

This is Church Community!

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Preacher: Oscar Chow

[0:00] The scripture reading today is taken from 1 Thessalonians 5, verse 12 to 28.

! Please follow along in your Bible. If you don't have a Bible, please feel free to grab one from the front of the stage on either side or at the back near the door. Our passage is on page 929 in the church Bible.

929. Hear then God's word to us today. We ask you, brothers, to respect those who labor among you and are over you in the Lord and admonish you, and to esteem them very highly in love because of their work.

Be at peace among yourselves. And we urge you, brothers, admonish the idle. Encourage the faint-hearted. Help the weak.

Be patient with them all. See that no one repays anyone evil for evil, but always seek to do good to one another and to everyone.

[1:12] 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 prophecies, but test everything. Hold fast what is good. Abstain from every form of evil.

Now may the God of peace himself sanctify you completely, and may your whole spirit and soul and body be kept blameless at the coming of our Lord Jesus Christ.

He who calls you is faithful. He will surely do it. Brothers, pray for us. Greet all the brothers with a holy kiss.

I put you under oath before the Lord to have this letter read to all the brothers. The grace of our Lord Jesus Christ be with you. Let us believe and respond to God's true and living word.

[2:13] Amen. Thanks, Kingston. Good morning, everyone. Good morning.

My name is Oscar. If you don't know me, I serve at Watermark as one of the non-staff elder pastors. That's a really mouthful, isn't it? That is, I guess, what I do, my role.

It's a real privilege to be delivering God's word today. And welcome to all of our guests and our church family. Can you guys hear me okay? Okay. Let's pray together as we look into God's word. Father in heaven, we come before you humbly, Lord. I pray, God, as we listen to your word and this message, Father, that it may come from you, Lord. I pray that you give me just the humility and the conviction to speak your word, Father.

If anything I've said is not of you, please remove it from our minds. I pray that our hearts would be soft to listen to you and to receive your word. Lord, we want to hear from you today, God.

[3:23] Your word is powerful. Your spirit is powerful. We want to hear from you, God. Help us to see ourselves and to see the beauty of our Savior, Jesus Christ. We give this time to you.

We pray this in his name. Amen. Amen. So in December 1914, the British explorer Ernest Shackleton and his crew of 27 men set sail aboard the Endurance from Buenos Aires, Argentina, towards Antarctica.

But after getting close to the Antarctic mainland, disaster struck. Massive blocks of floating ice surrounded and eventually crushed and sank the Endurance.

And to survive, the crew, they camped on top of the blocks of ice. But when the blocks of ice started to crack, they had to grab lifeboats and they stayed on a deserted island.

But soon realizing that no one would save them, Shackleton, the captain, and a few good men, they grabbed another lifeboat and they sailed 800 miles and somehow found their way in Chile and managed to convince the Chilean government to borrow a boat, which they took back and rescued the entire crew.

[4:37] So how did this crew, a hodgepodge of sailors, scientists, carpenters, doctors, and cooks, survive 10 whole months of freezing, life-threatening conditions?

Well, historians write that it was mainly because of the mutual support that this crew had for each other. From doctors to chefs, all 27 men worked together to encourage each other, share and care for each other, working towards the same goal, the same shared goal, getting home safely.

So whether we are shipwrecked and trying to get home or we are Christians trying to get to our eternal home, heaven, we all need people to help us.

So as a church, we've been going through this entire book of one Thessalonians, and today is the last sermon in this series. The church in Thessalonica was a young church.

After planting this church, the apostle Paul, he had to leave suddenly under persecution. Paul sends Timothy, his helper, to go see how the church was doing, and Timothy comes back with a favorable report.

[5:53] And so on the back of that report from Timothy, Paul writes this letter. Paul says, hey, I'm encouraged by you. But he also challenges the church, and he says, I see you've been loving God and loving each other, now do so more and more.

Help each other to stay the course and finish well. For Jesus, our great hope, is returning. This book of 1 Thessalonians tells us that as Christians await the return of Jesus, it's a life of active waiting, of living to please the one who is inclined to be pleased with us.

But of course, life is not easy. It's difficult. Life pulls us in all different directions. We have responsibilities.

We have to work and make money. We have temptations. And so today in this final passage, we'll see that God has given us a special gift to help us stay the course.

And this gift is the church. Not just a building, not just a once-a-week Sunday service, but a deeply connected community of Christ followers who authentically and sacrificially care for one another under God's authority.

[7:10] And for you today, if your church community is going to help you finish well and stay the course, there are three key things that you must grasp.

For without them, you'll always be on the fringe and feel disconnected from church. So let's examine these three things. First, how we're called to relate to our leaders.

Second, how we're called to care for our members. And third, how we're called to commune with God. You ready? Should we dive in?

Someone in the back is ready? Great. Let's do it. First, how we're called to relate to our leaders.

Let's look at verses 12 and 13. Paul writes, We ask you, brothers, to respect those who labor among you and are over you in the Lord and admonish you, and to esteem them very highly in love because of their work.

Be at peace among yourselves. In this church, in Thessalonica, there was likely some tension between leaders and members. That's why in verse 13, Paul writes, Be at peace among yourselves.

[8:22] Because there wasn't peace between leaders and members. Paul asks them, Hey, respect and esteem your leaders. Now before we continue, let's address the elephant in the room.

History is riddled with bad leaders. Politicians who run on campaigns to serve the people, but end up serving themselves. Church clergy who, under the banner of authority, abuse congregants.

Perhaps you're here and you've been hurt by someone that you've been told should be caring for you. A teacher or a church leader or a parent.

And so now when you read that Paul says, Hey, respect and esteem your leaders, if you're honest, it's hard to accept. But notice that Paul isn't saying to respect your leaders just because they have some title.

He doesn't even use the formal title of elder or overseer like he does in other passages of the Bible. But he's most certainly talking about elder pastors.

[9:22] Those whom the Bible say run or lead individual churches. Paul doesn't mention the title because he wants to focus on the elders' actions.

Respect your church leaders, he says, not because of their position, but because of their labor. The translation of the word labor here is a very strong word.

It's a picture of a farmer getting up early in the morning to water his crops, staying out in the hot sun to harvest those crops. Church elder pastors are not overlords who sit in some ivory tower, barking

orders to people.

They are to work hard. Teaching from the Bible. Praying for the people. And being hands-on in caring for the church. But they're under-shepherds.

Serving under our chief shepherd, Jesus. Listen to how Jared Wilson describes a regular day of an elder pastor. Jared writes, The pastor is a multitasker, not just of duties, but of personalities and problems.

[10:29] Many Christians are focused on their own journey. The biblical pastor is too. But he's also focused on yours and his and hers and the next guy's. And one day he might hold a dying woman's hand, grieve in the office with a couple on the verge of divorce, celebrate 100 days of sobriety with someone, and then go home and laugh with his wife and kids at a Munster's rerun.

That's an American sitcom, by the way. I just learned that recently. Jerry, by the way, misses a few things. How about preparing a sermon? Well, that's off the list at least for now.

Paul writes, And Paul mentions one very specific part of this work in verse 12.

He writes, Elders admonish the congregation. John Stott defines admonish to mean this, To warn against bad behavior, sin, and its consequences, and to correct and even discipline those who have done wrong.

Now, it's not a harsh telling off to make us feel bad or to shame us. It's reminding us of what we already know from God's word, to help us to stay the course. I'll tell you, in my life as a Christian, I have been greatly blessed, but also challenged from both mentors and friends who have asked me penetrating and sometimes difficult-to-hear heart questions done out of love to help me see where I have put my hope and happiness in something other than Jesus.

[12:16] When I have gripped money too tightly, I was asked, Hey, isn't God a generous God? What does your stinginess reflect about your view of God? When I was idolizing my career, I was asked, Hey, Oscar, how about, if you didn't have your career, what is your identity?

And so if you're a member of Watermark, remember that you have given the elders permission to ask you similar types of heart questions, because we love you, but don't be surprised if we ask you these questions.

It's a gentle but honest reminder from God's word, done out of love, to help us all get back and stay the course. And so if you call Watermark your home church, how can you respect or esteem your elder pastors who labor, lead, and admonish you?

Well, first, listen to them. This is Paul's main point in this passage. Don't blindly agree with everything they say. Test it with God's word.

But have a heart posture, which is, How may God be speaking to me through my elder pastor?

Second, care for them. If you didn't know, elder pastors have feelings too.

[13:35] They have real life challenges. They get tired. They have burdens. They make mistakes. Yeah, it's true. Have a two-way relationship with your elder pastor.

Don't just unload on them. Also, ask them, How are they doing? Ask them good heart questions. Hey, are you resting in Christ today? And most importantly, pray for your elder pastors.

See, our elder pastors are Watermark. We need to find our identity in Jesus and not in our work. We need to rest in the grace of Christ, even though the labor is hard. We need prayer to walk in humility because one of the biggest temptations of leaders is pride.

We need prayer to experience the joy of knowing Christ deeply through the labor of leading his church. So this is number one, how we're called to relate to our church leaders.

Second, how we're called to care for our church members. Let's look at verses 14 and 15. Paul writes, One of the biggest challenges in the modern church is consumerism.

[15:00] People hang back, thinking that it's the leaders who do all the work. Well, in these two verses, Paul urges not just leaders, but everyone to care for each other, to help each other to finish well, and specifically to care for three different kinds of fellow church members.

First, he says, admonish the idol. We've already seen and talked about what admonish means. It's speaking truth in love. Paul mentions admonish the idol because if you were here last week, Kevin spoke about how there were church members in this church in Thessalonica who said, Hey, if Christ is coming back soon, well, we don't need to work.

Well, that was disruptive to the church community because people who are idol get up to no good. And also, if they're mooching off of other people, they're using up precious resources that can be used for those truly in need, like elderly widows and orphans.

So first, admonish the idol. Second, Paul writes, encourage the faint-hearted. Now, these are those who have experienced significant persecution, suffering, or grief.

Those who have lost a loved one. Those who are under immense financial stress. Those who are battling severe mental illness. And so here at Watermark, let's encourage the faint-hearted.

[16:24] Let's sit with them. Comfort them. Pray with them. Remind them that even as their heart may feel heavy, that Jesus offers to carry that burden.

Have a mindset that is, Hey, when you come to church on Sunday morning, have an open heart and say, Hey, how can I encourage one person today? If you see someone who's struggling, don't assume that someone else is going to encourage them.

Make a note to text them Monday morning to say, Hey, how can I be praying for you? This is low-hanging fruit. You see, Watermark should not be a church just for those who have it all together, but a place where those who are down and discouraged can be lifted up and encouraged to hold fast to Jesus.

And finally, third, help the weak, Paul says. This likely refers to both physical and spiritual weakness. To care for those with physical disabilities as well as those who are struggling with sin and addiction.

So three imperatives to three different kinds of people. Admonish the idle, encourage the faint-hearted, and help the weak. You see, everyone at church is different.

[17:42] So we need to recognize where each person is at and ask ourselves and to pray, Hey, what would help this person most at this time? John Piper has a prescient quote which describes all of this.

Piper writes, Picture your arm pointing to the idle, saying no more. Picture your arm touching the shoulder of the faint-hearted to let them know that you care and are beside them for encouragement.

And picture your arm actually holding up and lifting the weak since they need extraordinary help.

But of course, caring for people is difficult because people are messy.

That is why Paul writes, Be patient with them all. People don't like being told they have a blind spot. Here it's our pride. The CG member that you've been trying to encourage may be discouraged for much longer than you had hoped.

Patience is necessary when we care for our church family. Well, then Paul goes a step further and he writes in verse 15, he says, See that no one repays evil for evil, but always seek to do good to one another and to everyone.

[18:57] You see, in the messiness of church community, you may be trying to care for someone. They may just reject your care. They may even complain about you behind your back and slander you.

And yet, always seek to do good to one another. I'm very challenged by that. Now, in no way are we to condone bad behavior and sin in the church.

Paul writes about church discipline in other letters, but here he is saying, Don't let the offense of others cause you to stumble and sin right back. Be patient.

Forgive. Do good. Honor Jesus. And the point of all this, friends, is simple. All of us, whether we admit it or not, need help.

Let's help each other. And through this sometimes inconvenient process of caring for someone, may God grant us a clearer vision of how Christ cares for us.

[20:06] And as we carry another person's burdens and pain, may we catch a glimpse of how Jesus Christ carries our sin and our shame on his shoulders. And as we sacrifice our time to care for our fellow church member, may we be reminded that Jesus didn't just give us time.

He gave his very life for us on the cross. Yes, church community can be messy, but the messiness of church is not a bug. It's a feature.

Caring for someone who is difficult to love is not a hindrance to church life. Friends, that is church life. Let me repeat that. Caring for someone who is difficult to care for, that it doesn't prevent us from growing.

That is part of church life. That's how we grow. So let me ask you, how is your church community? Who is your church community?

Who have you opened up your heart to that can help carry your burdens? Whose shoulder are you putting your hand on to remind them, hey, it's okay. Jesus, our Lord, he understands the pain you're

going through.

[21 : 15] Who are you texting during the week to ask, hey, how can I be praying for you? Maybe you need them to pray for you back. So in this passage thus far, Paul has asked the church to respect their leaders who work hard to care for them, and he's urged the church to care for one another.

And now Paul says to them, this is what it looks like for the church community to commune with God. So in these next few verses, Paul describes this, next slide please.

Paul describes an interplay, a sort of back and forth between God speaking and the church responding. God speaking and the church responding.

God speaking and the church responding, a back and forth. Let's look at God speaking first. Let's go to verses 19 to 22. Paul writes, Now it seems quite sudden, and we really don't know why, but Paul, out of the blue, brings up prophecy here.

What is prophecy? In 1 Corinthians 14, verse 3, Paul writes in a different letter, the one who prophesies speaks to people for their upbuilding and encouragement and consolation.

[22 : 47] Prophecy isn't necessarily about telling the future, although it could be. It's a word of encouragement that God brings to the human mind to build up and encourage the church.

And in Thessalonica, perhaps there were some wacky prophecies, or maybe the church just didn't know how to deal or respond to prophecy. Whatever the reason, Paul writes, Hey guys, don't despise prophecy.

God speaks through His Spirit to people, but because people don't always get it right, we must test the prophecy. Is it in line with the gospel?

Does it glorify Jesus? Does it build up and edify His church? If it aligns with Scripture, hey, embrace it. Hold fast to what is good.

But if not, abstain, reject it. And this is the same approach for us today. God gives His church today prophetic words to encourage and edify us.

[23 : 52] And so if we reject this spiritual gift today, we are quenching the Spirit. We are putting the fire out of the Spirit's power and missing a key way that God can encourage His church.

And by the way, if you sense that you have this gift of prophecy, be encouraged and come talk to the watermark elders. We'd love to help you, encourage you, work with you to see how your gift can encourage His church.

But prophecy is not the primary way that God speaks to His church. Even in the first century, the main way God spoke to the church was His Word.

They didn't have bound Bibles like we do today. They had Old Testament scriptures. In Acts 17, when the author writes about Paul going to Thessalonica for three weeks, the author writes that Paul reasoned with the people there from the scriptures, the Old Testament scriptures.

But today, friends, think about it. We are so privileged to have a bound Bible in our hands. God's infallible and authoritative Word that does not need to be tested.

[25 : 05] The living and active words of Christ illuminated through the power of His Spirit. Today, the Bible is the primary way that God speaks to us. And by the way, next week's sermon will be on exactly this topic, why the Bible is authoritative and the main way God speaks.

So here's an application. Treat God's Word as precious gold. Actually, before that, here's an application. Buy a Bible if you don't have one. If you can't buy a Bible, if there's an issue for you, come talk to me.

Treat God's Word as precious gold. Read it every day with an open and humble heart, praying, God, speak to me through Your Word. Feed your soul as God's Word reveals to you the inner workings of your own heart and who you are in Christ Jesus.

So this is the first part of the section three, which is God speaking. The second part of the section now is how does a Christian respond to God speaking to us?

Well, let's go to verses 16 to 18. Rejoice always, pray without ceasing, give thanks in all circumstances. As we hear God's Word speak to us, primarily from His Word, reminding us of the goodness and grace of Jesus, we respond to Him with joy and thanksgiving.

[26 : 35] And if you think about it, that is the rhythm of our Sunday morning worship service. We hear God's Word from the beginning, from the call to worship, through the Scripture reading, and through the sermon.

God's Word speaks to us. And throughout the service today, we respond to Him. We rejoice in Him through the song, through the music, through prayer, with thanksgiving. And it's also how we commune with God daily, outside of Sunday service, either in our CGs or by ourselves. We read God's Word, and then we respond to Him with awe, with praise, with joy, as we're reminded of the gift of Christ, always, in all circumstances.

But, if we're honest, sometimes, it's hard to have joy. It's hard to be thankful. Maybe on Sunday morning at church, in the midst of our church community, it's a bit easier.

But on Monday morning when the alarm rings and we have to get up again for another week of work or in the middle of the night when our baby wakes us up and is demanding a nappy change or when the bills pile up or maybe when life just nails us with pain and disappointment, it's hard to experience joy and thanksgiving.

[27 : 58] And yet, this is the will of God in Christ Jesus for you. End of verse 18. You see, friends, the Bible never promises that the Christian life is easy.

And yet, in the midst of both blessing and abundance as well as during hardship and suffering, it is God's will somehow that you can rejoice and give thanks.

Why? How? Well, notice this verse. It's the will of God in Christ Jesus for you. If today, if you're a Christian, if you're a follower of Jesus, you are united with Christ.

You are in Christ. His Spirit lives in you. And therefore, all of the blessings of Jesus Christ flow to you.

In Christ, you're adopted into God's family. In Christ, you can know God and be known by Him. In Christ, your record is clean.

[29 : 06] Your sins are forgiven. In Christ, God's Spirit is working in you to help you to please Him. And in Christ, when Jesus returns again, you will inherit your eternal home in heaven.

If you're not a Christian this morning, the blessings of Christ do not flow to you. But the good news, friends, is this. You don't have to be a better person to be in Christ.

but you have to simply, but you must repent and you must believe in Jesus. Paul ends this passage, this book of the Bible with a prayer.

In verse 23, Paul writes, Now may the God of peace Himself sanctify you completely and may your whole spirit and soul and body be kept blameless at the coming of our Lord Jesus Christ.

He who calls you is faithful. He will surely do it. There's been a theme in this book. Paul constantly talks about the second coming of Jesus.

[30 : 15] And again here, he writes that Jesus is coming again. This was Paul's great hope and this is our great hope.

In light of the return of Jesus, may we live lives pleasing to Him so that our entire being, every part of us, soul, spirit, and body will be blameless at His coming.

Watermark. May we stay the course and finish well. To help us finish well, God has given us this gift of our church community. And so today, if you are on the fringe of church, I urge you, make the investment.

Dive into church community. Respect good leaders who work hard to care for you. Care for your church community and be cared for by them. And let's do this together as a messy church.

Let's listen to God's word and spirit, remind us of the gospel. And as we do that, let's respond to Him with joy and thanksgiving because we are in Christ. I'll close with the words of Jesus from John 16, 33.

[31 : 30] Jesus said, In the world, you will have tribulation, but take heart. I have overcome the world. We can rejoice always. We can give thanks even in the midst of pain, disappointment, and suffering.

Because ultimately, as we look to heaven, we know with great confidence that our Lord Jesus Christ will be coming back soon to welcome us into our eternal home.

So may our prayer be that when we see Him again, face to face, He'll say to us, Hey, you've stayed the course. You've finished well. Well done, my good and faithful servant.

Let's pray together. Let's pray. Father in heaven, we give you thanks for your word, Lord.

Thank you that we don't have to be in the dark. We don't have to guess what you're saying to us, Lord. You've told us in your word. Thank you, Father, for the church community which you have created thousands of years ago, Lord, to help us stay the course.

[32 : 47] Pray, God, that as we meditate on your word today and as we allow it to gestate in our hearts, Father, that we'll be convicted, God, where we need to show kindness and goodness and grace to each other, help us to do that.

God, where we have been hiding our true selves and not opening up our hearts, help us to do that as well, Lord, to be vulnerable and to ask, Hey, we need help. Help us to see that actually we all need to experience Christ through the church, Lord.

And as we do that, may we listen to your word and respond to you, God, with joy and thanksgiving as we await the return of Jesus Christ, our Lord.

We pray this in his name. Amen.