

Sunday 8 November 2020

Encourage One Another

1 Thessalonians 5:13 Live at peace with one another

Lord of all,
help us to come to you now not just as an outward gesture,
but in heart and mind and soul.
Help us to make space in our hectic lives
to be still in your presence,
and so may we live in you and you in us.
Accept us now as we come to you,
and use us for your kingdom.

As I come into God's presence, I choose to praise him in the words of Psalm 84:1f, 10-12

- ¹ How lovely is your dwelling place,
O LORD of hosts!
- ² My soul longs, indeed it faints
for the courts of the LORD;
my heart and my flesh sing for joy
to the living God.
- ¹⁰ For a day in your courts is better
than a thousand elsewhere.
I would rather be a doorkeeper in the house of my God
than live in the tents of wickedness.
- ¹¹ For the LORD God is a sun and shield;
he bestows favour and honour.
No good thing does the LORD withhold
from those who walk uprightly.
- ¹² O LORD of hosts,
happy is everyone who trusts in you.

Over the past weeks we have been reflecting on some of the Bible passages that tell us how we should relate to one another as followers of Jesus: encourage one another, love one another, forgive one another, bear with one another. Today we look at a longer list of attitudes and virtues that point to the distinctive lifestyle of God's people. They are summed up by the call to be at peace with one another.

We appeal to you, brothers and sisters, to respect those who labour among you, and have charge of you in the Lord and admonish you; esteem them very highly in love because of their work. Be at peace among yourselves. And we urge you, beloved, to admonish the idlers, encourage the fainthearted, help the weak, be patient with all of them. See that none of you repays evil for evil, but always seek to do good to one another and to all. Rejoice always, pray without ceasing, give thanks in all

circumstances; for this is the will of God in Christ Jesus for you. Do not quench the Spirit. Do not despise the words of prophets, but test everything; hold fast to what is good; abstain from every form of evil. (1 Thessalonians 5:12–22)

Paul starts this section of his letter with instructions on how we are to relate to one another (12-15), before turning to our relationship with God (16-22). He opens with guidance regarding leadership (12f). Although leaders may wish to point out the responsibility of the congregation towards them, these words also encourage leaders to reflect on their role. Here is a brief job description for all in leadership, no matter what their specific task may be: to put in the effort, to take responsibility and to encourage those in their care. If leaders seek to do this, however imperfectly, they are worthy of honour (see Hebrews 13:7, 17).

Paul develops with this three-fold approach in the next verse (14), opening out the application to all: admonish the idlers, encourage the fainthearted, help the weak. All this is to be done in a spirit of patience and so allow peace among all. Given the gentleness with which Paul addresses all other issues in these verses, we should apply the same spirit to the 'idlers', 'fainthearted' and 'weak'. These are not chaff, to be winnowed out, but people who need special attention, like a bruised reed or a dimly burning lamp (see Isaiah 42:3).

We pause and pray for those known to us who are struggling to keep the faith at this difficult time.

Pause and pray

The second half of this passage turns our attention to our relationship with God. This starts with three quick-fire instructions: rejoice, pray, give thanks, and do all these continually. Paul is not being unrealistic here. He does not say, 'give thanks *for* all circumstances'. Rather, he encourages us to remember that in all things God is working out his purposes, so whatever happens around or to us we can rest secure in the knowledge that God is with us, therefore we can, 'rejoice always, pray without ceasing [and] give thanks in all circumstances.'

Rejoicing, prayer and giving thanks are all component parts of worship. So, in these verses we are called to two things, to be at peace with one another and to see the whole of life as worship. With the eye of faith we see a different reality from the one presented to us by the world. The life, death and resurrection of Jesus enables us to defy circumstances (without ever glibly dismissing them), and to worship him.

What then are we to say about these things? If God is for us, who is against us? He who did not withhold his own Son, but gave him up for all of us, will he not with him also give us everything else? (Romans 8:31f)

Gracious God,
take our faith, flawed though it is,
our love, poor though it may be,
and our commitment, for all its imperfections,
and use us in your service
to make known your gracious purpose,
through Jesus Christ our Lord.

Amen.