

## Prayers

### To God

*Be quiet before Your Lord today. Listen for His voice speaking to you through the events of your life and what is happening in the world right now.*

### For myself

Lord God Almighty, in this world some starve, some have too much, some give food away and some throw it away without thought. Save us from ourselves, we pray; show us how to use the gift of food properly, and give us a heart to recognise the needs of those who deserve better than the scraps from our tables. **AMEN**

### For others

*Pray about the world of advertising. It serves a good purpose of informing us, but too much of it has become more like commercial manipulation than the shop front of free choice. Pray for those who work in this field.*

## Meditation

Distress colours the mind and distracts the soul;  
It becomes hard to know what to do and where to look  
But the peace of Christ absorbs the colours of pain  
Restoring poise to the mind, the soul, the spirit.

Anxiety distorts our sense of time and perspective;  
It becomes hard to be patient, trusting or positive:  
But the love of Jesus soaks up painful experiences  
Through the spiritual empathy of His followers.

The pain of suffering is never far from anyone;  
We cannot avoid the reality of life in a fallen world:  
But the saving work of Christ is no sham, no stunt,  
For God loves all, and longs to help us in our trials.

So let us not turn from Him in our distress; He holds the answer.

# Bible Passage

## 1 Thessalonians 5:12-15

<sup>12</sup> But we appeal to you, fellow believers, to get to know those who work in your midst, those who are set over you in the Lord and those who instruct you. <sup>13</sup> Hold them lovingly and in the highest regard because of their work, and be at peace among yourselves.

<sup>14</sup> We urge you, fellow believers;

- warn those who are idle,
- encourage the faint hearted,
- keep close to the sick,
- be patient with all people.
- <sup>15</sup> See to it that no one repays evil for evil,
- and always seek to do good to each other and to all.

## Review

Paul frequently offers practical advice about living the Christian life when closing his letters, and he does this here. Our passage is a wonderful collection of advice, presented in two very different ways, an appeal to obedience and discipline within the church (5:12-13), followed by the memorable list of warnings and commendation(5:14-15). All of this is valuable spiritual advice which will reward us if we choose to remember it.

### **Attitudes towards church leaders**

The opening two verses concentrate on attitudes towards church leaders. Now in much of this letter, Paul has been careful to justify both his own teaching and that of the other leaders he sent to Thessalonica (notably Timothy, see 2:9, 4:1f.). He wanted these leaders to be accepted as having the same authority as himself, but Paul had another reason for saying this. Paul was not trying to bolster the status and ego of leaders (see 2 Cor 11:16f.), far from it, but he was concerned that the churches should recognise the authority of true Gospel teaching and accept it.

While churches were created across the world, evangelists and leaders like Paul, Silas and Timothy acted as the 'glue' holding the church together. But as false teachers interrupted the progress of the Gospel (e.g. see 2 Cor 11:13, Galatians 2:4 etc.), how were people to recognise the true Gospel? Throughout his writing, Paul pointed out that the Gospel does not change, and the first way of assessing it is to check out whether what is preached is the Gospel 'as you first heard it' (1 Cor 2:1f., 1 Thess 2:13 etc.). Paul presents a vision of unity, of one God, one Gospel of Salvation, one Christ, and one Church united in the Saviour, and none of this changes. It may change in its application and effect, but not in its substance; in the light of this, what vision of the church universal do we have?

### **Being at peace**

Then, before offering the powerful advice of verses 14 and 15, Paul points his readers to a truth which is too often ignored, especially when the church is in crisis; he calls on God's people to be '*at peace among yourselves*' (5:13). By definition, a Christian is one who has '*peace with God*' (Romans 5:1), and so as Paul now says, we should be able to be '*at peace amongst ourselves*' (5:13). Here is the scriptural advice we all need to hear before we enter church meetings and gatherings, and teaching we should obey when in those meetings!

### **The six cameos of wisdom (5:14-15)**

### ***'warn those who are idle'***

After this opening, we find six wonderful teaching cameos about the Christian life. Paul's words do not refer to spiritual truths as if they are a permanent state to which we should aspire; for example, he does not say, *'do not be idle'*. He teaches something far more radical, which requires all God's people to be on the look out. He says *'warn those who are idle'*. Even in those days for which Christians today often pine, it is obvious that Paul was aware that there were Christians who were 'lazy'; whatever they said, they did little. He did not know how much this would become a problem for the church in later years, where today, many go to church and think this an adequate expression of their faith. Christian discipleship requires more, and this Scripture makes the matter plain.

### ***'encourage the faint-hearted'***

The words *'encourage the faint-hearted'* reflect an essential ministry within the church. Everyone knows what it is like to be daunted by what lies ahead or downcast at what has happened, and we all need the fellowship of the church around us to encourage us. Some have the gift of encouragement as a spiritual gift (3:2, 2 Tim 4:2), and for the rest of the Christian community, encouragement is a general gift that arises naturally from the fact of our salvation. The positive effects of our salvation can surely have no other affect than to make us people who are positively hopeful for the future, and from this comes our encouragement of others.

### ***'keep close to the sick'***

I have translated the next phrase, *'keep close to the sick'*, but most Bible versions have *'help the sick'*. This is because the Greek word used here does indeed refer to offering help, but it also carries the idea of doing this by keeping close by, in other words, by being loyal, persisting in friendship and in prayer, and not giving up. Such is the help of a true friend, and this is what those who are sick most often need, especially those who are chronically sick and who struggle with the fact of their continued sickness despite much prayer. 'Keeping close' is a healing ministry that is as essential as healing prayer.

### ***'be patient with all people'***

The next piece of advice says, *'be patient with all people'*. But why should Paul see fit to say this given all he has said so far? Surely, a positive approach to all people is all that is required? There is however great wisdom in Paul's words here, because it is all too easy for God's people to be trying to do God's work too fast, and some folks keep up with what a fellowship is doing and others find that they just cannot do this. The call to be patient with all people is therefore essential advice. Much well-meaning ministry can do harm if it ignores the true circumstances and feelings of people. So all of us must learn to wait on God for His timing, and be patient with the people to whom we minister, just as people need to be patient with their leaders who have to put together a complex array of ministry needs when deciding how and when to act on anything.

### ***'see to it that no one repays evil for evil'***

The next piece of advice is in verse 15, and urges God's people to refrain from returning *'evil for evil'*, each one of us has a way of responding when things do not go well, or when we are confronted with something evil. We tend to do one of these things, we fight, we withdraw or we try to overcome what is before us in various ways. Paul's advice is profound and challenging. The Christian must overcome the natural urge to respond to evil by giving back that same thing; in other words, he or she must not succumb to what we otherwise call 'bitterness'. This is extremely difficult to do, but our example is Jesus, who took all evil on Himself on the Cross, and did not give it back, and this is how He won our salvation. He, therefore, is the One to whom we must turn to help us do what Paul suggests here.

### ***'seek to do good to each other and to all'***

In comparison to the advice to refrain from returning evil for evil, Paul ends with the foremost instruction, *'seek to do good to each other and to all'*. In this way, the Christian demonstrates the victory of the Cross in real life. We extend the incarnation of Christ and make the Gospel real in this world when we do what is good and right not for ourselves, but knowingly for other people. Notice, that Paul says here that our duty is first to do this for *'each other'* within the Christian community, and after this, to do this *'for all'*. It can be too easy to concentrate on one and not the other, but without question, we are called to both.

## **Application**

### **Leaders**

Church life is often dominated by people's opinions of and attitudes towards their leaders, and being human, they have faults and frailties that cause people to hold wildly differing opinions about their suitability as leaders. Paul cuts across all such speculation here with an appeal to respect the authority of leaders, that is, *'those who are set over you in the Lord'* (5:12). He calls on God's people to get to know their leaders (5:12), to love and respect their teaching (5:12,13) and *'hold them ... in the highest regard'* (5:13). This is a strong challenge to godliness in the way we deal with each other at church; we must hear this Scripture.

Unfortunately there is a crisis in leadership within the church today. Many are oppressed and find it hard to deliver the leadership and teaching they would like; they are not well paid or loved, and struggle to provide for their families. Elsewhere, some have become fat from the riches of the church and become lazy; they prefer to preach the spectacular or the original in order to write a book and gain notoriety (and consequently money); they are not willing to do the hard graft of Kingdom service. Others keep the appearance of religion or evangelism but avoid the risky business of letting themselves be led by God's spirit; they believe a programme of church activity will prove they have done the job.

I firmly believe that when church and leader come together under God to love and respect each other and agree on the basics of the Gospel, God is able to do radical things that can change the world. Of course, such things may not be as visible as some would like, and the Lord God works in a thousand ways unseen whilst the world parades its idols and celebrities. We do not need Christian leader celebrities or evangelistic personalities, but rather, people who will work with others to do the groundwork of evangelism at the heart of the Gospel and the true life of the church.

### **Good advice**

I find the words in verses 14 and 15 very challenging. Fortunately, I came across the advice not to return evil for evil many years ago, and at the time I was aghast that I had not fully understood this teaching. Now I know how important this is I still find it hard to refrain from *'retaliating in kind'*, but knowing God's will is the starting point of conquering a problem. Each phrase of verses 14 and 15 is a strong challenge to live as Christ taught and strive for the highest standards of behaviour and life. I know that striving will not achieve my salvation, but it will commend the Gospel to others; for how are other people to believe what I proclaim if I do not strive every fibre of my being to live like Christ and attain such standards of behaviour and relationships.

Lastly, I recommend learning simple lists like this (5:14,15). Unless we have simple practical discipleship advice like this imprinted on our memories then we will let too much of our discipleship duties pass us by, by default. I do not want this, and suspect you feel the same.

## **Questions (for use in groups)**

1. Study the six guidelines in this passage and consider which you believe to be the most urgent for today.
2. Look through this passage of scripture and assess what you feel is the one piece of advice which challenges you most. Pray about this.
3. How easy is it to refrain from returning 'evil for evil'? Discuss this in your group.

## **Final Prayer**

Praise You, Almighty and powerful God! You have conquered death for us, You have made us worthy to stand before You by love, You have given us the blessing of eternal life, You have now given us a glimpse of the eternal glory which is ours through Your Son. Praise You, Almighty God; praise You for Jesus Christ Your Son! AMEN