
Advice for the Christian Life

SCOTT HOEZEE

Maybe we have done this ourselves, or perhaps we have seen it depicted on a TV show: Mom and Dad are leaving the kids on their own for the first time; but before they go, Mom and Dad pile on the last-second instructions: Remember to lock the doors; feed the fish; fill up the dog's water bowl; turn on the porch light at night; check to make sure the oven burners are off before you go to bed; don't fight; dinners are in the fridge; love you, bye. Well, the end of 1 Thessalonians is like this; and today on *Groundwork*, we will explore Paul's closing words. Stay tuned.

DAVE BAST

From Words of Hope and ReFrame Media, this is *Groundwork*, where we dig into scripture to lay the foundation for our lives. I am Dave Bast.

SCOTT HOEZEE

And I am Scott Hoezee; and Dave, this is our fifth and final program. Paul's letter...we think the first letter of Paul's that we possess...1 Thessalonians. So, we have had four programs...there are five chapters actually, in 1 Thessalonians. We strayed a little bit into the fifth chapter in the last program; but we have looked at the opening of the letter; we have looked at Paul's pastoral instructions and words on love and faith; instructions about sexual ethics; and then in the last program, he tried to clear up a lot of confusion about a Christian view of death and the return of Christ.

DAVE BAST

The last chapter is kind of a laundry list of final instructions, exhortations, a little bit of encouragement, a little bit of warning, a little bit of challenge... You know, Scott, when you were doing the opening, I must confess my mind was wandering back a long way, to when our kids were young and we were at home; and my wife would often write a list for them...

SCOTT HOEZEE

Right.

DAVE BAST

She would literally not just say it verbally, but she would write down what she expected them to do as she was going to work, or I was at work, or we were going out for the evening; and here is: One, two, three, four, five; and that is just about exactly what Paul does here at the end.

SCOTT HOEZEE

Yes; when we used to leave, I used to type up a list of things on the computer, but inevitably we would think of more, so my wife would add to the list in handwriting, and then there would be my handwriting and then her handwriting...it's like you keep thinking of last things; and that is what Paul does here. It is sort of like: Oh, well, I am finished, but wait, one more thing...one more thing.

So, let's listen to a few of these verses. We will get to all of it also in the next segment, but 1 Thessalonians 5, beginning at verse 12:

Now we ask you, brothers and sisters, to acknowledge those who work hard among you, who care for you in the Lord, and who admonish you. ¹³Hold them in the highest regard in love because of their work. Live in

peace with each other; ¹⁴and we urge you, brothers and sisters, warn those who are idle and disruptive. Encourage the disheartened; help the weak; be patient with everyone. ¹⁵Make sure nobody pays back wrong for wrong, but always strive to do what is good for each other and for everyone else.

DAVE BAST

So, we noted several times earlier in this series that Paul had to leave Thessalonica in a hurry, relatively speaking; and he had left some unfinished business there; and as he moved on down the line, he felt real anxiety as to what was going on. Were they standing firm? Had they already abandoned the faith? We also know from the New Testament that false teachers often followed Paul, and would come in and sort of worm their way into these new churches and cause trouble. So, he had sent Timothy; Timothy came back with a good report. They were kind of hanging in there; they were solid; and Paul was overjoyed with that, but now he has more concerns. Timothy must have reported other things back...and by the way, as he writes this letter, he had to send someone else with it to deliver it.

SCOTT HOEZEE

Right.

DAVE BAST

So, you know, you can kind of picture the going and the coming, and the long delays, and things would prey on Paul's mind, certainly, in those intervals. So, now he writes again and seems to be addressing some things that Timothy reported.

SCOTT HOEZEE

From the looks of it, Dave, reading between the lines here, and intuiting what was going on, it looks like the church at Thessalonica had all the same problems churches still have today. You know, we could read this letter as though it were written to our own congregation, no matter where you are. You know, there are leaders in the church, Paul says. Sometimes they have to admonish you; sometimes the pastor or the elder or the deacon has to kind of get in your face a little bit spiritually to help you shape up; and of course, we don't always take to that well.

DAVE BAST

Yes.

SCOTT HOEZEE

I mean, ask any pastor to this day, and they will say: Yes, people don't really like it sometimes when you have to kind of tell them the truth, or where they have gone off the rails. But Paul says: Look, your leaders have got to do that, so respect them, okay? Love them; they have been called to do that work; don't beat up on them.

DAVE BAST

Hold them in high regard, he says, in love because of their work, you know; don't just look at the individual and their shortcomings and foibles because every pastor is going to have those; but look at the office. This is God's gift to you as a church. You know, Scott, I just happened to be reading in my devotions this morning a line that struck me, where the writer said: The greatest challenge any leader faces is discouragement...

SCOTT HOEZEE

Right.

DAVE BAST

And that is certainly true of church leaders. That is true of your pastor. They are human; they get discouraged, especially when they are criticized. So, be an encourager. Hold them in high regard, Paul says.

SCOTT HOEZEE

Then Paul goes on: He said there are some other people in the church who are idle; they are just not doing...they are not sharing the load; and there are some who are disruptive, Paul said; and again, we know all about that, right?

DAVE BAST

Really? Yes.

SCOTT HOEZEE

Really, yes.

DAVE BAST

Imagine that! People in church who are disruptive.

SCOTT HOEZEE

It happens everywhere, right? There are always some people who think they own the church. They throw their weight around. The music that gets sung is the music that they want. The church programs they will support are the ones they think work best. They are just disruptive; and Paul says: You know, it's true, but kind of admonish them, but also be loving toward even these people. Be patient with everyone, Paul writes here...and boy, is that a tall order.

DAVE BAST

Yes; I think most of us, if we are Bible people...if we are New Testament people...we tend to idealize the early Church. Wow, you know. The apostles were the leaders there...

SCOTT HOEZEE

The golden age.

DAVE BAST

Yes, can you imagine? And the Holy Spirit had been poured out on them; they were filled with it; and you know, it was just the same. It has never been different.

SCOTT HOEZEE

And the New Testament doesn't cover that up...

DAVE BAST

No.

SCOTT HOEZEE

I love that.

DAVE BAST

No; exactly. It is honest...

SCOTT HOEZEE

You see it in the book of Acts.

DAVE BAST

And quite straight forward. Churches are blemished because they are filled with a bunch of people...and you know the old criticism that you hear. I get so sick of it: Oh, the Church is full of hypocrites, that is why I don't go there.

Give me a break! That is like complaining that the hospital is full of sick people. Where else would you have imperfect, flawed, sinful people be but in the church, where God is working on them, where they hear the Word; and so, Paul says: You know what? We have got to put up with each other, really. And imagine that! Somebody has to put up with *you*...

SCOTT HOEZEE

Somebody has to put up with me...

DAVE BAST

Somebody has to put up with me...

SCOTT HOEZEE

So, be patient with everyone; but that means somebody is going to have to be patient with me. Remembering that is a good tonic to generating patience also for other people. Paul makes clear in this letter, but really, in all his letters, Dave, that we are never finished growing in love; we are never finished growing into the love of Christ; and the reason, of course, is that we have to love, not concepts, but real people, including the people who are idle and who don't seem to share the load or carry their weight; those who throw their weight around, who are disruptive. You have got to love real people; and you know, Paul wrote this letter...you can almost imagine somebody rolling their eyes a little bit and saying: Oh, fine, Paul; easy for you to say. Why don't you come here and try to love Frank, you know; because I have had it up to here with Frank!

DAVE BAST

Yes.

SCOTT HOEZEE

But that is what we have to do.

DAVE BAST

Really, this is an antidote to the temptation to drop out; because we all know people, too, probably who have become frustrated with their church or with somebody in church...they get mad at somebody, and they just quit; and they don't go anywhere else. They just quit and they say: I don't need that. I can be a Christian on my own; and that is anathema to the Apostle, to the New Testament Church. You don't go it alone; you hang in there, as hard as it is; and Paul is going to come up with a few more items on his laundry list here at the end. So, let's turn to that next.

Segment 2

SCOTT HOEZEE

I am Scott Hoezee, along with Dave Bast, and you are listening to *Groundwork*, where Paul is rounding off his first letter to the Thessalonians in the fifth chapter. He has written a fair amount already. We just saw how he had some advice for the church, and how to treat its leaders, how to deal with some troubling people. He calls for them to be patient; but he is not done. So, here we are at verse 16 of 1 Thessalonians 5:

Rejoice always. ¹⁷Pray continually. ¹⁸Give thanks in all circumstances, for this is the God's will for you in Christ Jesus. ¹⁹Do not quench the Spirit; ²⁰do not treat prophecies with contempt, ²¹but test them all; hold onto what is good. ²²Reject every kind of evil. ^{23a}May God himself, the God of peace, sanctify you through and through.

DAVE BAST

^{23b}May your whole spirit, soul, and body be kept blameless at the coming of our Lord Jesus Christ. ²⁴The one who calls you is faithful, and he will do it. ²⁵Brothers and sisters, pray for us. ²⁶Greet all God's people with a holy kiss. ²⁷I charge you before the Lord to have this letter read to all the brothers and sisters. ²⁸The grace of our Lord Jesus Christ be with you.

SCOTT HOEZEE

So, you are almost out of breath just reading those words. It is a real lightning round here of last-minute advice that Paul just, in very, very short, clipped...usually just one or two word little phrases here, is...indeed, just as we said at the top of the program, Dave, like parents leaving the kids at home alone, and you just keep pouring on the last-second advice.

DAVE BAST

We have often pointed out that the basic pattern of one of Paul's letters is doctrine followed by ethics, or indicative followed by imperative. So, he first states the truths, more or less, it breaks down that way. He first states the truths of the Gospel of the Christian faith, and then he applies them by giving commands or exhortation or imperatives is the name for the verb form; and I counted just quickly here eleven imperatives in these closing verses; eleven of them. As you say, often in Greek it is one word or maybe two words.

SCOTT HOEZEE

Yes; so, he is really going through it quickly. We don't have time to unpack everything in here. We would probably need three whole shows, maybe, to do that; but, we can pick up three things that kind of head the list; three things that Paul says really sum up and maybe characterize the Christian life: Rejoicing, praying, thanking...

DAVE BAST

Yes.

SCOTT HOEZEE

Rejoicing, praying, thanking; and so, he is telling them to rejoice always, to pray continually, to always be thankful; but if we remember, Dave, why was Paul so concerned to hear how the Thessalonians were doing after he was forced to flee Thessalonica? Well, because it was a tough era for the Church. The Church was persecuted. Leaders like Paul and others were roughed up. Paul really did escape, almost by the skin of his teeth, even from Thessalonica, when some of the Jewish people in Thessalonica tried to stir up trouble because they just didn't believe the message that Jesus is the Messiah. So, this is a tall order. This was not an easy time for anybody in the Church to be perpetually rejoicing, praying and thanking.

DAVE BAST

Right; it is also important, I think, just to make the ordinary observation, which is usually made, that when Paul says rejoice always, he doesn't mean rejoice for everything or rejoice in everything that happens to us; because bad stuff happens, and we are not thankful for that. We are not thankful for the bad thing, but we can rejoice because we belong to God. We can rejoice because no matter how terrible the things that happen, they will not separate us from God and from Christ, and from God's love, as Paul says famously in another passage.

SCOTT HOEZEE

Yes; at the end of Romans, as he will write some years hence after this letter: Give thanks *in* all circumstances; not *for* all circumstances, but *in* all circumstances look for the living presence of Jesus; and we said in the previous program as well, Dave, that the belief—the bedrock belief in the resurrection of Jesus Christ from the dead forms like the baseline—the bass note—that underlines all the other music in 1 Thessalonians. Paul comes back to that resurrection again and again and again. As you just said, Dave, as Paul will famously put it at the end of Romans 8, years later, because of that nothing can separate us from the love of God that is in Christ Jesus; and so, in all circumstances, even ones that are kind of tough, you can...you don't have to be thankful *for* them, but in those circumstances that truth about Jesus abides.

DAVE BAST

Yes, absolutely; and the main point is that it happened. It has already taken place. We are not hoping that it will happen. Jesus already died and Jesus already rose again; and in doing that, he has put the kiss of death on

death. He has really undercut death's power, and that is why we can still rejoice, even along the way when things are hard...when we are burdened...when we are struggling with one problem or another; maybe it is our own sin, maybe it is a loss that we have undergone; but we can rejoice that we have this unshakable bond with Christ, and an unshakable hope for the future. So, in that we rejoice.

SCOTT HOEZEE

Yes; in fact, you just mentioned the future, Dave. We mentioned this, I think, on some of the Easter programs we have done here on *Groundwork*. The great German theologian, Wolfhart Pannenberg, famously said that, you know, the resurrection is a past event. It is an event in history, but it was actually an out-of-time event because it is our future; and so, the resurrection is our future in the past. So, not only does that past event assure us that it is over and done with, but that past event is also the doorway to our very future. So, nothing can take that away from us either.

DAVE BAST

You know, and here is another thing that we can point out here, I think, that is significant for our rejoicing and our praying and our giving thanks. This is not a one-way street. It is not just us kind of reaching out to God in prayer...

SCOTT HOEZEE

Right.

DAVE BAST

God is still going to be speaking to us...speaking into us his words of comfort and of hope. So, Paul also adds here: Don't quench the Spirit. Don't treat prophecies with contempt; but test them all. Hold onto what is good; reject every kind of evil. So, I mean, the context here that Paul is thinking of is that there are going to be people around us who will speak God's Word to us in our situation, and we shouldn't just sort of blow that off...

SCOTT HOEZEE

No.

DAVE BAST

Or say: Ah, that's kind of weird. What are you, prophesying to me? But, it is not just predicting the future. It is proclaiming the truth of God to us now.

SCOTT HOEZEE

Prophecy is not just foretelling, it is forth-telling, as we have said when we looked at prophets like Isaiah. Test everything; don't believe every message that comes along. There are going to be some people who get some things wrong; but, expect...as you just said, Dave, what he is saying to the Thessalonians...expect that God is going to keep talking to you...expect that the Holy Spirit is going to keep reaffirming what you already know, and maybe even revealing some new things you don't know; and when that happens, then you are reminded again: Yes, we serve a living God; we serve a risen savior; he is in the world today, as we say through the Holy Spirit...

DAVE BAST

Yes, right.

SCOTT HOEZEE

So, as Paul comes at the Thessalonians fast and furious with this last-second advice, he says: God's got this thing. He's got you; and we are so thankful for that, in all circumstances; and maybe it becomes even clearer, I think, and crystallizes...we already read it, but we will reread it in just a moment, as Paul blesses them and leaves them with a benediction; and we will ponder that in just a moment.

Segment 3

DAVE BAST

You are listening to *Groundwork*, where we are digging into scripture to lay the foundation for our lives. I am Dave Bast.

SCOTT HOEZEE

And I am Scott Hoezee; and Dave, let's dig right into scripture here, as we begin this closing segment of this closing program on our five-part series on 1 Thessalonians. These are the last words from 1 Thessalonians 5, beginning at verse 23.

DAVE BAST

May God himself, the God of peace, sanctify you through and through. May your whole spirit, soul, and body be kept blameless at the coming of our Lord Jesus Christ. ²⁴The one who calls you is faithful, and he will do it.

SCOTT HOEZEE

²⁵Brothers and sisters, pray for us. ²⁶Greet all of God's people with a holy kiss. ²⁷I charge you before the Lord to have this letter read to all the brothers and sisters. ²⁸The grace of our Lord Jesus Christ be with you. There is a classic benediction, with which many of us conclude our worship services, and with which Paul concludes this letter, and most of his letters. It is all God all the time, Paul is saying. God is going to sanctify you. God is the one who is going to make you more and more like Jesus as you go on. That is not the product or the output of your hard work or effort. It is all God; it is all the Holy Spirit. He's got this. It is like that song: He's got the whole world in his hands. He's got you and me, brother...you and me sister, in his hands. That is basically what Paul is conveying here.

DAVE BAST

Right; yes, he uses the word *sanctify*, which is religious speak, and it may be those of us, perhaps, who have grown up in the church all our lives, that is a familiar word to us. Yes, we talk about sanctification. If you are not somebody like that, you are not as familiar with the language of the Bible, it is kind of mystifying: Sanctify...sanctification. What does that mean? Well, we hear the word *saint* in there, sort of. It is a form of the word to be made holy, to become holy. As you said, this is primarily God's work. It is not that we make ourselves over. The Christian faith is not a self-help religion in any way, shape, or form. It is not a do-it-yourself project, where you just sort of improve yourself morally by tremendous effort; which is not to say we don't have to cooperate with what God is doing; but Paul says clearly, God is going to do this, and he is going to do it to all of you. Paul mentions your spirit, your soul, and your body; and some people have from that deduced the idea that we have three parts to us. Probably not. Probably spirit and soul are more or less the same thing, I think. I don't know what your take on that it, but...

SCOTT HOEZEE

Yes, we are a unified whole; but yes, he also says may all of that...may basically the entirety of your being—spirit, body, soul—your body, too...be kept blameless, so that when Jesus comes again, which Paul had just been talking about a few verses earlier, at the beginning of Chapter 5 and the end of Chapter 4...when Jesus comes back, may you be found blameless; and, you know, I don't know about you, but I could stop myself at any given moment on any given day and think: Am I blameless right now? Um, no. I mean, we have confession of sin in most of our churches every week because we all come back to church with a life that is anything but blameless. So, how can Paul say we will be blameless somehow; how does that work?

DAVE BAST

In the ancient Church, there was a practice...a custom...of putting off baptism as long as possible...

SCOTT HOEZEE

Oh, right; yes.

DAVE BAST

Often maybe even until you were on your deathbed, because there was the thought that you only had one shot at this, and baptism would wash you clean...it would make you blameless from all your sins; but if you went back and got dirty again by sinning, then you were done, because it was a one-shot deal. So, people would try to wait and wait and wait. But, the truth is, we go out and get dirty right away...

SCOTT HOEZEE

Yes.

DAVE BAST

I mean, you can confess your sins; you can get down on your knees, confess every sin you can think of, and before you go to bed the next day, or by the time you get up the next morning, you will have fallen again; and so...

SCOTT HOEZEE

They say Martin Luther could never get off his knees because he would pray a prayer of confession. He would confess all his sins, and he would finish the prayer and stand up, and well, he realized he was feeling kind of proud of that prayer; so, back on his knees he would go...

DAVE BAST

Yes, yes, right.

SCOTT HOEZEE

That is why, in many traditions, including the Reformed tradition, of which you and I are a part, Dave, we always talk about the double washing of baptism. There is the water, which washes us clean; but then there is the perpetual washing day to day of the Holy Spirit, who then lives in our lives; and that is the point. How could we possibly be blameless at the coming of Christ? Well, because Jesus has already transferred all of his moral credit into our bank account. God looks at us and he sees Christ on the cross; he sees that we died with Jesus and we rose with Jesus, and that is it.

DAVE BAST

Yes; the technical term for this is sometimes used, at least historically, the classical term is imputed righteousness; and some theologians object to that today, and you can say it in such a way that it maybe goes off the rails a little bit; but I love that phrase, because the idea is that God...as you said, God puts Christ's righteousness over us...

SCOTT HOEZEE

Right.

DAVE BAST

And he is putting it into us as well; and someday, that process will be complete, and we really will be blameless through and through in and of ourselves; but even now, when he looks at us, he says: I don't condemn you. No condemnation. No blame. You are blameless. You are washed. You are mine. And that is amazingly good news when we look inside our own heads and we see a lot of junk; and God forgives that.

SCOTT HOEZEE

Yes; and that is the Gospel; but, before we close, one last little thing to note here, Dave. We get a little peek behind the scenes here, when Paul instructs that this letter of his be read to all the brothers and sisters. Now, he doesn't usually say that directly in his letters, but we always assume that that is what happened. The letter

arrived in Galatia; the letter arrived in Rome; the letter arrived in Corinth or Ephesus or Philippi, and it was read in public worship, almost as though it were scripture...

DAVE BAST

Yes.

SCOTT HOEZEE

And maybe the pastor or the leader, the elder of the church, expanded on Paul's words...clarified...oh, that sounds like a sermon. So, they didn't know, and Paul didn't know that one day we would regard this letter the same way Paul regarded Genesis and Isaiah, as scripture; but, we get a little preview here of how this went. This was used in public worship for the edification, admonition, and encouragement of the believers. These letters functioned like scripture; and of course, we later declared they are.

DAVE BAST

Yes; that is a really cool thought. You know, as I read these closing words, I realize some of them we don't take literally. We don't literally have to greet one another with a holy kiss, that is kind of a cultural thing; although, if you are a Middle Easterner, you would do that, but we can substitute a handshake, I think, or even a hug; but, that business about reading aloud the words of this letter, we do take that literally; and as we read it and expound it, that is preaching; and it is that kind of thing that still gives life to the Church today.

SCOTT HOEZEE

Amen. Well, thanks for listening and digging deeply into scripture with *Groundwork*. We are your hosts, Scott Hoezee and Dave Bast, and we hope you will join us again next time as we continue to dig deeply into scripture to lay the foundation for our lives.

We have a website, groundworkonline.com. Go there, connect with us, and make suggestions for what you would like to hear discussed on *Groundwork*.

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