

Encourage One Another

The Closing Exhortations of 1 Thessalonians — the Condensed Edition

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Preface

This book began as a series of messages taught to a single congregation. Our situation was ordinary. We wanted our fellowship life to grow up, and we had come to believe that the New Testament had already told us what a maturing community actually does when it comes together.

So we went to the end of Paul's first letter to the Thessalonians and stayed there.

That closing section, 1 Thessalonians 5:11–24, is what scholars call a paranesis: a run of moral exhortations gathered at the end of a letter.

The apostolic team saved these instructions for last because they expected them to be obeyed. And they framed them inside the most urgent expectation the church has ever held: that the Lord Jesus is coming back. Everything in the list is given in the light of His return.

The vision is a spiritual fellowship that is free, welcoming, liberating, healthy, strengthening, safe, and growing.

Unless otherwise noted, Scripture is quoted from the New American Standard Bible. One exception is deliberate: the responsive reading that follows, which our congregation read aloud at the opening of every message in this series. We read it from the Tree of Life Version, and I have preserved it exactly as we spoke it. Read it aloud, if you can. It is the text of this whole book.

The Reading

To be read responsively.

Leader: Therefore encourage one another and build each other up,

Congregation: just as you in fact are doing.

Leader: Now we ask you, brothers and sisters, to recognize those who work hard among you and are over you in the Lord and correct you,

Together: and to esteem them beyond all measure in love because of their work. Keep shalom among yourselves.

Leader: We urge you, brothers and sisters,

Congregation: correct the unruly, comfort the fainthearted,

Leader: help the weak, be patient with everyone.

Congregation: See that no one repays evil for evil to anyone,

Together: but always pursue what is good for one another and for all.

Leader: Rejoice always,

Congregation: pray constantly,

Together: in everything give thanks, for this is God's will for you in Messiah Yeshua.

Leader: Do not quench the Spirit,

Congregation: do not despise prophetic messages,

Together: but test all things, hold fast to what is good, keep away from every kind of evil.

Leader: Now may the God of shalom Himself make you completely holy. May your whole spirit and soul and body be kept complete, blameless at the coming of our Lord Yeshua the Messiah.

Together: Faithful is the One who calls you—and He will make it happen! (1 Thessalonians 5:11–24 TLV)

PART ONE — THE SETTING

1. Seasons

There is a season for everything a farmer does, and the farmer does not do everything in every season. Isaiah knew it, and he turned it into a parable about the wisdom of God:

Does the farmer plow continually to plant seed? ... For dill is not threshed with a threshing sledge, nor is the cartwheel driven over cummin; but dill is beaten out with a rod, and cummin with a club... For his God instructs and teaches him properly. (Isaiah 28:24–29 NASB)

Note what the farmer knows. He does not plow forever. He does not thresh delicate seed with the heavy sledge. Dill gets a rod, cummin gets a club, and grain gets the cartwheel, and even the grain is not crushed forever. And this knowledge, Isaiah says, is not the farmer's cleverness. His God instructs him.

A congregation has seasons too. There is a treatment appropriate to dill and a treatment appropriate to wheat, and the man who cannot tell the difference will ruin both. Wisdom in the life of a community is knowing what season you are in.

So begin by asking two questions honestly. What is the degree of our spiritual maturity? Measure it where the Scriptures measure it, in love for God, in love for one another, in godliness, in servant lifestyles. And what is the culture in which we are living? Both answers determine the work of the season.

The Body Builds Itself Up

The goal is not a better meeting. The goal is a body that grows.

but speaking the truth in love, we are to grow up in all aspects into Him who is the head, even Christ, from whom the whole body, being fitted and held together by what every joint supplies, according to the proper working of each individual part, causes the growth of the body for the building up of itself in love. (Ephesians 4:15–16 NASB)

This describes something a congregation cannot manufacture by programming. The head is the Messiah. The growth of the body comes about "according to the proper working of each individual part." The body builds *itself* up, in love.

So the health of a fellowship is not finally a function of the platform. It is a function of the joints. It is what happens between the members, in ordinary speech, in ordinary rooms.

Table Fellowship

Which is why the vision that drives this book is not a program but a table.

What I long to see is a spiritual *koinōnia* that is free, welcoming, liberating, healthy, strengthening, safe, and growing. Concretely, that means table fellowship: intentional conversation that is Word-based and Word-focused, open to the Spirit's promptings, friendship-building, and frankly aimed at making disciples. A pattern that can be reproduced, first where people can see it modeled, and then in homes.

The New Testament describes this kind of gathering plainly:

What is the outcome then, brethren? When you assemble, each one has a psalm, has a teaching, has a revelation, has a tongue, has an interpretation. Let all things be done for edification. (1 Corinthians 14:26 NASB)

Each one has something. All of it is for edification and all of it is intentional.

You know the difference between running into someone and meeting with someone. When believers gather, their interaction is meant to be intentional, and we come expecting the Holy Spirit to reveal the Messiah's mind and activity.

Where Do We Begin?

Where does a community start, if it wants to become this? My conviction is that we begin with the word of grace.

And now I commend you to God and to the word of His grace, which is able to build you up and to give you the inheritance among all those who are sanctified. (Acts 20:32 NASB)

That is where we begin: sharing with one another what the Holy Spirit has been showing us in the Scriptures. Such sharing is not exhortative. It is not corrective. It is not confrontational. It is testimony: “This is what God has been doing in me through His Word.”

It is, if you like, the sharing of the milk of the Word. And let no one sneer at milk. Peter wrote to believers at every level of growth and told all of them to crave it (1 Peter 2:2 NASB). It is mother's milk, warm and nourishing, and it is given inside a framework of mutual care. That framework matters as much as the nourishment.

So let us begin there.

2. Milk and Solid Food

Milk requires nothing of the one who drinks it. Solid food is different. Solid food must be chewed. Someone else may have prepared it, but no one else can eat it for you.

Solid food requires thought, in order to understand. It requires meditation, to hear what the Lord may be saying. It requires the exercise of the will, to let the Word take effect, and then to do the will of God. Which is precisely how Jesus described His own nourishment:

Jesus said to them, "My food is to do the will of Him who sent Me and to accomplish His work." (John 4:34 NASB)

The Qualification for Solid Food

For a disciple, the social context in which we do the will of God is the community of believers the Messiah is establishing and upholding. There we are commanded to love one another, honor one another, build up one another. And a community that is ready for solid food is a community devoted to the Lord and walking in covenant love with one another.

That is the qualification. Not intelligence. Not years. Love.

Paul could not give the Corinthians solid food, and he told them why:

I gave you milk to drink, not solid food; for you were not yet able to receive it. Indeed, even now you are not yet able, for you are still fleshly. For since there is jealousy and strife among you, are you not fleshly, and are you not walking like mere men? (1 Corinthians 3:2–3 NASB)

The disqualification was not a deficiency of teaching. It was a deficiency of love. James diagnosed the same disease and named its source: where there is "bitter jealousy and selfish ambition," there is "disorder and every evil thing," and the wisdom driving it is "earthly, natural, demonic" (James 3:14–16 NASB). Those are strong words for what looks, in most congregations, like ordinary jostling.

We are not seekers of the spotlight. The only one worthy of center stage is the Messiah.

Encourage and Build Up

So what are we to do when we gather? The New Testament gives us two verbs and one horizon. Hebrews tells us to "stimulate one another to love and good deeds," not forsaking the assembly "but encouraging one another; and all the more as you see the day drawing near" (Hebrews 10:24–25 NASB).

Encourage one another. Build up one another. Regularly. Habitually. Deliberately. With our eyes on the return of the Lord.

That last clause is not decoration. It is the reason the apostles bothered.

3. Living in the End

The apostles wrote these exhortations to people who expected the Lord to return. So before we walk through the list, we have to reckon with the expectation, and with the two ditches on either side of the road.

The first ditch is fanaticism. He is here. He is in the desert. He is in the inner room. Jesus warned about it precisely, and we know how it ends, because we have watched it end. *Sell everything you have and give the money to me.* Or worse: *I am your infallible leader. Now die.* The Lord's return will not need an announcement from an inner room. It will be lightning across the sky (Matthew 24:23–27 NASB).

The second ditch is the opposite, and it is quieter. He is delayed. Indefinitely. Forever.

Know this first of all, that in the last days mockers will come with their mocking, following after their own lusts, and saying, "Where is the promise of His coming?" (2 Peter 3:3–4 NASB)

Notice the diagnosis Peter gives, because it is not intellectual. The mockers follow "after their own lusts." The disbelief is a cloak. Underneath it is a love for the world. Scoffing at the promise is rarely a conclusion. It is usually a permission.

Between the ditches runs the road. Every generation is ordained to be alive in its own times, must keep its lamps lit, must provide for the future progress of the gospel, and must maintain urgency without collapsing into fanaticism.

For the grace of God has appeared... instructing us to deny ungodliness and worldly desires and to live sensibly, righteously and godly in the present age, looking for the blessed hope and the appearing of the glory of our great God and Savior, Christ Jesus. (Titus 2:11–13 NASB)

Grace trains us. Grace teaches us to live sensibly in the present age *while* looking for the blessed hope. Fanaticism cannot live sensibly. Scoffing cannot look for the hope. Grace does both.

Add Pressure

Now add pressure to the horizon, and you have the actual situation of the Thessalonians.

Peter told believers not to be startled when persecution comes, but "to the degree that you share the sufferings of Christ, keep on rejoicing" (1 Peter 4:12–14 NASB). Persecution is not a sign that something has gone wrong with your discipleship. It is a sign that you are in the story.

And pressure is the background of the great encouragement text in Hebrews. People were falling away. Notice why they were forsaking the assembly: believers may well have feared ostracism from the community they belonged to. Courage is necessary in order to be faithful. And faithfulness *because of love* looks exactly like courage. Love goes into the danger for the sake of what it loves.

Let me encourage you here. We do not need to live in fear of falling away, as though persecution were more powerful than our relationship with the Lord. There is nothing more powerful than our relationship with the Lord. It is an individual relationship, but it is not an isolated one.

One caution, since a pressured community is always tempted to pull in its edges. We are not withdrawn. We are not insular. We are good neighbors. Our hands are open to receive others and stretched out to reach them. A community preparing for the Lord's return is not a community that has stopped loving its neighbors. It is a community that has finally started.

Where the Exhortations Begin

The horizon is on nearly every page of the letter. These were converts who had turned from idols "to wait for His Son from heaven" (1 Thessalonians 1:9–10 NASB), and the team prayed that they would abound in love for one another "so that He may establish your hearts without blame in holiness... at the coming of our Lord Jesus" (1 Thessalonians 3:12–13 NASB). Increase in mutual love, so that you may stand blameless when the accounting comes. And then:

For God has not destined us for wrath, but for obtaining salvation through our Lord Jesus Christ... Therefore encourage one another and build up one another, just as you also are doing. (1 Thessalonians 5:9–11 NASB)

And *there* the exhortations begin.

So what were they to do? And what are we to do?

PART TWO — THE EXHORTATIONS

4. Encourage One Another and Build Each Other Up

Therefore encourage one another and build up one another, just as you also are doing. (1 Thessalonians 5:11 NASB)

Here is the heading over everything that follows. Every instruction in the rest of the paranesis is a specification of this one sentence. And notice the last clause, because it changes the tone of all that comes after it: *just as you also are doing*. This is not a rebuke. It is a commendation, followed by instruction on how to do better what they were already doing.

The word behind "encourage" is *parakaleō*, from the same root as Paraclete, the name Jesus gave to the Holy Spirit. To encourage is to come alongside and call up. And to build up is to strengthen a person's loyalty to the Messiah.

What does that look like in a room?

It looks like weeping with those who weep and rejoicing with those who rejoice. Sharing the promises of God. Rehearsing sacred history. Speaking of God's faithfulness. Bringing to mind the ways of the Lord. And telling one another, plainly, what a blessing they are as they serve the community.

None of that requires a platform. All of it requires intention.

Read Them Generously

One more thing before the list, because how you read the Thessalonians determines how you hear what is said to them. In this letter there is no hint of disruption, schism, rebellion, or position-seeking that needed adjusting. We see plenty of that elsewhere, in Romans, in 1 Corinthians, in James. Not here. To me these read as sincere lovers of the Messiah and of one another, still in the fresh wonder of God's saving love.

And they trusted the team because the team had earned it:

But we proved to be gentle among you, as a nursing mother tenderly cares for her own children. Having so fond an affection for you, we were well-pleased to impart to you not only the gospel of God but also our own lives, because you had become very dear to us. (1 Thessalonians 2:7–8 NASB)

A nursing mother, and then a father exhorting his own children. Both images, of the same men, in the same chapter. And then this, which I cannot read without being moved: *for now we really live, if you stand firm in the Lord* (1 Thessalonians 3:8 NASB).

It is upon that foundation, a community reassured of the sincere love of its teachers, that all the exhortations rest.

5. Recognize Those Who Labor Among You

But we request of you, brethren, that you appreciate those who diligently labor among you, and have charge over you in the Lord and give you instruction. (1 Thessalonians 5:12 NASB)

I am aware that this is an awkward passage for a leader to teach. It can look self-serving. Bear with me. The exhortation is in the text, it comes first in the list, and it is foundational to everything that follows.

Look at the vocabulary, one word at a time.

We request. The Greek is *erōtaō*. It is not a requisition. It carries no authority in itself. Of course there was inherent authority behind it, but they chose to ask. They are honoring the moral agency of the readers.

Appreciate. The word is simply "to know." Take note of these people. Identify them. In that culture, if you recognized someone as your instructor, respect was a given.

Who diligently labor among you. The word implies work that can exhaust a person. And note the little word *among*. They are not above the community. They are part of it.

And have charge over you. Although they are among the community, they also stand before it. Their responsibility is to lead, and to be examples.

And give you instruction. Here is *noutheteō*, the word we will meet twice more. It means to instruct as to correct behavior and belief, to warn, to admonish. It is not too much to render it "reprimand."

That is work. It requires love, and a willingness to be misunderstood, and a willingness to be rejected. Paul described his own practice of it:

Therefore be on the alert, remembering that night and day for a period of three years I did not cease to admonish each one with tears. (Acts 20:31 NASB)

Three years. Night and day. With tears. That is a tenderness of heart which is very rare.

6. Esteem Them Very Highly in Love

and that you esteem them very highly in love because of their work. (1 Thessalonians 5:13a NASB)

Now the awkwardness becomes something closer to embarrassment, and I will simply admit it. In more than fifty years I have almost never heard a leader tell the people he was discipling that they were responsible to love him. Bear with me anyway, because the apostles said it, and they said it for the community's sake rather than their own.

Esteem means to hold a view, to consider, to regard. It is a settled evaluation, not a passing feeling. *Very highly* piles the terms up; a woodenly literal rendering is "beyond all measure." *In love* is *agapē*, and here the note is unmistakably one of appreciation and affection. *Because of their work* — not because of their office, and not because of their charisma. Because of the tasks they actually do.

There are different kinds of respect. There is the respect due an office, and there is respect that has been earned. The New Testament pattern is that earned respect gets recognized, and then the position is honored. Both matter, and they run in that order.

Notice, too, that this is relational rather than institutional. The Thessalonians are not being told to submit to a structure. They are being told to love some people.

Nor is honor something believers reserve for their teachers. Scripture tells us to honor all men, to honor government, to honor family, to honor fellow believers. Honoring the ones who serve you is simply one facet of a life that has learned to give honor at all.

I will say what I think is true, at the risk of sounding as though I have an interest in it, which I do. Where mutual respect has collapsed, mutual instruction becomes impossible, and everything downstream of it fails.

7. Live in Peace with One Another

Live in peace with one another. (1 Thessalonians 5:13b NASB)

The first section of exhortations closes with a word about the whole community: shalom among yourselves.

Peace here has reference to the entire fellowship, but I think it has two particular groups in view, the workers who instruct and the instructed. That is where the fracture usually runs.

Consider what happens whenever a fellowship is emerging. There is zeal. There is growth. The community is not yet solid as an institution, and leadership is emerging rather than settled. And that, predictably, provokes problems. To one degree or another, authority is always resented, or resisted. Paul's own authority was contested in communities he had founded. Where there are people, there is often strife.

Peace is not merely the absence of conflict. It is the ground on which the difficult work of mutual care becomes possible.

And there is a kind of peace that is not passive at all:

The God of peace will soon crush Satan under your feet. (Romans 16:20 NASB)

The God of *peace* will crush Satan. He dwells among a people who are at peace with God and with one another, and it is there, under their feet, that the enemy is broken.

8. Admonish the Unruly

We urge you, brethren, admonish the unruly. (1 Thessalonians 5:14a NASB)

Notice first that the verb has changed. In the previous sentence the apostles were *requesting*. Here they are *urging*.

And notice who is being urged. Not the leaders. The entire fellowship. Imagine the trust these apostles had in this young congregation, that the very first thing they urge the whole body to do is to admonish the unruly. Everything after it requires less confidence than that.

But hear me carefully. This is not a room full of believers taking turns admonishing one another. People are not to be faultfinders or busybodies. Paul described the actual environment:

Beyond all these things put on love, which is the perfect bond of unity. Let the peace of Christ rule in your hearts... Let the word of Christ richly dwell within you, with all wisdom teaching and admonishing one another with psalms and hymns and spiritual songs, singing with thankfulness in your hearts to God. (Colossians 3:14–16 NASB)

Read the atmosphere before you read the instruction. Love put on. The Messiah's peace ruling. Thankfulness, not complaint. And the Messiah's word richly dwelling within. Only *inside* that room does anyone admonish anybody.

Privately, Not Publicly

John gives the instinct that should come first, before any confrontation at all. If you see a brother "committing a sin not leading to death," you are to ask, and God "will for him give life" (1 John 5:16 NASB). Don't confront. Pray.

And the Lord's own pattern of confrontation begins one-on-one and stays there as long as it possibly can:

If your brother sins, go and show him his fault in private; if he listens to you, you have won your brother. (Matthew 18:15 NASB)

Show him his fault in private, preserving the person's dignity. Think about the logic. If a sin serious enough to warrant *rebuke* is to be handled privately, how much more mere admonishment?

This is Torah, of course. And underneath all of it lies the great text:

You shall not hate your fellow countryman in your heart; you may surely reprove your neighbor, but shall not incur sin because of him... but you shall love your neighbor as yourself; I am the Lord. (Leviticus 19:17–18 NASB)

Reproof and neighbor-love are in the same breath. Reproof *is* an act of neighbor-love, and its opposite, hating your brother in your heart while saying nothing, is the sin the verse forbids.

There is such a thing as public rebuke, and it has a narrow scope: an accusation against an elder requires witnesses, and those who continue in sin are to be rebuked before all (1 Timothy 5:19–20 NASB). From my perspective, most admonishment from leadership ought to be general, within public instruction from the Scriptures. And such public instruction must never be a camouflage for targeting individuals.

Who Are the Unruly?

The word is *ataktos*. It carries the sense of disorderly and insubordinate, and also idle and lazy. I wonder whether it describes a lifestyle or those who reject the admonishment of leadership; it may well be both. It reaches some of the exhortations that follow — those who will not stop repaying evil for evil, those who will not be patient.

Understand: this is the exception in our normal mutual relationships, not the rule. The atmosphere is set by the sentence that leads into it, *encourage one another and build up one another, just as you also are doing*.

How It Must Be Offered and Received

Two texts from James govern the giving and the receiving. For the one receiving: "in humility receive the word implanted" (James 1:21 NASB). Frankly, the benefit of any admonishment depends entirely on the attitude of the hearer. And for the one giving, there is the wisdom from above again: "first pure, then peaceable, gentle, reasonable, full of mercy and good fruits" (James 3:17 NASB).

Does anyone actually enjoy confrontation? This is the most sensitive of the apostolic exhortations. Go slowly. Go privately. Go in love.

9. Encourage the Fainthearted

encourage the fainthearted (1 Thessalonians 5:14b NASB)

A word about the word. The NASB renders it "encourage," but the Greek is *paramutheomai*, to console, to cheer up, to comfort. It is a gentler verb than the one that opened the sentence. So let me put the instruction the way I have come to remember it:

Comfort the fainthearted. Do not confront the fainthearted.

It is easy, having just been urged to admonish the unruly, to go overboard. Here is a different emphasis entirely, and it comes in the very same sentence. The community that admonishes must also console, and it must know the difference between a person who needs correction and a person who needs comfort.

The word can mean *timid*. But I think consolation fits better with an emphasis on the desperately disappointed. The disheartened. People who have lost heart, or are losing it. People asking, *How can I go on?*

Consider John 11. Word was sent to Jesus that Lazarus was sick. He did not go. He waited until Lazarus died, and arrived four days after the burial. Who could have been more disheartened than Mary and Martha? The Lord had disappointed them. They were relying on His help. He did not come.

And their neighbors came to do what neighbors do. They came "to console them concerning their brother" (John 11:19 NASB) — our word, *paramutheomai*. Sometimes, often, words fail, and people try anyway. I have sympathy for them. Job's friends were at their best in the seven days they said nothing. Their presence was meaningful. Their words were not.

At the tomb, the Lord Himself spoke to the fainthearted. First He wept. Then, having demonstrated His love, He called for faith:

Jesus said to her, "Did I not say to you that if you believe, you will see the glory of God?"
(John 11:40 NASB)

That is the supreme example of comfort: love demonstrated, then faith encouraged. Not the other way around.

The Words We Comfort With

Resurrections happen, but they are rare. Yet in the face of grief we are not left without direction:

For the Lord Himself will descend from heaven with a shout... and so we shall always be with the Lord. Therefore comfort one another with these words. (1 Thessalonians 4:16–18 NASB)

Therefore comfort one another with these words. Which words? That some have no hope at all. That our hope rests on the resurrection of Jesus, and on the promise of His return. That our hope includes our own resurrection. And that our hope is finally a Person and a fellowship that does not end. So we shall always be with the Lord.

How Not to Comfort

A caution. We do not comfort by exhorting. We do not say, "Come now, be comforted, the Lord will return." We weep with those who weep, and rejoice with those who rejoice (Romans 12:15 NASB). At times grief eclipses the expectation of glory. At times hope overwhelms the grief. Let the person who is grieving set the terms of the conversation. What are they telling you about how they feel?

But the comfort presupposes something. It presupposes that we have built relationships strong enough that it actually matters to us whether a person is hope-filled or fainthearted.

10. Help the Weak

help the weak (1 Thessalonians 5:14c NASB)

The verb is *antechomai*. Its nuance is not "assist from a distance" but *hold on to them*. Cling to them. Do not let them go.

And who are the weak? The New Testament uses the word in several registers, and I suspect Paul means all of them. There is the weakness that is simply the human condition before God. There is the weak conscience, the brother whose scruples must not be trampled by my liberty. There is physical weakness and sickness. And there is moral weakness, people of fragile character who stumble over the same thing again and again and again.

That last category is where most communities quietly give up. The same failure, the same confession, the same relapse. And at some point we wash our hands.

Do not wash your hands of them. Hold on to them.

Notice, too, who is usually best equipped for that work. Often the best people to help are those who are going through, or have already overcome, the same thing. There is less shame in the room. There is more empathy.

There is also plain material weakness, and the apostolic word about it is unambiguous:

In everything I showed you that by working hard in this manner you must help the weak and remember the words of the Lord Jesus, that He Himself said, "It is more blessed to give than to receive." (Acts 20:35 NASB)

Israel knew this. There was the third-year tithe, the practice of alms, the injunction to leave the gleanings of the field for the poor.

And yet Paul was no sentimentalist. The second letter to this same congregation makes the boundary plain: *if anyone is not willing to work, then he is not to eat, either* — and then, immediately, *but as for you, brethren, do not grow weary of doing good* (2 Thessalonians 3:10, 13 NASB). Note the two halves. Not *unable*. Unwilling. And then the community is told not to let that abuse make them cynical.

This can be very trying. Which is why the very next word out of the apostles' mouths is the one it has to be.

11. Be Patient with Everyone

be patient with everyone (1 Thessalonians 5:14d NASB)

Read this exhortation against everything that has just preceded it, and you will see why it is placed here.

Are they unruly? Be patient. Are they fainthearted? Be patient. Are they weak? Be patient.

Correct, comfort, help, and be patient while you do all three. The instruction is not an afterthought. It is the tone in which the other three are to be carried out.

And note the scope: *with everyone*. I take this to reach beyond the boundaries of the community of disciples altogether.

God Is Patient

Patience seems an elementary word. Look into it and you find God.

The definition is the prolonged restraint of anger. And it is the self-revelation of the God of Israel:

Then the Lord passed by in front of him and proclaimed, "The Lord, the Lord God, compassionate and gracious, slow to anger, and abounding in lovingkindness and truth."
(Exodus 34:6 NASB)

Where the Hebrew says "slow to anger," the Septuagint uses *makrothumos*, long-suffering. It is the same word the New Testament uses for the patience we are commanded to show.

The Father is patient, and His patience "leads you to repentance" (Romans 2:4 NASB). Patience goes with kindness, and kindness is what leads a person to repent.

The Son is patient, and He proved it on the worst man He could find:

Yet for this reason I found mercy, so that in me as the foremost, Jesus Christ might demonstrate His perfect patience as an example for those who would believe in Him for eternal life. (1 Timothy 1:16 NASB)

Perfect patience — the Greek means the whole of it, all of it. Paul called himself the foremost of sinners, and we may as well agree with him: a blasphemer, a persecutor, a violent aggressor. And how did the Messiah interact with such a man? Patiently. All of it.

And the Holy Spirit is patient, which is precisely why He produces patience in the people He indwells. Patience in a congregation is not a personality trait unevenly distributed. It is fruit.

Patience and Compassion

The Lord's parable of the unforgiving servant shows where patience comes from. The debt is insurmountable. The debtor has no way to make it right.

So the slave fell to the ground and prostrated himself before him, saying, "Have patience with me and I will repay you everything." And the lord of that slave felt compassion and released him and forgave him the debt. (Matthew 18:26–27 NASB)

Have patience with me. And the master felt compassion. People will disappoint one another. Sometimes the only way out of their trouble is if somebody is compassionate. They do not deserve patience. But love enlivens compassion, and compassion exercises patience.

Patience and the Coming of the Lord

Finally, and we should have expected this, the command to be patient is end-time instruction:

Therefore be patient, brethren, until the coming of the Lord... Do not complain, brethren, against one another, so that you yourselves may not be judged; behold, the Judge is standing right at the door. (James 5:7–9 NASB)

Note James's diagnosis: complaining against one another is a symptom of impatience, and he equates it with judging.

Here is an exercise worth doing slowly. Take the Lord's own commands about love, and substitute the word patience. *This is My commandment, that you be patient with one another, just as I have been patient with you.* The substitution holds, because patience is what love looks like when it is made to wait.

How, then, do we grow in patience? By growing in love. As we love, we will be patient. To the degree that we love, we will be patient.

12. See That No One Repays Evil for Evil

See that no one repays another with evil for evil. (1 Thessalonians 5:15a NASB)

See that no one. Pay attention. Watch.

Consider what that assumes. It assumes a fellowship affectionate enough, and intimate enough, that the members actually know one another's life situations. You cannot see to it that no one repays evil for evil among people whose lives are opaque to you.

But let us be careful, because there is a counterfeit of this. Authoritarian states have always encouraged citizens to watch one another, neighbors reporting neighbors, children turning in their parents. No sane person wants that in a congregation. Spying and reporting on one another is not what the apostles have in mind.

And yet the believers here *are* being asked to see to a kingdom cultural norm: making certain that nobody repays evil for evil to anyone.

Why does it matter? First, to please the Lord. Then the plain, practical reasons. For the sake of the person taking revenge. For the sake of the person who is its target. For the spiritual vitality of the community. And for the sake of the community's witness before unbelievers, who are watching.

Hebrews gives the same mutual care a stronger verb:

See to it that no one comes short of the grace of God; that no root of bitterness springing up causes trouble, and by it many be defiled. (Hebrews 12:15 NASB)

That "see to it" is not merely noticing. It is *episkopeō*, the word from which we get *bishop*. It is oversight. And notice what happens: the one defiled by bitterness defiles others. It spreads, like one rotten apple in a barrel.

Bitterness is the motive for repaying evil with evil.

Repayment Belongs to God

The verb is *apodidōmi*, to recompense someone according to what he deserves. Repayment is not intrinsically wicked. Indeed, God will do it. On the last day, God will repay. That is precisely why we need not.

Never take your own revenge, beloved, but leave room for the wrath of God, for it is written, "Vengeance is Mine, I will repay," says the Lord... Do not be overcome by evil, but overcome evil with good. (Romans 12:19–21 NASB)

Four Witnesses

Joseph. Hated. Sold. Years of hardship. And then his brothers stood before him, entirely at his mercy. He fed them, provided for them, and reassured them of a good future.

David. Saul came out to kill him with three thousand men, and then lay at David's mercy in the camp at night. David spared him, in reverence toward God, and looked to the Lord rather than to Saul for his deliverance. He had sown mercy, and he expected mercy from God.

The Father. Lift your eyes higher and look at what God has done: "while we were yet sinners, Christ died for us" (Romans 5:8 NASB). God overcame evil with good. And we are told to be imitators of God.

The Son. Jesus taught us to do good to those who would harm us, and then He did it: "Father, forgive them; for they do not know what they are doing" (Luke 23:34 NASB).

But there is a quieter example, and I owe it to my wife, Elaine, who suggested it when I was hunting for instances of overcoming evil with good. It is more remarkable for being so ordinary — a good deed done to a man in the very act of betrayal.

And one of them struck the slave of the high priest and cut off his right ear. But Jesus answered and said, "Stop! No more of this." And He touched his ear and healed him. (Luke 22:50–51 NASB)

Think about it. Surrounded by a mob that had come to kill Him, betrayed by a friend, Jesus performed a miracle of healing on one of the men who had come to arrest Him. The miracle reveals the will of God. It shows how deeply God is committed to not repaying evil with evil.

13. Always Pursue What Is Good

but always seek after that which is good for one another and for all people. (1 Thessalonians 5:15b NASB)

The verb is *diōkō*. It is the ordinary Greek word for *pursue*, and it is also the word for *persecute*. Paul, who had once pursued the church, now tells the church what to pursue.

There is a Hebrew word standing behind this in the imagination of anyone raised on the Psalms. It is *radaf*, and you know it from the last verse of the twenty-third psalm:

Surely goodness and lovingkindness will follow me all the days of my life. (Psalm 23:6 NASB)

Follow is too tame. Goodness and *chesed* **pursue** David. They come after him. Mercy is chasing him down.

Now apply that to the sentence in front of us. The people around us who have done evil, to us or to others, need mercy. So let goodness and mercy from you pursue those people.

Consider what that does to the situation. Imagine a man who has wronged the followers of Jesus, and who is now waiting for the reprisal. *They're going to come after me*. And they do come after him. They come after him to give him mercy.

That is what a congregation of the Messiah looks like when it is behaving itself.

For One Another, and for All

Note the two spheres, and the priority between them. There is a priority within the family: "let us do good to all people, and especially to those who are of the household of the faith" (Galatians 6:10 NASB). But it does not stop at the door. The goodness overflows to everyone within our sphere of relationships, because that is what the Father is like:

for He causes His sun to rise on the evil and the good, and sends rain on the righteous and the unrighteous. (Matthew 5:45 NASB)

Luke's version goes further: love your enemies and do good, "expecting nothing in return... for He Himself is kind to ungrateful and evil men" (Luke 6:35 NASB). How is the Father kind to them? Sunshine and rain. We are to reflect the nature of our Father.

Overcoming Evil Is Warfare

Doing good to our enemies is not passivity. It is a relational manifestation of victorious spiritual warfare.

Evil for evil multiplies the evil and enlarges the devil's influence. Paul said exactly how that works: "do not let the sun go down on your anger, and do not give the devil an opportunity" (Ephesians 4:26–27 NASB). Do not give him the opening.

Do believers take revenge? No. They have a higher vision. They see their enemies as the ideal candidates for overcoming evil with good.

Satan wants us to sin. The Savior wants us to win.

14. Rejoice Always

Rejoice always. (1 Thessalonians 5:16 NASB)

Two words in Greek. And with them the direction of the paranesis turns. Until now the exhortations have concerned our relationships with one another. From here they run Godward: rejoice, pray, give thanks. But do not imagine the two halves are separate. Every one of these commands requires divine help, and the human work of the first half prepares the way for the second.

Begin where the letter begins, because the Thessalonians did not learn to rejoice in easy weather:

You also became imitators of us and of the Lord, having received the word in much tribulation with the joy of the Holy Spirit. (1 Thessalonians 1:6 NASB)

Much tribulation. And the joy of the Holy Spirit. In the same sentence. Joy in the midst of suffering, for the sake of the Messiah's testimony, is not extraordinary. It is normative.

Joy Is Relational

Notice how rejoicing works. It reaches out. It wants company.

Think of the three parables of Luke 15 — the sheep, the coin, the son. In each case the finder calls the neighbors. Why? Because he loves them, and he cannot keep the joy to himself. And God is like this: "there is joy in the presence of the angels of God over one sinner who repents" (Luke 15:10 NASB).

So in the body: "Rejoice with those who rejoice, and weep with those who weep" (Romans 12:15 NASB). We rejoice on behalf of others who are doing well in the Lord. Their well-being is itself a reason for our joy. That is what Paul kept telling these very people: *you are our glory and joy* (1 Thessalonians 2:20 NASB).

The Joy of Jesus

Jesus was a joyful person, and He rejoiced for reasons. When the seventy returned elated that the demons were subject to them, He redirected their joy and then displayed His own — "He rejoiced greatly in the Holy Spirit" over a blessed eternal destiny and over revelation given to His disciples (Luke 10:20–21 NASB).

And He intends to hand that joy over. Watch the chain. The Father's love is the Son's joy. The Son's love is our joy.

Just as the Father has loved Me, I have also loved you; abide in My love... These things I have spoken to you so that My joy may be in you, and that your joy may be made full. (John 15:9–11 NASB)

The Lord could think of no greater joy to give us than the joy He Himself enjoyed.

Joy and the Wedding

There is a reason for our own joy. We are in fellowship with a Jesus who is *still* joyful. He carries an anointing of joy:

You have loved righteousness and hated lawlessness; therefore God, Your God, has anointed You with the oil of gladness above Your companions. (Hebrews 1:9 NASB)

That line is lifted from Psalm 45, a psalm celebrating the wedding of the king. Which points to the Son's own reason for joy. He is getting married. "As the bridegroom rejoices over the bride, so your God will rejoice over you" (Isaiah 62:5 NASB), and heaven cries, "the marriage of the Lamb has come and His bride has made herself ready" (Revelation 19:7 NASB).

So take the inventory. Joy in ordinary daily life. Joy in trial and persecution. Joy because of our loving relationships. Joy because of hope. The Holy Spirit is a joyful Person. Jesus gives His followers His own joy. Whatever the circumstance, there is a reason for joy, and the Spirit will help us.

15. Pray Without Ceasing

pray without ceasing (1 Thessalonians 5:17 NASB)

Another two-word verse. It is not a difficult exhortation to understand. It is an attitude and a practice.

Notice that the God-ward exhortations begin with a corporate mindset. When the Lord taught His disciples to pray, the first word was plural. *Our* Father. Restful, reverent, reliant, and addressed to the Father, which is the direction of practically every prayer in the New Testament.

Unceasing Does Not Mean Unscheduled

Notice where many earnest people go wrong. "Pray without ceasing" does not abolish the appointed hour. In fact, scheduled prayer is the foundation of unceasing prayer.

David prayed at fixed hours: "Evening and morning and at noon, I will complain and murmur, and He will hear my voice" (Psalm 55:17 NASB). Those hours followed the rhythm of the daily sacrifices. The apostles kept the schedule — Peter on the housetop about the sixth hour, Peter and John going up to the temple "at the ninth hour, the hour of prayer" (Acts 3:1 NASB).

Something here has never stopped arresting me. The Messiah's offering at Calvary coincided with those hours of prayer. "It was the third hour when they crucified Him" (Mark 15:25 NASB), nine in the morning. Darkness from the sixth hour to the ninth, and at the ninth hour He cried out with a loud voice (Mark 15:33–34 NASB), noon until three. While Israel prayed its appointed prayers, the Lamb was being offered.

Jesus Himself kept both patterns. He had the scheduled corporate prayer of the synagogue. And He devoted special times to prayer when the situation demanded it: early, before dawn, after the miracles at Capernaum; through the entire night before He chose the twelve; and in Gethsemane.

Prayer and Warfare

Prayer is also how the church's mission advances and how its ground is held.

And take the helmet of salvation, and the sword of the Spirit, which is the word of God. With all prayer and petition pray at all times in the Spirit. (Ephesians 6:17–18 NASB)

Notice what the praying leans on. *Proseuchomenoi* — praying — is a participle. It carries no command of its own, and in Greek a participle has to lean on something. The nearest thing is the verb back in verse 17: take the helmet, take the sword — praying. And look at what Paul has just done. Verses 14 through 16 are four participles in a row, having girded, having put on, having shod, taking up, and every one of them leans on stand firm. The praying is the fifth in that line. Young's Literal Translation keeps them together: "and the sword of the Spirit, which is the saying of God, through all prayer and supplication praying at all times in the Spirit." The sword of the Spirit, the immediate word of God, is released by believers as they pray in the Spirit. And note the frequency: *at all times*.

What is praying in the Spirit? It certainly includes praying in tongues. But the phrase is broader. Prayer can be *led* by the Spirit, and prayer can be *empowered* by the Spirit, who prays through our weakness:

In the same way the Spirit also helps our weakness; for we do not know how to pray as we should, but the Spirit Himself intercedes for us with groanings too deep for words.
(Romans 8:26 NASB)

So: unceasing prayer, and persevering prayer. Scheduled prayer as the foundation of unceasing prayer. And particular times of prayer when we need specific help.

Pray without ceasing.

16. In Everything Give Thanks

in everything give thanks; for this is God's will for you in Christ Jesus. (1 Thessalonians 5:18 NASB)

Note the preposition before you do anything else. *In* everything, not *for* everything. The Greek is *en panti*: in every circumstance, in the middle of whatever is happening, give thanks. Paul does not require you to be grateful that your child is ill. He requires you to give thanks to God while your child is ill.

And note the extraordinary claim attached: *this is God's will for you*. Few things in Scripture are labeled so directly.

Gratitude and Prayer Belong Together

In Scripture, gratitude is bound to unceasing prayer:

Be anxious for nothing, but in everything by prayer and supplication with thanksgiving let your requests be made known to God. And the peace of God, which surpasses all comprehension, will guard your hearts and your minds in Christ Jesus. (Philippians 4:6–7 NASB)

Here is a puzzle worth sitting with. Why must we make our requests known to God? Does He not already know them? Part of the answer, I think, has to do with what *we* experience. Our emotions often follow our decisions. When we cultivate gratitude, our love grows.

Sustained gratitude sparks faith, hope, and love. Faith, because *You did it before. You will do it again*. Hope, because *we expect to see Your goodness*. Love, because *we so appreciate the kindness You have already shown us*.

Grateful people are not people without goals. They are people uniquely satisfied and at peace with their lives, because they have so much to be thankful for.

Which leaves us with a question for the ordinary day. Can we see God's sustaining and intervening love throughout it? If we are not granted a sudden illumination, we can still look beyond what is seen and watch for His hand, which reveals His heart.

The Problem with Ingratitude

Now look at the other side, because Paul does. Ingratitude is not a small failure of manners. It is the thing a civilization turns on.

For even though they knew God, they did not honor Him as God or give thanks, but they became futile in their speculations, and their foolish heart was darkened. Professing to be wise, they became fools. (Romans 1:21–22 NASB)

Read the sequence. They knew God. They did not honor Him, and they did not thank Him. Then their thinking became futile, their hearts were darkened, and, professing wisdom, they became fools.

And then, three times, the terrible refrain: *God gave them over*. Very well, He says. You do not want Me. Have it your way.

Do not stop at idolatry and immorality, as though those exhausted the harvest. Look at what happens to the way people treat one another once the seed of ingratitude comes to full crop: "full of envy, murder, strife, deceit, malice; they are gossips, slanderers... untrustworthy, unloving, unmerciful" (Romans 1:29–31 NASB).

Gossips. Untrustworthy. Unloving. Unmerciful. That is a description of a society, and its origin is a refusal to say thank you.

A Daily Sacrifice

Gratitude, like manna, does not keep:

When you sacrifice a sacrifice of thanksgiving to the Lord, you shall sacrifice it so that you may be accepted. It shall be eaten on the same day; you shall leave none of it until morning; I am the Lord. (Leviticus 22:29–30 NASB)

Yesterday's gratitude is not sufficient for today.

And notice what the apostles gave thanks for. For triumph. For government, and this is worth noticing, since the government in question was Rome. And constantly for people: "constantly bearing in mind your work of faith and labor of love and steadfastness of hope in our Lord Jesus Christ" (1 Thessalonians 1:3 NASB). Their faith, their labor of love, their steadfastness, their growing love for one another. Those are the things worth thanking God for in the people around you.

Take a few minutes in the morning and be grateful. Make it a daily practice.

17. Do Not Quench the Spirit

Do not quench the Spirit. (1 Thessalonians 5:19 NASB)

The metaphor is fire, because that is how the Spirit was introduced at Pentecost. And there is an older fire that was never to be extinguished:

Fire shall be kept burning continually on the altar; it is not to go out. (Leviticus 6:13 NASB)

To quench is to put something out. To extinguish it. To kill it.

Consider that altar fire carefully, because it teaches us what kind of fire we are talking about. It is not the sort of flame that would burn the tabernacle to the ground. It is an appropriate flame, in the right place. It enhances the purpose of the tabernacle. And it is confined, to the altar of sacrifice or the altar of incense.

The entire tabernacle is not a bonfire. It is fire *on the altar*.

That is a needed word in both directions. Those who fear the Spirit's fire should notice that God commanded it and would not have it go out. Those who want the whole tent ablaze should notice that God gave the fire a place, and a purpose.

Why People Quench

Consider what this command assumes about human cooperation with divine activity. People can stop the movement of the Spirit. Through self-effort. Through pride. Through simply resisting Him.

Set that against the Messiah, who never once did it. "The Son can do nothing of Himself, unless it is something He sees the Father doing" (John 5:19 NASB). There was no self-will in Him, except that He chose His Father's will.

Why do people quench Him? Fear of strange fire, and the memory of Nadab and Abihu is a terrible one. Fear of the counterfeit will make a person suppress the genuine. It is an understandable fear. It is also a disobedient one, because the command is not *do not permit strange fire* but *do not quench the Spirit*. Both are true. Only one is in front of us here.

And fear of following the Spirit's voice, which is an insecurity that grows from a legitimate need for security. People want to stay in control.

How is He quenched? By neglecting the spiritual gifts rather than fanning them into flame. By banning certain gifts outright. By the clock — hyper-control of a meeting, in which

nothing unplanned is ever welcomed. By resisting the Spirit's witness through the Scriptures. And by resisting His conviction.

He Is a Person

The Spirit of God is a Person, though He is often revealed in impersonal images: wind, oil, water, and here, fire. But a Person can be wounded. "Do not grieve the Holy Spirit of God" (Ephesians 4:30 NASB). Grieving describes an emotional wounding. Quenching describes something else, the act of putting a fire out.

Here is a question I cannot fully answer, and will not pretend to. If a people quench Him, is it possible that He will withdraw? We are told that if we draw near to Him, He will draw near to us. If we withdraw from Him, what then?

I will only say this, from my own experience. I have known Him to come in ways that surprised me, and I have missed Him. Afterward I have watched for Him to come again in that same way, and He has surprised me again, from another direction. There is a sensitivity required here, a willingness to give Him the freedom that in fact sets us free.

The opposite of putting out a fire is stirring one up. Paul told Timothy to "kindle afresh the gift of God which is in you" (2 Timothy 1:6 NASB). The word means to rekindle, to reactivate what has gone dormant.

Do not put it out. Blow on it.

18. Do Not Despise Prophetic Utterances

do not despise prophetic utterances (1 Thessalonians 5:20 NASB)

The two commands belong together, and the second explains the first. How were the Thessalonians in danger of quenching the Spirit? By despising prophecies.

Prophecy ignites people's faith, zeal, expectation, consecration, and love. Through it, God lets us know that He sees us. That He is aware of us. That He is in our midst. And He wants a prophetic people.

So why would anyone despise it?

The Honest Reasons

Because there is a great deal to despise. Let us not pretend otherwise.

Mixed motives. The Didache, an early Christian manual, gave simple tests for the traveling minister. An apostle who asks for money is a false prophet. A prophet who says in the Spirit "give me money" is not to be listened to — though he may ask on behalf of others in need (Didache 11).

Imagination passed off as revelation:

Thus says the Lord of hosts, "Do not listen to the words of the prophets who are prophesying to you. They are leading you into futility; they speak a vision of their own imagination, not from the mouth of the Lord." (Jeremiah 23:16 NASB)

Manipulation and intimidation, as with the prophets who tried to frighten Nehemiah. False promises of prosperity and victory — Hananiah announced, "I have broken the yoke of the king of Babylon." He had not. And there is the memorable scene of Zedekiah son of Chenaanah, who made himself iron horns and declared, "With these you shall gore the Arameans until they are consumed," while every prophet in the room agreed with him. Then he walked over and struck the one man who had told the truth (2 Chronicles 18:10, 23 NASB).

And money. Always money.

These things make discerning people despise prophecies, and understandably. But here is a thought worth sitting with: these abuses may themselves be the fruit of a Spirit *already*

quenched. Where the genuine has been suppressed, people who still hunger for supernatural interaction will manufacture it.

And the Less Honest Reasons

The Spirit is fire, and fire is connected with cleansing and holiness. Fire of that kind is not always comfortable, and it is easy to call our discomfort discernment.

We also despise what fails to impress us. A word may be dismissed because it is weak, generic, or vague. Another because it is outlandish or exaggerated. Some of those dismissals are right. Some are simply contempt.

The Greek word is *exoutheneō*, to despise something on the basis that it is worthless, of no value. It is not hatred. It is contempt. And that is a serious posture to take toward anything the Spirit may be doing in a beginner.

Be careful, because pride is a fertile soil for contempt, and intellectual sophistication is often its disguise. Consider how easily an educated believer sneers at Ezekiel's end-time vision of an invading army "all of them riding on horses" (Ezekiel 38:15 NASB). Horses — how quaint. And so an entire prophetic tradition is waved off, on the strength of a detail we have not troubled to understand.

And consider whom God tends to use:

and the base things of the world and the despised God has chosen, the things that are not, so that He may nullify the things that are. (1 Corinthians 1:28 NASB)

The despised thing may be exactly the instrument by which God intends to bring down the proud.

19. Examine Everything Carefully

But examine everything carefully; hold fast to that which is good; abstain from every form of evil. (1 Thessalonians 5:21–22 NASB)

There is a pendulum here, and both ends of its swing are errors. Cynicism at one end. Gullibility at the other. We are told to be neither. We are told to *examine*.

The Word Is Positive

The verb is *dokimazō*, to learn the genuineness of something by examination and testing. And crucially, the testing is *for the purpose of approving*. The Greek has other words for the other outcome. *Adokimos* means unapproved. *Apodokimazō* means to reject upon examination. Paul did not choose those.

I labor the point because the exhortation is positive. The goal is not to find out what is wrong with the prophecy. The goal is to find out what is good.

Then: *hold fast to that which is good*. The verb is *katechō*, to continue to believe, with the implication of acting in accordance with such belief. Not merely to file the word away.

Sifting

Some sifting will be required, and honesty about our own instruments is the beginning of it. What began as a pure word may be shaped, on its way out, by the speaker's personality, theological convictions, desires, fears, and culture. Where a vision is vague, it becomes a kind of inkblot, and the interpretation tells you as much about the interpreter as about God.

Here is an illustration I have used for years. Read this string of letters:

GODISNOWHERE

Is it *GOD IS NOW HERE*? Or is it *GOD IS NOWHERE*? The data is identical. The reading is not.

Now suppose the vision comes without vowels, as Hebrew does:

GDSNWHR

GoD iS NoW HeRe. Or GoD iS NoWHeRe. Or, for that matter, GooD SNoW HeRe.

Or take a simpler case. Someone sees a door. What does it mean? Is it about to open? Is it temporarily shut? Is it something to resist in prayer, and keep knocking? Or does somebody in the room simply need guidance about buying a new door?

Evaluate in Fellowship

Which is why the data should be evaluated within the fellowship, and not in the privacy of one person's certainty.

Share it with an open hand. Be willing to be asked why you feel that way. And watch yourself: you may be trying to make something fit because you are suffering from a desperation born of fear or desire, and are willing to force any input into the shape you need.

There is a particular danger for the loving. Love "believes all things" (1 Corinthians 13:7 NASB). It is one of love's glories, and it is why the credulous are so often the kindest people in the room.

Testing is not optional. It is commanded, and Paul tells us how a meeting should run:

Let two or three prophets speak, and let the others pass judgment... For you can all prophesy one by one, so that all may learn and all may be exhorted; and the spirits of prophets are subject to prophets; for God is not a God of confusion but of peace. (1 Corinthians 14:29–33 NASB)

Here is how I imagine the room. Two or three speak. The rest are evaluating, and while they evaluate, their ears and eyes stay open to the Spirit of God. There is no competition and no self-promotion. Nobody is pushing an agenda or trying to prove himself right. They are seeking the will of God together.

On What Basis Do We Evaluate?

Start with the messenger. Is the person prophesying living a reasonably godly life? Are they attention-seeking, self-promoting, divisive? What is their attitude toward believers with whom they disagree? Beware of false prophets "in sheep's clothing," Jesus warned, "you will know them by their fruits" (Matthew 7:15–16 NASB). Know their background, not the résumé they present. If you would not receive *them*, why would you receive their word? God can speak through a donkey, and that does not mean you want a donkey living in your dining room.

Are they accountable? Do they submit to adjustment, and when did they last do so? And what do they leave behind them — people built up, or people broken down?

Then the word itself. Is it biblical? Every prophet built on the foundation of the Torah, and prophecies that contradict or distort the meaning of the sacred text are wrong. Does it encourage loyalty to God? Does it honor the gospel? Does it build up the believers?

And is it sneaky? *Shhh, don't tell anyone who might disagree.* Why would someone say that? Prophecies need to be in the open, and open to evaluation. That is the plain assumption of both 1 Corinthians 14 and 1 Thessalonians 5.

Remember the environment. It is within a loving, supportive, devoted community that prophetic ministry is encouraged and made safe. There is a reason that 1 Corinthians 13 sits in the middle of Paul's discussion of the gifts.

A Hard Truth

Here is something that ought to sober everyone who prophesies, and everyone who listens.

A false prophet can give a true word.

Balaam was a false prophet who prophesied accurately. Legitimate things can be done by illegitimate ministers. Look closely at the most dreadful words in the Gospels. They do not read, *I never knew you, you prophesied falsely.*

Many will say to Me on that day, "Lord, Lord, did we not prophesy in Your name, and in Your name cast out demons, and in Your name perform many miracles?" And then I will declare to them, "I never knew you; depart from Me, you who practice lawlessness."
(Matthew 7:22–23 NASB)

I never knew you. You practiced lawlessness. The prophecies, apparently, were real.

So: did those prophets love the Lord, and love the people to whom they ministered? Probably not. They were users. God have mercy on all of us.

Two More Tests

Is it in accord with what the Lord has already been saying, both in the Scriptures and in the legitimate spiritual history of the person receiving the word?

To the law and to the testimony! If they do not speak according to this word, it is because they have no dawn. (Isaiah 8:20 NASB)

Is it accurate? Some prophecies are simply way off, and within a community of believers there is a learning curve. But the test is not complicated. If a word is predictive, does it come to pass? And if it does not, is the one who spoke it willing to say so?

Hold fast to that which is good. Having examined, keep believing and practicing what proved genuine. And *abstain from every form of evil*, which is the necessary shadow of holding fast. The community that will not let go of what is good must let go of what is not.

Examine everything carefully. That is neither cynicism nor credulity. It is love, awake.

20. The God of Peace Himself

Now may the God of peace Himself sanctify you entirely; and may your spirit and soul and body be preserved complete, without blame at the coming of our Lord Jesus Christ. Faithful is He who calls you, and He also will bring it to pass. (1 Thessalonians 5:23–24 NASB)

Look where the list ends.

It ends where it began, at the coming of our Lord. Everything in between has been given in the light of that horizon. Encourage one another, because the day is drawing near.

Admonish, comfort, help, be patient, because a people is being prepared. Rejoice, pray, give thanks. Do not put out the fire. Do not sneer at the word. Test it, keep the good, and let the evil go.

And it ends with a prayer rather than a demand. *Now may the God of peace Himself sanctify you entirely.* Not: now go and sanctify yourselves. The God of peace, the same God who will crush Satan under your feet, will do it Himself.

Which brings us to the last sentence, and to the only ground on which any congregation could ever attempt what this letter asks.

Faithful is He who calls you, and He also will bring it to pass.

Read the list again, honestly, and you will feel the weight of it. Who among us admonishes the unruly without becoming harsh, or comforts the fainthearted without growing tired, or helps the weak without letting go, or repays no evil at all, or rejoices always, or prays without ceasing, or gives thanks in everything? Nobody. Not one congregation on the earth.

And yet the apostles did not write the list as a burden. They wrote it as a description of a people God intends to have, and they closed by naming the One who will produce them. *He also will bring it to pass.* The command and the promise are the same sentence.

So Begin

I have not written this book so that you would admire the shape of an apostolic congregation from a distance. I have written it because I want to live in one, and because I believe the Spirit of God is willing to build it.

So begin where you are. Take one relationship and make it intentional. Sit at one table with an open Bible and a plain question: *what has the Lord been showing you?* Share the word of grace, which is able to build you up. Learn to say a hard thing privately, gently, and only after you have prayed. Learn to sit beside a grieving friend and say nothing at all. Take hold

of somebody weak and refuse to let go. When you are wronged, do not settle the account, leave room for God, and go do that person good. Give thanks in the morning. Ask for the Spirit. Do not put out the fire that God Himself lit on the altar. When a word comes, do not sneer at it and do not swallow it whole. Examine it, keep what is good, and let the rest go.

And do all of it with your eyes on the horizon, because the Judge is standing at the door, and He is coming as a Bridegroom.

Encourage one another. Build each other up. Just as you also are doing.

Content and teaching by David Harwood; prose drafted with Claude (Anthropic) from his material and edited by him. Scripture quotations are from the New American Standard Bible.