

# Peace with God, Others, and Yourself

<sup>12</sup> We ask you, brothers, to respect those who labor among you and are over you in the Lord and admonish you,

<sup>13</sup> and to esteem them very highly in love because of their work. Be at peace among yourselves.

<sup>14</sup> And we urge you, brothers, admonish the idle, encourage the faint-hearted, help the weak, be patient with them all.

<sup>15</sup> See that no one repays anyone evil for evil, but always seek to do good to one another and to everyone.

<sup>16</sup> Rejoice always,

<sup>17</sup> pray without ceasing,

<sup>18</sup> give thanks in all circumstances; for this is the will of God in Christ Jesus for you.

<sup>19</sup> Do not quench the Spirit.

<sup>20</sup> Do not despise prophecies,

<sup>21</sup> but test everything; hold fast what is good.

<sup>22</sup> Abstain from every form of evil.

<sup>23</sup> 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.

<sup>24</sup> He who calls you is faithful; he will surely do it.

<sup>25</sup> Brothers, pray for us.

<sup>26</sup> Greet all the brothers with a holy kiss.

<sup>27</sup> I put you under oath before the Lord to have this letter read to all the brothers.

<sup>28</sup> The grace of our Lord Jesus Christ be with you."

1 Thessalonians 5:12:28

# A Century of War, Blood, and Death

## *A Peaceless People*

THE 20<sup>TH</sup> CENTURY goes down as the bloodiest century in the history of the world, and it's not even close. Conservative estimates put the number of murdered and killed in war at 108 million people.<sup>1</sup> Frankly, the number murdered just by the communists is more than this, not that you'd ever hear that in public school these days.<sup>2</sup> Thus, you get ranges for the entire century that go as high as 203<sup>3</sup>-258 million, with 45.5 million of these estimated to be Christians.<sup>4</sup>

According to a *New York Times* article, the number of people murdered throughout all of known human history ranges between 150 million to 1 billion. That would mean that perhaps as many as ¼ of all the people who have ever been slaughtered by other humans were killed last century.

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<sup>1</sup> **Chris Hedges**, "What Every Person Should Know About War," *New York Times* (July 6, 2003), <https://www.nytimes.com/2003/07/06/books/chapters/what-every-person-should-know-about-war.html>.

<sup>2</sup> **R. J. Rummel**, *Death by Government* (New Brunswick, NJ: Transaction Publishers, 1994) puts the number between 97 million – 128 million, depending on if you take the narrower communism or broader socialist totalitarians. breaking it down this way: 61,911,000 Murdered: The Soviet Gulag State; 35,236,000 Murdered: The Communist Chinese Ant Hill; 20,946,000 Murdered: The Nazi Genocide State; 10,214,000 Murdered: The Depraved Nationalist Regime.

<sup>3</sup> **M. Cherif Bassiouni**, "Searching for Peace and Achieving Justice: The Need for Accountability," *Law and Contemporary Problems* 59:4 (Autumn 1996): 9-28; **Matthew White**, *Historical Atlas of the Twentieth Century*, 2010.

<sup>4</sup> **David B. Barret**, *World Christian Trends AD 30 – AD 2200* (Pasadena: William Carey Library, 2001).

(The number of Christians murdered in all of human history until the year 2,000 is estimated at 70 million, so that would put the number from last century at well over half of all Christians who have ever been martyred). During the last 3,400 years, humans have been entirely at peace for only 268 of them, or just 8 percent. All this to say, human beings are simply not creatures predisposed to peace.

It was out of the insanity of two world wars and another seemingly looming that the 1960s “peace” movement started speaking to this issue. The Turtles “Eve of Destruction,” Buffalo Springfield’s “For What It’s Worth,” and the Byrds, “Turn, Turn, Turn,” are just three examples of anti-war songs that prevailed in the last half of that decade. To give you a feel for just how unique this was, there is a *Wikipedia* page dedicated to listing war songs from the Civil War – the War on Terror and everything in between. It lists exactly 3 songs written during the Civil War, 4 songs during WWI, 3 during WWII, but 109 songs during the Vietnam War!

This did not stop once that war ended. Something profound had changed in our culture once-for-all. It has nearly 100 (98) songs written during the Cold War that could be about that war. It has 26 songs written during the First Gulf

War and the first Bush presidency, 169 during the so-called War on Terror during second Bush presidency (2001-08) and another 19 on the same war written during the Obama presidency.

This last fact is super curious, because it signals to me something that I'm actually quite concerned about. That is, it seems to me that we are increasingly a people so at ease, so perfectly at peace in our everyday lives, and so totally personally out-of-touch with actual warfare that really does ravage entire populations and all the carnage it leaves in its wake, that [the enemy has shifted](#) from actual wars that we want desperately to see end to something far different.

What is this new enemy? Look at how our political discourse has so dramatically changed from all of American history until just the last 2 to perhaps 15 years. The new enemy is not the communists but those in my own country who disagree with me politically. How else do you explain an 89% drop in war songs between two presidencies who both presided over the exact same war, a war which hasn't ended to this day? Obama gets in and people willingly overlook the very thing that they were supposedly so upset about for the previous 8 years? Gimme-a-break. This isn't my opinion. It is objective fact (if you can trust Wikipedia at least).

As it shows itself in public, the rhetoric is turning increasingly foul, hostile, and violent as the cultural and political divides grow ever farther apart. From news stories that are simply made up and the accompanying near total negative coverage of the current president in the mainstream media and Hollywood, to the knee-jerk reactions of digging in and doubling down among “Preppers” who create shortages in ammunition and food as they prepare to take down their fellow evil Americans, to the censoring of what the elite deem as “dangerous” or “inappropriate” material (usually political or religious) by major social media platforms, to the simple every day discourse you see in chat rooms or on Tweets, ours seems to be a culture hell-bent on starting a war. In fact, some are suggesting that our own people have quietly entered a new cold war—*with itself*. Imagine if that is true that we are in a cold war right now and that it is a civil war. If the history moving from the Great Wars to the Cold War to a new cold war works its way out chiastically, then I greatly fear what will become of our nation.

### *Peace in the Church?*

But this isn't a sermon on politics or America. This is a sermon for Christians and the church. So I ask, [is the church](#)

**immune** to such behavior? I'm not talking about the church taking sides in a culture war. I'm talking about the way Christians behave towards one another? If you think it is, feel free to frequent the Facebook groups: *Reformed Pub*, *Arminianism: Dissent from Calvinism Reformed Theology*, or *Arminianism vs. Calvinism* any time, day or night and you'll see quickly enough as you dive into the deep dark recesses of the threads that we are not. Why, it is to the point where there is actually a Group called *Calvinism vs. Arminian Debate in Christ-like Fashion*, because guess what? It just doesn't happen.

For whatever reason, people have this idea that because you can't see the other person you are talking to that you can simultaneously lie about who you are and act however you want in this wild west frontier known as the Internet. But is it really so different when Christians are together in person?

Our church has enjoyed a period of tremendous peace for these last many years. Yet, literally every church I've been part of, from my infancy till now, has had periods where mass numbers of people have left—and left in anger. While not always disruptive of the entire church, it certainly often is. People get angry over the music, the preaching (or

lack thereof), the doctrine, the organ, the authoritarianism, the décor of the building, and yes even the color of the carpet. They get angry with one another, with their leadership, with their pastor(s). Some is justified. Some isn't.

But people rarely just leave. They often do it in groups, as they gossip amongst themselves, stirring up dissension and factions, which results in mass exodus, enmity, hatred, and the dragging in the mud of the Name of Jesus.

Of course, we can expand this beyond local churches to the church as a whole. While I strongly believe God still works in the midst of his people even when they behave in these ways, even when they start new churches in this way, and on a bigger scale often entire new denominations, we mock our Savior when do not take seriously his last great prayer for peace among us. “The glory that you have given me I have given to them, that they may be one even as we are one, I in them and you in me, that they may become perfectly one, so that the world may know that you sent me and loved them even as you loved me” (John 17:22-23).

# Ending the Letter: Peace Among Brothers

## *Peace*

To that end, framing this discussion in a context of great disharmony, discord, warfare, and so on, we come to **the end of Paul's first letter** to the Thessalonians. The **last main section** prior to the closing of the letter is **1 Thessalonians 5:12-22**. **The closing** then lasts for six more verses (**23-28**). We will only be able to look at **vv. 12-18** today, as there is just too much to think about to do this justice in one sermon.

What we find when we analyze **the structure** is that it essentially begins and ends with the word **“peace.”** Hence, the opening thoughts. **“Be at peace among yourselves”** (**13**) begins the first section. **“Now may the God of peace himself sanctify you completely...”** (**23**) begins the closing section. As such, **“peace” bookends a long list of commands** that Paul gives to these Christians at the end of this letter. We will see throughout this passage, both this week and next, everything he says tells these Christians to do seems to have peace as its ultimate goal. This is obviously a very, very important thing to the Apostle, that his churches be at peace.

You can see this more than just here. You can make an argument that entire letter has “peace” as its theme. This reinforces the point of its importance. It begins, “... **Grace to you and peace**” (1:1). Thus, its **first word** and **last word** are about **peace**.<sup>5</sup>

So, **what is peace**? Most people think peace is the opposite of hostility. Thus, if you are not at war at the present moment, then you are at peace. But is this true? I can easily not be at war with someone I haven’t seen for 20 years. But I may not be at peace with them. I know plenty of Christians who are not at war with other Christians that they used to know, because they left in bitterness and haven’t talked to the person since. They do not have opportunity for hostility!

Think about the idea of **bitterness**. Hebrews says, “**Strive for peace with everyone ... see to it that ... no ‘root of bitterness’ springs up and causes trouble**” (Heb 12:14-15). If you are bitter towards someone, harboring terrible

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<sup>5</sup> **Jeffrey A. D. Weima**, *1-2 Thessalonians*, Baker Exegetical Commentary on the New Testament (Grand Rapids, MI: Baker Academic, 2014), n.p. Weima focuses in also on grace saying, “The wish or content of this benediction is ‘grace.’ Thus, in contrast to secular letters where the farewell wish expresses the desire that the recipients will have physical strength (‘Be strong!’) or prosperity (‘Prosper!’), Paul calls on God to give his readers that which he believes to be a more valuable gift and one that is needed more: the gift of grace. This wish for grace, along with the preceding peace benediction (5:23), which is also typically found in the letter closing, forms an inverted, or chiasmic, inclusio with the greeting of the letter opening: ‘Grace to you and peace’ (1:1).”

thoughts in your heart about them, is it right to say that you at peace with them? Absolutely not.<sup>6</sup> I know a person who was so bitter with me for reasons I have never been told that she complained constantly about me. For years. Often just in her heart. Sometimes to others. One day, as she was telling this to a friend, her friend said to her, “**Maybe you should pray for him,**” the response was, “**I couldn’t do that!**” This kind of heart attitude is virtual war, a cold-war that gathers steam below the surface in a heart. It is a refusal to forgive, a refusal to be one. This is the kind of thing the Apostle hopes to have the Thessalonians avoid. And he gives them a string of commands to help them to this end.

### *Having Peace*

There is a curious thing that we find attached to the word peace in Paul’s letters. It is the starting point of all the commands. For these commands presuppose this. We must talk about it.

Someone has noticed that Paul actually closes *seven* letters with a “**peace benediction**” (**Rom 15:33; Rom 16:20a; 2 Cor 13:11; Gal 6:16; Phil 4:9b; 1 Thess 5:23; 2 Thess**

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<sup>6</sup> For more on this thought, see my sermon “New Covenant Worship Part I: Purity in the Temple,” on Hebrews 12:14-29.

3:16). These benedictions exhibit clear and consistent patterns. Among them, the word “**grace**” is attached, even as we have seen in the first verse and will see in the very last verse of this letter. In these two words, with the exception of one instance, the peace benediction aligns with “**God,**” while the grace benediction is always aligned with **Christ**.<sup>7</sup> The peace of God; the grace of Christ.

Someone says, “**He describes God as the source and thus also the giver of peace ... [This peace] does not refer merely to the resolution of conflict but has a much richer meaning involving the restoration of the fallen created order to its former perfection and glory, i.e., eschatological salvation (see Rom 2:10; 8:6; 14:17; Eph 6:15).**”<sup>8</sup> So God is the giver of peace. That means, it is not up to you to make yourself be at peace.

Perhaps you are a person who does not know peace or refuses to be at peace with God, with yourself, or with someone else. In all instances, the solution is the same. **Peace**

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<sup>7</sup> “The God of peace ... the grace of our Lord Jesus Christ” (Rom 16:20); “The God of love and peace ... The grace of the Lord Jesus Christ” (2Co 13:11, 14); “The God of peace ... The grace of the Lord Jesus Christ” (Php 4:9, 23); “The God of peace ... The grace of our Lord Jesus Christ” (1Th 5:23, 28); etc.

<sup>8</sup> Jeffrey A. D. Weima, “The Significance of the Pauline Letter Closings,” in *Paul and the Ancient Letter Form*, ed. Stanley E. Porter and Sean A. Adams (Boston: Brill, 2010), 311.

with God who is the God of peace. This peace comes through grace, and grace through the Lord Jesus Christ.

I think we have a living example of this very thing in the OT with the person of Melchizedek. Melchizedek means, “King of Righteousness” and he presided over “Salem,” the City of Peace. But if Hebrews is to be taken literally, that he is a priest “forever” (Heb 7:3); is distinguished from mortal men (8), has an “indestructible life” (16), has “no father or mother, beginning of days or end of life” (3), and Abraham gives him the tithe, then this man must have been the Angel of the LORD, i.e. Christ pre-incarnate.

In the Bible, peace is friendship with God. How does a person have peace with God? Through the only mediator, the Son of God. Thus, James reminds us of Genesis that Abraham “was called a friend of God” (James 2:23; cf. 2Ch 20:7; Isa 41:8). How? Because he was a friend of Christ. He saw his day (John 8:56).

If salvation then comes to us through the grace of Jesus Christ, and peace follows it, then to be at peace in any of these ways, you must first know and then display the grace of Jesus Christ. Christians need to hear this as much as non-Christians, because as we have seen, we often are not at peace in our hearts. For a Christian who knows this grace to refuse

to extend it to others is for them to act entirely unlike a Christian and it is to bring the opposite of peace down on your own head. So beloved, I implore you, see the grace of God displayed by Jesus, take your eyes off your own anger with someone else, put them on Christ and what he did for you when you were his enemy sinning greatly against him, and come to know the peace of the God of peace who has made it possible for he and you to be reconciled together through the death of the Son of God. See the grace of Jesus and know the peace of God.

### *Brothers*

In this I do not mean to imply that God does not give us **means**, means which he has ordained and through which he works, which will result in peace. This is what we will move into now. Let us turn our attention to what is the longest list of commands in this Epistle. The text is **1 Thessalonians 5:12-22**.

It is addressed to “**brothers**.” This, of course, also includes sisters, all who confess Christ by faith. “**Brothers**” is a word that dominates our entire passage today, perhaps even more than “peace,” as it appears in five different verses (**12, 14, 25, 26, 27**). Brothers are, of course, **family**. In the

Bible, the family of God is not biological but supernatural. They are not born of woman (**John 1:13**), but by the Spirit of God (**John 3:5-8**). When they are born, they become part of God's heavenly family and are thus considered "**sons of God**" (**Rom 8:14, 19**).

Curiously, Jesus tells us, "**Blessed are the peacemakers, for they shall be called sons of God**" (**Matt 5:9**). This fits perfectly with our passage, and thus it impresses even more than what we will see in Paul the vital importance of peace. For what is the opposite of being a son of God? A son of the devil. And who are they? It is implied that they are those who do not seek peace.

What **an incredible gift** that God would lavish upon those he calls. Indeed, John bursts forth almost into song when he says, "**Behold, what manner of love the Father has bestowed upon us, that we should be called the sons of God**" (**1Jn 3:1**). Therefore, Paul's instructions are given to you, Christians, even though what he says, as we will see, was clearly circumstantial and addressed to specific things for the church at Thessalonica. At the end of the day, they are in their own ways, timeless.

One more thought about **the structure** here might be helpful before looking at it in detail. I have tried to find a

chiasm around the word peace, hoping for some middle-highlighted point. Others have tried to,<sup>9</sup> but I've been unable to see a strong enough pattern. Better is probably to see five separate groupings:

1. the church's responsibility to its spiritual leaders (vv 12-13)
2. the church's responsibility to its needy members (vv 14a-c)
3. the church's responsibility to all men (vv 14d-15)
4. the church's spiritual privileges (vv 16-18)
5. the church's spiritual responsibilities (gifts) (vv 19-22).<sup>10</sup>

Which break into two main categories:

1. Christian behavior (12-15)
2. Christian inner life (16-22)<sup>11</sup>

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<sup>9</sup> For example at the *Biblical Chiasm Exchange*: <https://www.chiasmusxchange.com/2016/05/18/1-thessalonians-514-22/>.

<sup>10</sup> There might be some fruit in making this a chiasm, but it is probably stretching it:

- A. Spiritual leaders (12-13)
- B. Needy Members (14)
- C. All men (14d-15)
- B<sup>1</sup>. Spiritual privileges (16-18)
- A<sup>1</sup>. Spiritual responsibilities/gifts (19-22)

<sup>11</sup> **David Alan Black**, "The Literary Structure of 1 and 2 Thessalonians," *Southern Baptist Journal of Theology Volume 3*, 3:3 (1999): 55 [46-57]. Also G. K. Beale, *1-2 Thessalonians*, The IVP New Testament Commentary Series (Downers Grove, IL: InterVarsity Press, 2003):

- (1) the relation of the church body to its leaders (5:12-13);
- (2) the relation of the church members to one another (5:14-15);
- (3) attitudes of all in the church (5:16-18);
- (4) the attitude of church members to prophetic revelation (5:19-22);
- (5) blamelessness before God's end-time judgment seat as the ultimate goal of 5:12-22 (5:23-24).

We will look at both the outward behavior portion and part of the inner life section today.

## *Christian Behavior Leads to Peace*

These groupings are full **imperative verbs**. These are verbs of commands. The list begins (**vv. 12-13**) with two verbs (infinitives)<sup>12</sup> to be obeyed by the brothers. They are “**respect**” or possibly “**acknowledge**” and “**esteem**.” Both are displayed outwardly in behavior. Who are they to direct these actions towards?

It appears that it is **one group of people** that have **three responsibilities** themselves.<sup>13</sup> Those responsibilities are in turn to be directed towards the brothers. Those responsibilities are to “**labor among you**,” be “**over you in the Lord**” and “**admonish you**.” Clearly, he is talking about some kind of leaders in the community. But who?

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<sup>12</sup> The first two main verbs in vvs. 12-13 are infinitives. As my language friend Michael Emadi told me, the reason they are infinitives is because the main verb of the clause is ἐρωτῶμεν, a verb of speech. Usually when an infinitive follows a verb of speech it is an infinitive of indirect discourse. In light of the imperatives that follow, these infinitives have an imperatival force. There’s nothing more to it than that.

<sup>13</sup> “The three participles, κοπιῶντας, προϊσταμένους, and νοουθετοῦντας, are connected into a series by the repetition of καί, and the article with κοπιῶντας governs all three of them. This means that Paul is talking about one group of individuals in terms of three aspects of their activity.” Charles A. **Wanamaker**, *The Epistles to the Thessalonians: A Commentary on the Greek Text*, New International Greek Testament Commentary (Grand Rapids, MI: W.B. Eerdmans, 1990), 192.

The **majority** of commentators think this must refer to **church leadership**, elders and deacons. This is probably because of the language “**in the Lord.**” They are over you “in the Lord.” But this is often just assumed. A **minority**, based on extensive studies of Paul’s social-political situations from his letters, argue that these people were the more well-to-do folks in the city that had converted to Christ. In other words, their role here may not be strictly spiritual advisory like you would have with elders, but it extends outside of the church perhaps to things like bosses or city councilmen or whatever. In this sense, a governing official who is also a Christian and in your church would be over you “in the Lord.” And what they would be doing would be for your best interest.

The words here are interesting. The first word “**laboring**” can refer to **physical labor** or more commonly to things like **spreading the gospel** or efforts on behalf of the gospel.<sup>14</sup> But Paul doesn’t tell us what kind of labor is in mind, presumably because the Thessalonians already knew. The second word translated as “**over you**” can refer to leading, overseeing, or even ruling. But elders and deacons do not rule like a king over the people. They are, rather, shepherds.

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<sup>14</sup> The following all comes from Wanamaker.

On the other hand, the word can refer to those who **protect you or those who are concerned about you**. Spiritually speaking, this is what church leaders do. Again, we do not know exactly what is in mind. The final word is usually used for **admonishing** as a spiritual father, and it seems clearly connected to behaviors and beliefs in this church.

I'm not sure that it matters all that much if he is talking about elders or city councilmen who happen to have had a high standing in the city and thus, when they were converted, naturally rose to the top in that church. We are to do these things for all who are over us, no matter their position. **It is worth noting** that Paul was only here for three weeks and that he does not seem to have appointed any leaders. Thus, it seems that they were probably in a position like many churches are today, where the people themselves have to decide which among them are being called out to be leaders among them in a spiritual capacity. In this case it is probable that at least some of the natural leaders also were becoming spiritual leaders.<sup>15</sup>

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<sup>15</sup> **Wanamaker** (p. 193): “He makes no appeal to persons appointed by himself, and thus it cannot be assumed that at this stage in the Pauline mission organized offices within the local church existed. Rather, as in v. 12, Paul calls on the community to recognize as their leaders precisely those people who functioned in such a way as to toil for them, to protect and care for them physically and materially, and to direct them ethically.”

No matter how you slice it, it is clear that these men are themselves **under the Lord**, for they are “**in the Lord.**” They have a deep responsibility to carry out their responsibilities towards the brothers in the fruit of the Spirit, knowing that they will be judged doubly by God. This is a great burden that become the motivation for the brothers to obey these commands.

What are those? First, the brothers are to *acknowledge* them, that is give them their due, perhaps **respect** them, but at least realize that they have been put over them in some fashion by God. It is certainly not a politically correct thing these days to talk about any kind of authority structure anywhere in our democratized crazed world. But the world only functions with such hierarchy. If you don't have it, all is chaos, as we are seeing today when leaders abdicate their responsibilities and the blind begin leading the blind.

This is probably why “**esteeming**” them is added. They are not merely to esteem them, but to esteem them “**very highly in love because of their work.**” You see? Their work is your motive. Their burdens are lightened by you. Clearly, this refers then to people who are Christians behaving in this way towards others who are Christians, all of whom are in one church together. Whatever their work and labor was,

and remember this is a group of Christians who had a particularly hard time even going to work to support their families, the Apostle deems it worthy of acknowledgement and high esteem.

**Vs. 13** concludes, I do not think coincidentally, with “**Be at peace among yourselves.**” “Be at peace” is the first imperative in the list. As Greg Beale points out on this entire section, peace seems to be the goal of all these commands. So think about how esteeming those who labor among you, those who are over you, and those who admonish you leads to **peace**. When a child acknowledges and respects and esteems their parents who have to admonish them, sometimes harshly, it leads to peace. When they do not, it leads to terrible things, especially in the heart of the child to stores up **resentment**, but often in the actual family relationship, as even moms and dads can become maddeningly irate and spiteful towards their children when they behave badly. We could say the same thing for the other aspects of these two verses, but we’ll leave it at that for time’s sake.

**Vs. 14** contains **four commands**. These are preceded by what the ESV translates as “**we urge**” (*parakaleo*, a word meaning to exhort or encourage). The ESV, rightly so, sees these as not merely good ideas, but as vital to the life of the

church. Why? Because they lead to peace! They are all directed towards the Christians in this church, their lives with each other, and with God.

First, they are to “admonish the idle.” If “idle” is a correct translation, this is truly interesting! A moment ago, it was those who are working and laboring in admonishing them that they are to esteem. Now, *they* are to admonish *those* who do not work. In other words, admonishment is not just the duty of some Christians, though all admonishing must take place in its proper sphere and in righteousness and order. We’ve seen earlier in the letter that Paul has had to encourage them all to “work with your own hands” (4:11) and in the next letter he will have to say, “If any would not work, neither should he eat” (2Th 3:10). Obviously, not working was a problem for some of these people. So, the admonishment is, “Go to work! Don’t be a free-loader.”

“Idle” may not, however, be the best translation. Beale argues that it should be “disorderly” or “disruptive.” “The word refers to Christians who do not remain in their proper place and who are out of order and need to be admonished to walk according to the order God has commanded.”<sup>16</sup> They are idle, but more than idle. They not only will not

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<sup>16</sup> Beale, 163-64.

work, but *work hard* at being busybodies who disrupt the community in a specific way, especially by spreading false teaching, and therefore they become insubordinate to God. Either way, there are some who are to be admonished.

But **what is admonishment**? The word is *noutheteo*. Jay Adams created an entire form of counseling around it that used to be called “Nouthetic Counseling.” It **means teaching and instruction aimed at changing one’s moral disposition through enlightening and warning of potential problems ahead and rebuking those entangled in wrongdoing.**<sup>17</sup> Basically, it means helping someone to think and act rightly. It is not scolding. It is not harping. It is more like discipline, the setting right of the mind for the correction of behavior, for the *peace* between brothers and God! When people are not at peace, you can be certain that they need admonishment in some area or another. When they do not heed the admonishment, then stronger actions may be needed.

The next three commands, I think, help you understand admonishing better. First you have “**encourage the faint-hearted.**” Who are the fainthearted? Those who are fearful of something, scared, timid, distressed. These Thessalonians were under great duress, apparently from persecution as we

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<sup>17</sup> Beale, 161.

have seen. This would surely make some of them faint-hearted. Second is “help the weak.” Who are the weak? Those who are not strong, those who can’t take care of themselves, those who fragile, frail, feeble. The elderly, the sick, the suffering, the orphan, the widow, the crazy, the paranoid, and so on. Third, “be patient with them all.”

If you have a disposition like most people, like I do to much of the time, then you will know that it is not easy to do these things, because these are the kinds of people that can often rub you the wrong way. And thus, encouraging, helping, and being patient are sometimes extremely trying things to do. It is into *this* context that I believe admonishing should be understood. When you do, then you will know that admonishing is not about being heavy-handed or harsh or severe or exacting or punitive, but about being **full of love and compassion** in the sometimes itself difficult duty of setting someone straight.

And, of course, what does this lead to? **Peace in the church.** How you admonish can lead to peace or hostility, even as certainly encouraging, comforting, and being patient can only lead to peace! When you say a kind word, give positive feedback, send money, go over and help someone move, or help someone who is very difficult in a patient

way, the result is peace. God gives these commands as means to peace among yourself. So if you aren't at peace, consider how you are acting or not acting towards one another and obey God's word here.

Our behavior in these ways continues into **vs. 15**. “**See** that no one repays anyone evil for evil, but always **seek** to do good to one another and to everyone.” The commands are “**see**” and “**seek**.” You see with your eyes. This means you pay attention to what you see going on around you. Instead of thinking about yourself, deliberately look around and see if someone is sitting by themselves, feeling lonely, hurting in some way. This takes work and it takes a selfless attitude that doesn't have as its first need to run to your friend to check on the score of the game or to the pastor to get your theological question answered. The point is, we are brothers and sisters together. There are many who are needy and they need you.

Sometimes the need comes because of how someone is treating someone else. This can be anywhere, but obviously if you see it in church, it is that much the worse. When you see someone repaying evil for evil, you then seek to do good not just to one another, but to everyone! To the one receiving the evil first. To the one divvying out the evil second.

Here, we have something that I could take an entire sermon to talk about. The *Lex Talionis* is the famous “eye for an eye” principle in the Mosaic law. Paul is not overturning this law. For that law deals with justice applied by a culture and a court. He is doing exactly what Jesus did when he talked about turning the other cheek.<sup>18</sup> He is talking about *individuals*, not countries; about Christians in *personal relationships*, not Christians acting as judges in courts of law.

Justice demands an eye for an eye. But Jesus came to give grace, not to nations but to individuals. Grace is the opposite of an eye for an eye. It is mercy. It is forgiveness of debts. It is not paying evil for evil. When I think of one thing that creates more hostility, more heat, more hate than anything else, it is probably this. Retaliating. Repaying. Reloading. Whether it is nations like Israel and everyone around them or families with mom and dad, when do things go from bad to worse? When we repay one another evil for evil. When we one-up the other. When we seek revenge.

But peace comes when the unexpected, the other-worldly thing intrudes upon this sorry earth and we seek, intentionally, to do good to one another and to everyone.

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<sup>18</sup> For much more see my sermon “Turn the Other Cheeky: Applying the Lex Talionis Today” (Matthew 5:38-42).

This implies, brothers and sisters, that you seek to do good to those who are presently doing evil. Again, not talking on a national or legal level, but on a personal level, whether it be in our interactions face to face or our tweeting back and forth or the way we speak about others behind their back. This is love in action. And it leads to peace. The opposite leads to the opposites of peace.

### *Your Inner-Life Leads to Peace*

At this point, the commands seem to move from **action** to **thought life**. He begins to deal now with our inner-life, our spirit-man, our heart attitudes. As Beale says, “**We are not peaceful people when we react wrongly to difficulties.**” How he directs our souls here is truly remarkable.

**Vs. 16** begins them with two simple words: **Rejoice always**. Rejoicing is first a heart attitude that only then bubbles up outwardly into behavior.

In the Greek, “**always**” comes first for emphasis! Everyone can rejoice when the circumstances are right: Your daughter marries a fine Christian man, your party wins the senate, Nebraska loses all of its football games (tongue in cheek). But what about when your son is murdered by a crazed psychopath or your mother and brother are killed in

a random car accident or you lose your house in a fire or your parents are dragged away to a gulag for being Christians. *Always* rejoice?

Let's think about the logic of this. Remember **the larger picture here is peace**. In several places, peace and joy are directly related to one another. “**For the kingdom of God is a matter of righteousness and peace and joy in the Holy Spirit**” (**Rom 14:17**). “**May the God of hope fill you with all joy and peace in believing, so that by the power of the Holy Spirit you may abound in hope**” (**Rom 15:13**). And so on.

In other words, rejoicing always is not an end to itself. This isn't about being happy when happiness is the last thing you want. It is a matter of having peace and therefore hope. When you are joyful, you are not resentful, hateful, angry, fighting, etc. So, respond in all things with rejoicing, that is praising God, especially knowing that your Savior has gone before you in times of trouble. As the hymn says,

Christ Jesus lay in death's strong bands  
For our offenses given  
But now at God's right hand he stands  
And brings us life from heaven  
Therefore let us joyful be  
And sing to God right thankfully

## Loud songs of Hallelujah.

What about the next one, “Pray without ceasing?” I was once in a Sunday School class where the guy was teaching on prayer, and he asked what he thought was a rhetorical question, “How many of you think you pray enough?” Out of 35 or so hands, I was the only one to raise mine. My thinking was that this was typical semi-legalism, a question to guilt people into praying more. But Paul says pray without ceasing.

Is that even possible? Obviously not in a formal way. But I’m always conscious that everything I think God hears. I don’t know if I’m unique in that or not, but it is true. Thus, all my thoughts are either consciously or subconsciously me talking to God. This is prayer! It isn’t bent over, kneeling on the floor kinds of pleading. I’m certain I don’t do that enough. But in a general attitude that God hears me and I’m talking not just to myself but to him? Yes. I actually do think that is possible, and I think more Christians need to hear that prayer is supposed to be a natural way of life that you do all the day long. We are too steeped in our thinking in the formal discipline of prayer and not enough in every day common and ordinary attitude of prayer.

The only time this won't happen is if you are **living in known sin** and you refuse to repent of it. Even then, if you are a Christian, you know that God hears your thoughts. And so running from your sin and fleeing from talking to him is a fool's errand. Therefore, pray without ceasing. Obey God. It leads to peace in your heart with him. For you can't hide your sin from him.

**Vs. 18** is similar again, and with it we will end today. **"Give thanks in all circumstances."** We just heard it in that song from Luther, **"... and sing to God right thankfully."** He very well may have had this passage on his mind. This one gives a reason. **"For this is the will of God in Christ Jesus for you."** In other words, God desires for you to give thanks no matter what.

Again, remember the circumstances of these people. They were undergoing much persecution, even seeing friends die because of it. They are to give thanks even in this. But why? So that you may have peace. Thankless people are ungrateful people, and almost always bitter. They are also self-centered, for there is no one to give thanks to. All that's left is yourself. How lonely this must be. How peace-less a life to be a thankless person.

In all of these commands, remember that the goal is your own well-being, personally and communally. I truly believe that the hippies were on to something when they sang about peace. But the peace the world knows is far different from the peace that God gives.

Strangely, that peace seems to lead only to greater and greater hostility. I remember during the Gulf War attending both a pro-troops and anti-war peace rally in Minneapolis. What I discovered is that the pro-troops rally was organized, calm, and peaceful. The so-called peace war was obnoxious, violent, repugnant, full of screaming, throwing of eggs, vandalism, and cursing.

Why? Because the peace of the world leads to a godless vacuum where basic virtues are taken over by selfishness and anarchy. The commands of God are not so. They are treasures and pearls and gold and silver and diamonds that cause our path to be straight, our brothers to be happy, our hearts to be satisfied, and our souls to be complete. Because they give us the very ways of God. The God of peace.

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