

Words from a Super Coach – 1 Thessalonians 5:12-28

Introduction

In sport, some coaches and captains are famous for giving their half-time speeches. At half-time, or during a break in the game, the captain or coach will call the players together and have something to say to them. In the movies, the coaches are often yelling at the players, demanding that they do better. But in real life, I think the best coaches and captains do not need to do a lot of yelling. That is because, they have already told the players everything they need to know. And so, they use the half-time speech to remind the players, not only what they already know, but to urge and inspire them to go out and put into action all that they have already been taught.

The other day, there was an amazing example of this but with a real twist. The Auckland Warriors had just finished being thoroughly beaten by the Melbourne Storm and the Warriors were absolutely dejected. You see, the Warriors had sacrificed a lot to help get the Rugby League competition started again after the COVID-19 outbreak. Then, less than a week ago, their coach was unceremoniously sacked. Not long after the game, The Storm's Captain, Smith and their Coach, Bellamy went into the Warrior's room and gave some speeches of appreciation and encouragement. It was an amazing gesture, and many are hoping it will lift the Warriors up again.

Today, we come to the end of Paul's first letter to the Thessalonians and I think that Paul is acting a bit like a coach or a mentor in his final few sentences of this letter. He begins by calling the "players" together...

Acknowledging

1 Thessalonians 5:12-13 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. ¹³ Hold them in the highest regard in love because of their work. Live in peace with each other.

As a minister of the church, it would be easy for me to take these verses and tell you that you have to listen to me. That whatever I say, you must do, no questions asked. But that is not what these verses are saying and if someone uses them this way, you need to be careful around them. Also, notice that Paul was not talking to the leaders at this point. He was talking to every member of the church. In the original language, he called them "brothers", but it was meant to be inclusive of everyone and so the 2011 NIV rightly says "brothers and sisters". So, whether they were the prophet, the teacher, the average church member, they were all to listen to what he was going to say. He started by saying that they were to acknowledge, respect, and honour those who worked hard, who cared for, and even admonished or gave spiritual guidance to people. Essentially, he was telling them to know and respect their leaders. But notice that he did not call them bishops, elders, deacons, or ministers. Rather, he used the kind of language to describe the kind of work they did.

In every church, there are people who work hard, there are people who care for others, and there are people who guide us spiritually, who tell us things we might need to hear and not all of them have an official role or title in the church. Just like a good club has senior players who mentor and care for younger players, so too a good church not only relies on its official ministers, but also on others who show important leadership in the church. Therefore, I think this verse applies to all of us, including me. I need to not only acknowledge, honour and respect the bishops and others who are officially over me. I also need to respect those who work hard, care for, and admonish me, even if they do not have a title. This will especially be true for when we come back to onsite church services.

Church is going to look very different for a while. We are going to have to register and probably pre-register so that we can go to church. We are going to have to help clean the church after we have finished so that we prevent the spread of COVID-19. We will not be allowed to sing, to stand around and talk, there will not even be morning tea for a while, and somebody may have to remind you to follow the new rules. So, we need to do our best to live in peace with each other, and to acknowledge and respect those who are making sure we do the right thing as we start coming back to onsite church.

Mentoring for Maturity

I have already suggested that in the best sporting clubs and teams, there are senior players who will often guide and encourage the junior players to help them develop. They are not officially coaches, but they take on an important role within the club or team. I think it is interesting that Paul spoke to the whole church about the idea of developing and mentoring people in the Christian faith.

1 Thessalonians 5:14-15 And we urge you, brothers and sisters, warn those who are idle and disruptive, encourage the disheartened, help the weak, be patient with everyone. ¹⁵ Make sure that nobody pays back wrong for wrong, but always strive to do what is good for each other and for everyone else.

There is so much in today's passage that I am not going to have enough time to explain all the things that Paul talks about and these verses are an example of that. But if I was to sum up what Paul is talking about here, then I would have to say that Paul was encouraging those hardworking people, we have just spoken about, to help mature those who are struggling. Like the senior players mentoring the younger ones, they will sometimes have to tell less mature Christians to get on with things and to stop being idle or lazy. The stronger, more mature Christians, should encourage, help, and be patient with those who are disheartened and weak.

Another sign of maturity is seen in how people treat each other. We do not want to be seeking revenge when someone has hurt us, rather we should be trying to find ways of doing good, even if someone has hurt us. I think that is why Paul told the Thessalonians to acknowledge and hold in the highest regard the more mature, hardworking, caring Christians. Sometimes, a mentor needs to help us mature. That can be an uncomfortable experience, but it is always important to be maturing as Christian people.

Attitudes

Well, the next few verses have something to say about our attitudes to life and how we ought to live.

1 Thessalonians 5:16-18 Rejoice always, ¹⁷ pray continually, ¹⁸ give thanks in all circumstances; for this is God's will for you in Christ Jesus.

We start these verses with the attitude a person should have in their relationship with God. "Rejoicing always" does not mean that a person is supposed to be happy all the time. No one can be happy all the time. But we rejoice in our relationship with God because we know we are saved, we know we will be with Jesus on Judgement Day, we are secure in our knowledge of eternal life. The knowledge of Jesus and the love he has shown us should make us rejoice. Praying regularly helps us to not be trusting in our own abilities but in God. A major part of prayer is about handing over our desire to control everything to God and to recognise that he is the Lord of all. And as the old saying goes, we need to have "an attitude of gratitude". Our relationship with Jesus should lead us to giving thanks to God continually. I know that sometimes we can become tired of continually thanking God for salvation and all the good things he has given us, but thankfulness changes our perspective on things. Being thankful can make it much easier to face the trials and difficulties in life which we will all experience at some time.

Do and Do Not

Paul then tells the Thessalonians what they should and should not do...

1 Thessalonians 5:19-22 Do not quench the Spirit.²⁰ Do not treat prophecies with contempt²¹ but test them all; hold on to what is good,²² reject every kind of evil.

I want to start by looking at verses 20-21 because I think all these things relate to each other and verses 20-21 are at the heart of the matter.

1 Thessalonians 5:20-21 Do not treat prophecies with contempt²¹ but test them all; hold on to what is good,

The question is, "What is a prophecy?" For the Old Testament people of God, that would not be too hard to answer because there were a number of prophets and we can read them and understand what their messages was about. Lots of people think that the main point of a prophet was to tell you the future, but that is not exactly what it was about. You see, the Old Testament Prophets of God would tell the people to stop disobeying God otherwise they would be punished. The prophets would remember the covenant agreement between God and his people – that God would be their God and they would be his people. When the people turned away from God then they were in danger of receiving the curses of the covenant agreement. The prophets would warn the people that if they did not repent and turn back to God then the Philistines, the Assyrians, or Babylonians would come to destroy them. Sometimes the people listened and they were saved. Sometimes they did not and they were defeated, captured and destroyed.

We are the New Testament people of God and the covenant relationship we have with God was made through Jesus. I think that New Testament prophecy is anything that calls God's people back into a right relationship with him. Part of that prophecy is warning us of God's wrath and the reality of hell if we do not repent. When Paul tells the Thessalonians to not treat prophecies with contempt but to test them all, I think he is telling the Thessalonians that they need to listen to those who tell them to repent and turn to Jesus.

But, you know, not everyone has a good understanding of the Bible. Not everyone is teaching you the truth about Jesus and salvation. Those who teach you the Prosperity Gospel are teaching you a false gospel which will lead you away from Jesus. Those who teach Liberal Theology, who say that Jesus never rose from the dead, are teaching a false gospel which will lead you to hell. Those who teach that you need to go to a saint or to someone else other than Jesus to help you speak to God, are teaching a false gospel and you could be on the wrong side of God's judgement. We do not just take what anybody says to heart and believe them. We have the Bible to test their words and teachings. That is why he says, "Do not quench the Spirit." I believe the Holy Spirit helps us to understand God's Word and the more we understand God's Word the more the Spirit leads us, which makes us better at recognising false gospels. So, we test what people have to say, we hold onto what is good, and we reject the evil, false words of a false prophet.

Made Holy

As Paul gets closer to the end of the letter, we see some words which act like a greeting and a blessing.

1 Thessalonians 5:23-24 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.²⁴ The one who calls you is faithful, and he will do it.

Jewish people often gave a greeting of peace and Paul talked about God being a God of peace here at the end of his letter. Of course, the peace is based on a person being ready for Judgement Day, for Jesus' Second

Coming. He asked God to sanctify the Thessalonians through and through. In other words, he asked God to make them holy, pure, free from sin. That way they would be blameless on the day of Jesus' return. Now, you could spend a lot of time trying to work out the difference between a person's soul and their spirit. But as that is really hard to work out and I don't have time to talk about it, I think we can just say that Paul wanted every part of a person to be kept blameless. It is just like when Jesus said...

Mark 12:30 *Love the Lord your God with all your heart and with all your soul and with all your mind and with all your strength.'*

You are not supposed to sit down and work out how you love God with each of those different aspects of yourself. You are supposed to realise that Jesus is telling us to love God fully, with every single part of our beings. Paul is saying that God is the one who makes us holy, he makes every part of us holy, and we can trust that he will do this for us so that we are ready for Judgement Day.

Final Greetings

Paul finishes his letter with these words...

1 Thessalonians 5:25-28 *Brothers and sisters, pray for us. ²⁶ Greet all God's people with a holy kiss. ²⁷ I charge you before the Lord to have this letter read to all the brothers and sisters. ²⁸ The grace of our Lord Jesus Christ be with you.*

Paul asks for prayer. We all need prayer. That is one of the reasons why I love that our church is becoming stronger with devotions. It is great to know that people are spending time with God in prayer for one another. He then tells the Thessalonians to greet God's people with a holy kiss. Now, obviously we are not allowed to do this right now. We cannot even give each other a hearty handshake. That is part of what is going to make onsite church difficult when we return, because we are not allowed to do these things. But it is not the physical act of kissing, hugging, or shaking hands which is important, it is the heartfelt greeting we give to one another. We share something in God, and that is the love, hope, and forgiveness we find in Jesus. So, whether we can only greet each other by letter, over the phone, on Zoom, in person, or with physical contact, it is all about recognising the love we have for each other because of what we share in Jesus.

Conclusion

Well today, Paul has challenged us to work together as a church. You see, we are more than just a club or a team, and we do not just get together in the hope of winning a sporting competition. We are called to be an active church. Right now, that looks different to what it has looked like for generations, but the principles are still the same. Some of us are young in the faith, but there are mature Christians who can mentor us to greater maturity. Sometimes people will have to admonish us and tell us to get on with things, and we need to acknowledge and respect them as they help us grow. There may be times when we are called to repent and turn back to Jesus as people give us a word from God, but we have to test those words and make sure they line up with what the Bible says. Otherwise, they might lead us away from God and away from our salvation. And ultimately, we are called to be ready. Ready for Jesus' return so that on Judgement Day, we will know that we will be with God forever in Jesus.