 18 months with that core team.

And one of the great things that I love about that WhatsApp group, I don't know if I've said this before, is that after preaching or maybe after hearing a message or being in church together or doing a Bible study, very often the question will come up on the WhatsApp group.

[26 : 20] What's your takeaway? And they're not meaning the Chinese or the Indian. What's your takeaway from this sermon? What was your takeaway from this message?

What is it you've learned as God has interacted with you? Because that's what we're looking for, isn't it, that we recognize that this isn't passive, rub on about that one again. It's not passive.

You're responding to God's Word as it's preached and as you read it and as you hear it. What's your takeaway today? Do you ever think about a takeaway from church, from the message?

What's God saying to me? Uniquely to me, because nobody else knows the circumstances you have. What is God's message? What's God's takeaway for me? Can I ask you, who is it that has your heart?

Who has your heart? Who owns your heart? Who owns that first place in love and grace? Do you need possibly today to take a step of faith for the first time to Jesus Christ?

[27 : 24] Do we consider the level of trust and love and honesty and commitment that He wants us to have as a people so that we can speak into each other's lives in an honest and gracious way and not take the huff or not be judgmental whichever way we look at it?

What is your understanding of the church of Jesus Christ?

Are we quenching His Spirit? These are all questions that we need to consider in the takeaway of the message and look to each time we are under God's Word, whether it's in our own private reading of Scripture or church or Bible or whatever it is, how is God transforming and changing my life and my thinking so that I love Him more and love one another more?

I'm blessed and no peace as a result, as a repent and turn and change. That's what He wants from us. He's the Master Surgeon and He's doing a great work in our lives if we allow Him into our heart to transform it and move beyond that kind of place where we protect ourselves from His outstanding light which sometimes pierces the darkness that remains to be dealt with in our lives.

So let's pray as we think about that this morning. Father, we ask and pray that you would bless your Word to us.

[29 : 07] All of us recognize that we all come under it. It's not the preacher preaching to the people as one above or with the answers, but preacher and hearer alike need to be transformed and changed, people and leaders alike in our interactions, in our lives, in our priorities, in our thinking and living.

Bless us as we do so. Help us to know that it's a battle. Know that sometimes we are tempted to quench you and to hold on to our hearts.

But help us to know that that is a dangerous and unpeaceful place to be. We ask it in Jesus' name. Amen.