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EDINBURGH

Gospel Rhythms

Read 1 Thessalonians 5:12-28

Paul talks here about relating to church leaders, relating to one another, relating to God, and relating to the Holy Spirit, we're just going to focus on the middle two – which Jesus said were the most important things to do (*Matthew 22:37-39*). These instructions are framed with references to peace (*1 Thessalonians 5:13,23*).

Cornelius Plantinga's definition of peace (shalom in Hebrew): *"The webbing together of God, humans, and all creation in justice, fulfilment, and delight is what the Hebrew prophets call shalom. We call it peace but it means far more than mere peace of mind or a cease-fire between enemies. In the Bible, shalom means universal flourishing, wholeness and delight – a rich state of affairs in which natural needs are satisfied and natural gifts fruitfully employed, a state of affairs that inspires joyful wonder as its Creator and Saviour opens doors and welcomes the creatures in whom he delights. Shalom, in other words, is the way things ought to be."* (Cornelius Plantinga, *Not the Way It's Supposed to Be: A Breviary of Sin*)

This was God's good design in creation but it was lost at the fall – we were alienated from God and each other. Jesus came to bring us this true peace (*Isaiah 9:6-7*, see long list of references in questions below) No wonder when He was raised from the dead the first thing He said to His disciples was, "Peace be with you" (*John 20:19*). Jesus is the giver of peace: He makes us whole.

We are at peace with God, working with the Prince of Peace, filled with the Spirit of peace; Paul's compact instructions are part of what it looks like to live in peace. As we learn to do these things again and again, by God's grace, we tell this story of peace and become shaped by it.

Loving God

"Rejoice always." This doesn't mean that we should pretend that bad things are good things (see *2 Corinthians 1:8, Romans 12:15, the psalms of lament*). But nothing in this life has a veto over the joy of the life to come, no-one can make Jesus any the less worth rejoicing in, and God is with us - in whose presence is fullness of joy (*Psalms 16:11*). Whatever is happening in your life, God is always good and the gospel is always great news. The more you rejoice, the more you'll be aware of what you've got to rejoice in.

"Pray without ceasing." This is learning to turn our thoughts towards God and into prayers all the time. The practice of "breath prayers" encourages us to choose a simple phrase that we can pray as easily as breathing (see link in questions below for more information on this). *Philippians 4* links continual prayer with receiving the peace of God, as we refuse to let anxieties dominate us but instead use them as prompts to pray quick prayers and be given grace.

_ "Give thanks in all circumstances." _ As Horatio Spafford did when he wrote the hymn It Is Well With My

Soul after the deaths of his daughters. For Paul, in all circumstances he was a forgiven sinner, an enemy of God who had been reconciled to Him and welcomed into His family through Jesus Christ. Journaling what you're thankful for each day can help with this.

Loving others

"Admonish the disruptive." Those who disturb the peace of others, which is contrary to the gospel of reconciliation should be challenged. People who know them should be the first to enquire if they realise the damage they're causing, leaders should only be involved if the situation can't be easily remedied. By doing this we are actually caring for those who are hurt and those doing the hurting.

"Encourage the fainthearted." Paul probably has people in mind whose difficulties are emotional or spiritual. They need your prayers, your company, God's truth; they need to be encouraged to rejoice and pray and give thanks. You need wisdom and sensitivity about how and when to do and suggest these things.

"Help the weak." All Christians are to care for those in need because this is the heart of God – and what we have experienced ourselves. Giving this kind of practical help may be in your job or vocation, or it may be something you do spontaneously.

"Be patient with them all." Peace requires patience: holding your tongue, praying for grace, remembering your own sins and faults, having a careful and honest conversation if necessary.

"See that no one repays anyone evil for evil." Retaliation is not an option for anyone who follows Jesus. We can seek justice through the ways God has appointed but we must carefully examine our motives and actions when we've been hurt to make sure we aren't bringing more evil into the world.

Summarising what he's said, Paul concludes: *"Always seek to do good to one another and to everyone."* We're to be always asking the question, "How can I bless this person?"

"Greet all the brothers and sisters with a holy kiss." Also translated "a handshake all round" (J.B. Phillips) and "a holy embrace." (The Message) Paul says kiss because that's how family members greeted each other in Greek and Roman culture, the Thessalonians were showing that they considered themselves to be in God's family together, no matter how different their backgrounds and personalities. It was a physical action that displayed and encouraged the spiritual reality of their unity in Christ. Some church traditions took this practice and call it "Giving the sign of peace", saying "Peace be with you" and replying "And also with you." It's a prayer for today and a promise for tomorrow, for all who have trusted in Jesus the Prince of Peace (*Matthew 11:28-30*).

Questions:

- What book(s) are going on your Christmas list? Why not check out Luke's list of recommendations. (<https://www.dropbox.com/s/q5d9z5lzmwu9t0v/Luke%27s%20list%20of%20book%20recommendations.pdf?dl=0>)
- Luke gave a brief overview of the biblical concept of peace: read through these passages to get a bit more detail: *Numbers 6:24-26; Isaiah 2:4, 9:6-7a, 11:6-9, 32:15-18, 53:5; Luke 2:14; John 14:27, 20:19; Galatians 5:22, Ephesians 2:13-18; Colossians 1:19-20.*
- If you tried to explain to someone who isn't a Christian what the Bible means by peace, how would you do

it?

- There seems very little peace in our culture: what can we do to experience God's peace for ourselves and share it with others?
- Why do you think Luke suggested that we should want the instructions Paul gives to become habits for us?
- Which of the three "Loving God" actions do you struggle most with? How can you develop this into a peace-bearing habit and what can you do as a small group to help each other with this?
- What do you think the difference is between the "breath prayers" that Luke mentioned and anxious thoughts with a "Please God?" added to the end? (More advice on this and other forms of prayer can be found at prayercourse (<https://prayercourse.org/toolshed/>))
- Which of the six "Loving others" actions do you struggle most with? How can you develop this into a peace-bearing habit and what can you do as a small group to help each other with this?
- We want small groups meetings to be a place where communion is often shared, could you also make giving one another the sign of peace a planned part of what you do together?
- If you want to talk about how to admonish the disruptive and avoid repaying evil for evil, discuss this four-stage process outlined by Ken Sande in The Peacemaker for resolving conflict:
 - 1. **Glorify God**: How can I please and honour God in this situation?
 - 2. **Get the log out of your own eye**: How can I show Jesus' work in me by taking responsibility for my contribution to this conflict?
 - 3. **Gently restore**: How can I lovingly serve others by helping them take responsibility for their contribution to this conflict?
 - 4. **Go and be reconciled**: How can I demonstrate the forgiveness of God and encourage a reasonable solution to this conflict?



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