

Sermon Series: Hope in uncertain times

1st Letter to the Thessalonians

#5 Gospel-shaped church – 1 Thess. 5:12-28

Intro: During the pandemic when almost all restaurants in Melbourne were closed (but for serving takeaway) it's amazing how the number of cooking shows proliferated on TV! Australian and international chefs alike teased our tastebuds via our big screen TV's and mobile devices.

When it comes down to it, no matter only one thing mattered – the **taste test**.

In this last section of Paul's First Letter to the Thessalonians, I imagine Paul is giving us a recipe for a Gospel-flavoured, or grace-tasting community of faith. As I read the text it struck me that Paul leaves us with 3 key ingredients that make for a church in which people can truly (as Psalm 34:8 puts it) "taste and see that the Lord is good."

The **first key ingredient** is...

1. Leaders who serve (vss. 12-13)

Verses 12 -13 reveal that there was room for improvement in the relationship between leaders and church members at Thessalonica. Paul writes:

"...respect those who [work hard] 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."

Notice that the respect and love and regard is to be for leaders who **labour and toil** for the church.

There's an old saying¹, "the fish rots from the head down". From a biological point of view, this may not be factual, but in business, government, and churches, it's a truism – a **toxic leader** often results in a **toxic culture**. In the Roman world power and status were social currency, so it's no surprise to find teaching in the New Testament to correct the attitude of leaders. But here, Paul urges the congregation to correct their expectations of a good leader.

¹ attributed to the ancient Greeks, the ancient Italians, and the ancient Turks!

It was upon reading Hermann Hesse's *Journey to the East* in 1958 that the late Robert Greenleaf founded a movement called **servant-leadership**. In Hesse's book a band of travellers on a mythical journey are accompanied by a servant named Leo. Leo did all the menial chores for the travelling party on their way. His servant spirit and his songs of life sustained the group along the way. All went well until Leo disappeared. The group of travellers fell into disarray and conflict. The journey was eventually abandoned. They could not continue in peace without the one who served. After some years of wandering, one member of the group, the narrator in the book, stumbled upon Leo. He discovered that Leo was the leader of an order – the very order, he discovered, had sponsored the original journey. The one he had only regarded as a servant, was in fact a guiding spirit; a great and noble leader.

As a result of reading Hesse's book, Greenleaf declared, "The first and most important choice a leader makes is the **choice to serve.**"

Long before Hesse and long before Greenleaf, Jesus of Nazareth proved to be both **master teacher and chief exemplar of servant leadership**. Jesus said to his disciples,

"The kings of the nations lord it over their subjects.... but not so with you; rather the greatest among you must become like the youngest, and the leader like one who serves (Luke 22:24-26).

Of his own mission, Jesus said,

"The Son of Man came to serve, not to be served" (Mark 10:45).

REFLECT – Healthy churches today will also be marked by **servant-leadership** – those who understand Christ's model of **sacrifice** for the sake of others as a key ingredient in the recipe for a **people of peace**. But they will also have church members who look for servant qualities when appointing leaders. It's tempting today to want leaders who exude charisma, or who show prowess in the pulpit, or who are decorated with academic regalia, or who bear other impressive credentials.² But as with Jesus, Paul calls congregations to measure godly and healthy leadership

² I witness this temptation time and time again when sitting on selection committees for new priest in charge

by the **standard of servanthood**. He tells them, “respect [your leaders], esteem [them] in love.”³

Both leaders and church members have a part to play. Jesus said to his first group of church leaders, “love others as I have loved you” (i.e. as a servant). Christians are all called to love one another in this same way.

Servant leaders are a key ingredient in **Paul’s recipe** for a grace-flavoured church.

2. Members who make peace (vss. 14-15)

The **second ingredient** in Paul’s recipe is **members** who make **peace**. Paul writes in verses 14-15:

“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.”

The **sense of shalom** in a church could be likened to the wonderful flavour and fragrance and nourishment of a 5-star dish. Paul says that **all relationships matter** if a church is to provide an overall sense of wholeness.

In verses 12 and 13 they are already to “be at **peace** among yourselves.” In the next verses, all members must work together...

- **to warn** any “**idlers**” - those who chose not to work but sponged off the hard work and generosity of others,
- **to encourage** the **faint-hearted** – those who were grieving the loss of loved ones, wondering about the certainty of the resurrection,
- **to help** those who’s knees were weak in the face of persecution and poverty – the immature in faith,
- **to exercise patience** with everyone, and
- **to reject revenge**, to purge any **preference for payback**.⁴

³ Sometimes church members put church leaders on a pedestal. Others think the church would be better off without church leaders at all! But a healthy Gospel-flavoured experience of church comes from the delightful combination of servant-leaders and peaceable parishioners who show mutual respect.

⁴ See Romans 12:20-22, and 1 Peter 2:23,24 says of Jesus, “When abused, did not return abuse; when suffering, did not threaten; but entrusted himself to the one who judges justly.”

A peaceful and grace-flavoured church will be committed to **patient encouragement** and **nurture** for those who need to grow in their faith in God.

REFLECT - As much as church members should lay down their anger over differences and conflicts that arise, leaders in churches also need to set high standards of mutual respect and facilitate good processes that provide for **just** and **fair** outcomes in relationship disputes. Too often the call to “pardon” has loaded unjust pain upon the victim in relationship disputes due to a lack of justice and accountability for harmful action. Paul’s call to peaceable attitudes must be balanced with other calls for people to amend their wrongful attitudes and actions.

If people are to **taste and see** that God is good in the church, the recipe includes the ingredients of **leaders** who are **servants**, **members** who are **peacemakers**, and **thirdly...**

3. **Worship that is in all of life** (vss. 16-22)

Paul’s final ingredient for a Gospel-flavoured community is worship of God that **infuses all of one’s life**. He writes in verses 16-18

"Rejoice always, pray as you go, give thanks in all circumstances".

Note that praise, prayer, and thanksgiving to God is not thought of as **1 hour on Sunday!** Nor is God to be thought of as good **only in good times**. Mature worshippers recognise God is good every day, and even in challenging times⁵ – in all circumstances.

Daily acts of praise, prayer, and thankfulness to God need not be framed in fancy religious language, liturgies or ceremonies, nor housed in special buildings. Instead, Paul urges Christians to worship God in the course of normal daily living in tune with the presence of the Holy Spirit, aware of the providence of a Heavenly Father, and along the path that Jesus has walked before. **In fact, in verse 19 Paul likens** those who compartmentalize worship to merely religious disciplines or ceremony as “quenching [the fire of] the Holy Spirit”.

⁵ The Old Testament Book of Job 2:21 reminds us that even amidst great calamities the model faithful one said: "Naked I came from my mother's womb, and naked shall I return there; the LORD gave, and the LORD has taken away; blessed be the name of the LORD." Job was an ideal to consider – someone who learned to practice the truth that "God is good, but the world around us often is not."

Good chefs need continued heat below the pan throughout the whole process of creating a flavoursome dish. Fire is a metaphor for the Spirit's presence and power to keep us mindful of God and on track with Jesus in our daily lives. To think of worship as only when we gather in this building is to miss the Bible's idea of worship altogether! To do so is like dousing the flames of the one who brings the very life of God into every moment!

Similarly, in verses 20-22, Paul hopes that the ministry of the word of God, (the tested teaching of prophets⁶ or preachers from the Bible) will impact **daily** living, (so that believers might **hold fast to what is good** and **avoid doing evil**).

REFLECT – The season of **Lent** is a great time to reboot your integration of praise, prayer, thanksgiving, and Scripture into daily life. This week coming we'll promote several **helpful resources** to assist you in daily devotions that might set you on this course. Let's reset the manner of our worship so that it is part of **all of life**.

Paul's recipe for a Gospel-flavoured experience of Christian community includes **three important ingredients**:

1. Leaders who serve
2. Members who are peacemakers, and
3. Worship of God that pervades all of the believer's life

4. A Blessing and A Promise (22-24)

Paul finishes his exhortation with a **blessing** to this end, praying: "may God set your whole person apart for God's holy purposes – may your body, soul and spirit be kept sound and blameless until Christ returns."

And he leaves us with a **promise**: "God is faithful and will do this."

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⁶ Prophets in New Testament references seemed to be those who applied the words of Scripture to life in the present. Paul in 1 Corinthians 14, calls the congregation to weigh up or test what is taught and agree together on God's will. Does the guidance we receive honour Christ as Lord (1 Jn 4:1-3). Does it major on God's grace. Does it promote peace and wholeness? Is the message evident in the speaker's own beliefs and actions? He commands them here in the strongest way possible to have this letter read to the church. This places his letter on the same level as the Old Testament Scriptures that were already read in their church meetings. To ignore this letter then, is also to quench the Spirit, since it's the Spirit that's inspired Paul to write it.