

Central Baptist Church

March 2023

1 Thessalonians 5:12-28 – Message #8

LIVING AT THE END OF TIME

WHAT SHOULD WE LOOK FOR IN A CHURCH?

By Tom Cowan

(SHOW TITLE SLIDE 01 as Tom walks up) Before we get into this final message on 1st Thessalonians – I express my sincere thanks to you as a congregation for your attentive ear over these past 8 weeks – I trust that we have engaged with truth – been challenged about how to live like a believer in these last days – how to pray for those we love. So I thank you. You guys are great!

Several folk have asked me what comes next. During the rest of April – with the emphasis on the resurrection – we will look at the power of the cross which is the central truth of Christianity.

Then starting in May – thru' most of June – **we've got mail** – the 7 letters from John on Patmos – Revelation 2-3. We are also preparing a study guide that will guide your personal reading - the community groups and integrate with the Sunday teaching ministry. Trust you will use that.

If you asked someone what are they looking for in a church – you would get a lot of different answers – there is an essential commitment to truth that we should be looking for – others want a sense of belonging/community – they might ask – what have you got for our children or perhaps youth -- a church must have a sense of mission or what I prefer to call engagement beyond ourselves – locally and globally.

In this final study in this series on 1st Thessalonians – Paul writes about what he sees in this church at the end of time – and it gives us some additional insights into what life in the church should be like. As we have seen in other passages – this is not the complete answer or picture – so we really have to add it to other passages. However these insights are vital.

From verse 13-22 – there are 15 imperatives or commands! 15 points is too much for a sermon! So I have grouped under some broad headings to help us gather them up.

(SHOW SLIDE 02) I WANT TO BE IN A CHURCH THAT RESPECTS ITS LEADERS.

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Leadership in any field is hard work these days – it seems these days we have made a national sport out of leadership-bashing. In my shelves in my office – I have a pile of books on leadership – there are probably more definitions on leadership than almost anything else.

There is another side to leadership which is hardly ever mentioned – it is called followership – it addresses the responsibilities of those who follow – it seems to me that hardly anyone ever talks about this.

(SHOW SLIDE 03) 12 Now we ask you, brothers and sisters, to respect those who work hard among you, who are over 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.

Central Baptist is a congregationally based church – that means we prayerfully select men and women to lead us – there are also pastors called to serve the church. This forms our leadership community.

Paul says – those of us in leadership are over the church in the Lord – they are called to servant leadership – which serve by leading and lead by serving. They are often called our lay leaders (I do not like the word lay – we are all LAOS = the people of God) – they leave home after supper – come at the end of their work day – spend more time in leadership issues.

“Over you” – does not mean to boss the church around – throw their weight around –

1st Peter 5: some critical leadership attitudes.

(SHOW SLIDE 04) 2 Be shepherds of God's flock that is under your care, serving as overseers-- not because you must, but because you are willing, as God wants you to be; not greedy for money, but eager to serve;

3 not lording it over those entrusted to you, but being examples to the flock.

In other words – it is not about power – it is about serving the church. I have great respect for the leadership here at Central.

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There are times leaders have to come eyeball to eyeball with people – Paul says – it is to admonish them. The issues might be theological – moral – relational – it is not fun – for those on the receiving end - it may arouse resentment – we get our backs up – we muster support for our position – in a previous church I was once threatened with a lawsuit.

Here is a critical test of trust – to hold leaders in the highest regard and support them in their work especially when we may not agree with them. Very often – those in leadership and pastors will have information about a situation that cannot be shared publicly – that is a place to express trust.

Churches such as ours which are congregationally based – walk a complex and intricate path in the whole area of leadership – for one thing - we tend to bring our thinking / attitude about leadership as it happens in the secular/political world into the church – and assume it is the same. It is not! We are neither an autocracy – nor a democracy – we are to be a community in which we seek the mind and the rule of Christ. That makes us a Christocracy.

Both leaders and followers need a whole new way of thinking about this dance – it is a place to find and exercise the mind of Christ. Church meetings should really be worship meetings about seeking this mind of Christ and then we submit to His rule. That is what a Christocracy is.

Let me encourage you as a starting point -- to pray for the Board and other ministry leaders – pastors - this is the place to start. When leaders make decisions that you do not understand -- ask – when you disagree – do not gossip - no emails - talk first to them directly. Ask what you need to ask – and there may be times when you have to let something drop and not push it any further.

Are leaders infallible? – are they always right? – we know the answer is NO – but God has called them to servant leadership – we need to give the respect they are due.

(SHOW SLIDE 05) I WANT TO BE IN A CHURCH WHERE PEOPLE LOOK OUT FOR EACH OTHER.

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14 And we urge you, brothers and sisters, warn those who are idle, encourage the timid, help the weak, be patient with everyone.

(SHOW SLIDE 06) Warn those who are idle

WARN = nouthetic – describe one style of counselling -- there are times to confront the IDLE – that might mean – morally idle – remember we expect believers to live like believers. There may be times when we go and meet with someone and sit down face to face.

Galatians 6

1. Brothers, if someone is caught in a sin, you who are spiritual should restore him gently. (with meekness)

(SHOW SLIDE 07) Encourage the timid –

The timid – when someone loses confidence over an issue – does not see how they can move on – you don't admonish people like that – because that crushes their spirit – that wipes them out – you come alongside to encourage them – you bring words that will comfort – restore confidence – try build up their courage.

(SHOW SLIDE 08) Help the weak –

There are folk who at times have had the wind has been knocked out of them – life has beaten them up – we are there to offer help – to get them back on their feet again.

It is a catastrophe – a disaster if we get these mixed up – if we encourage the idle or warn the weak.

Then a final word that wraps these three up – ties them together.

(SHOW SLIDE 09) Be patient with everyone -

2 different Greek words for patience

1 – endurance/perseverance – always for patience when faced with difficult circumstances – they are designed to put strength in to us –

2 – word for patience when working with people – used here. We sometimes talk about having a short fuse in working with people – here the picture is having a long (lit. macro) fuse - Used to describe God's patience in working with us -

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Some final instructions about life together –

(SHOW SLIDE 10) 15 Make sure that nobody pays back wrong for wrong, but always try to be kind to each other and to everyone else.

The church is not a place for retaliation – reprisals or whatever – it is a place to work at developing and nurturing kindness between one another.

We have to find that narrow path between – on the one hand – Our individualism and right to privacy can keep our lives apart – and on the other hand – interfering and meddling into each others lives.

My sense is that most churches that have tried to put into effect some process of discipline have not done it well – and the results have sometimes been worse than the initial problem – so we tend to back off from the tricky and awkward subject and we hope the problem or the people will just go away – find another church.

Bonhoeffer – *Life Together* – pastoral staff have been reading this together -

(SHOW SLIDE 11)

We admonish one another to go the way that Christ bids us to go. We warn one another against the disobedience that is our common destruction. ... why should we be afraid of one another since both of us only have God to fear.

The practice of discipline in the congregation begins in the smallest of circles.

(SHOW SLIDE 12) Where defection from God's Word in doctrine or life imperils the family fellowship and with it the whole congregation – the word of admonition and rebuke must be ventured. Nothing can be more cruel than the tenderness that consigns another to his sin – nothing can be more compassionate than the severe rebuke that brings a brother back from the path of sin.

(SHOW SLIDE 13) I WANT TO BE IN A CHURCH THAT HELPS ME EACH WEEK TO RE-CONNECT WITH GOD IN WORSHIP

There is a lot of stuff in the world that every week – every day – tears into our lives – pulls us down – beats us up. It is so easily to lose sight of who God is – what God does

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– I need to be reminded at least each week of what God is doing – and to re-connect my life with him in the community of the church.

(SHOW SLIDE 14)

16. Be joyful always;

17 pray continually;

18 give thanks in all circumstances, for this is God's will for you in Christ Jesus.

We are well aware that our own personal worship is vital – of course – individually we are called to be joyful – to pray – to give thanks – but we have a vital need to be part of the corporate life of the church.

Psalm 95 – note the emphasis on US –

(SHOW SLIDE 15)

1. Come, let **us** sing for joy to the LORD; let **us** shout aloud to the Rock of our salvation.

2 Let **us** come before him with thanksgiving and extol him with music and song.

6 Come, let **us** bow down in worship, let **us** kneel before the LORD our Maker;

7. for he is our God and we are the people of his pasture, the flock under his care.

One of the great negatives of covid – we could not meet together face to face. For me – being at home and watching on line was not the same. I needed to be together.

I need to stand in the congregation of the people of God every week – to worship – to be part of this choir of praise - to pray together – to hear what God is saying in his word – to hear what God is doing in your life.

(SHOW SLIDE 16) I WANT TO BE IN A CHURCH THAT HAS SPIRITUAL DISCERNMENT.

(SHOW SLIDE 17) 19 Do not put out the Spirit's fire;

20 do not treat prophecies with contempt.

21 Test everything. Hold on to the good.

22 Avoid every kind of evil.

It seems that there are two problems today in the whole area of the Holy Spirit – from John Stott -

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1 – on the one hand – we are open to nothing new – our minds and hearts are closed to His work and ministry. This puts out/quenches the fire of the Spirit. It closes the church and our lives to his life-changing transforming power. We are just like a club – any other organization.

2 – on the other hand – at the opposite end of the spectrum – churches can be so open to everything that they end up in all kinds of trouble – theological - emotional – moral - relational.

The answer - the solution – test everything – hold on to what is good.

The situation may be referring to a church style which is more free-flowing than ours – when someone may stand and say – I have a word from the Lord. The question is – is it really from the Lord?

(SHOW SLIDE 18) 1st Timothy 4 --

1. The Spirit clearly says that in later times some will abandon the faith and follow deceiving spirits and things taught by demons.

2 Such teachings come through hypocritical liars, whose consciences have been seared as with a hot iron.

So Paul is saying– these words of prophecy have to put to the test – put in the crucible and the heat turned up – to see if they are true or if they are false – genuine or counterfeit.

What kind of tests might we use? John Stott in his commentary – gives 5 suggestions.

(SHOW SLIDE 19) 1 – the plain truth of Scripture.

What we say and teach has to balance within the whole counsel of God. In other words – it has to fit somewhere within the entire flow of scripture – and be supported by the truth of God's Word. Most heresies begin as truth – and they usually contain truth – just enough truth to sound believable – but they are usually truth out of balance. They have taken something which I call a “small” truth – and they have enlarged it beyond its size.

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(SHOW SLIDE 20) 2 – the truth of the divine-human nature of Jesus.

(SHOW SLIDE 21) 1st John 4 says clearly –

1. Dear friends, do not believe every spirit, but test the spirits to see whether they are from God, because many false prophets have gone out into the world.

2 This is how you can recognize the Spirit of God: Every spirit that acknowledges that Jesus Christ has come in the flesh is from God,

The word that is truly from the spirit of God will always affirm the person of Jesus as the word become fully flesh.

(SHOW SLIDE 22) #3 – the third test is the test of grace.

There are many movements today that call on people for all kinds of effort – what they have to do to be accepted – what they must do to be welcomed – what they have to give up to be part of the community – perhaps some spiritual ladder of increasing knowledge that they have to climb – some form of Gnosticism which was a 2nd century cult. The only ground of our authentic message is the grace of God – nothing more – nothing less. A message that has the breath of the Spirit will affirm the grace of God.

(SHOW SLIDE 23) 4 – we often forget this – a true message is known and validated by the character of the speaker.

Jesus says –

(SHOW SLIDE 24) 15. "Watch out for false prophets. They come to you in sheep's clothing, but inwardly they are ferocious wolves.

16 By their fruit you will recognize them.

We must not accept or tolerate a disconnect between what we sometimes call the walk and the talk. There must be an authentic correlation between the private world and the public world.

(SHOW SLIDE 25) 5 – the degree to which a message edifies and builds up the church.

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A genuine message should always encourage – strengthen – edify – comfort – at times convict -

It seems that some people today are so hungry for something – that they will listen to – respond to – almost anything or anyone. Don't be gullible – but on the other hand - don't be so close-minded that God's Spirit cannot bring a fresh word to us.

We want what is genuine – as opposed to what is counterfeit – we want to listen and respond to what is authentic – as opposed to what is false – what is solid as opposed to what is empty.

Remember as we live in these last days – Paul to Timothy -- 1:4-5

(SHOW SLIDE 26) 4 do not be devoted to myths and endless genealogies. These promote controversies rather than God's work-- which is by faith.

5. The goal of this command is love, which comes from a pure heart and a good conscience and a sincere faith.

As a church – we want – we need to be open and sensitive to the moving of God's spirit – who takes the word and breathes life and breath into it.

We want to sing with confidence –

Holy Spirit rain down – holy spirit rain down.

Or gently – spirit of the living God fall afresh on me – melt me – mold me – fill me – use me.

The spirit that brooded over the waters and brought order out of chaos – also gently sweeps over our lives and brings new life. He breathes into us as he breathed the breath of God into Adam in the garden.

So – we are living in these last days – we are living between these two epiphanies – one is the coming of Christ at his birth – the other epiphany is his coming in power and in glory. We are called to nothing less than to live like believers as we live in these last days.

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Paul has a great benediction which we will read in a moment – just before that he finishes with a writes a personal word.

²⁵ Brothers and sisters, pray for us. ²⁶ Greet all God's people with a holy kiss. – that probably means men would kiss men and women would kiss women – WE ARE NOT GOING TO DO THAT! I DON'T CARE WHAT PAUL SAID!

²⁷ I charge you before the Lord to have this letter read to all the brothers and sisters.

Here is Paul's great benediction for us –

STAND/ WORSHIP TEAM UP.

23. 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.

Closing song:

Prayer partners –

Let me give you again that final benediction from 1st Thessalonians – the word of Paul – this time from The Message --

May God himself, the God who makes everything holy and whole, make you holy and whole, put you together—spirit, soul, and body—and keep you fit for the coming of our Master, Jesus Christ. The One who called you is completely dependable. If he said it, he'll do it!