

When the Church Family Functions Well

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Preacher: Edward Lobb

[0 : 00] our events. But we're going to turn, before we go further, to our Bibles, and we're going to read together in the Scriptures. And if you've been here on recent Sunday evenings, you know that Edward Lobb has been leading us through one of these letters of the Apostle Paul to the church, one of the churches in the New Testament, the church in Thessalonica. And so we're coming to our final study this evening, and we're going to read now from chapter 5 of 1 Thessalonians.

1 Thessalonians 5 at verse 12, and right through to the end of the letter. So Paul begins to conclude, and he says, We ask you, brothers, to respect those who labor among you and are over you in the Lord and admonish you, and to esteem them very highly in love because of their work. Be at peace among yourselves, and we urge you, brothers, admonish the idle, encourage the faint-hearted, help the weak, be patient with them all, and see that no one repays evil for evil, but always seek to do good to one another and to everyone. Rejoice always, pray without ceasing, and give thanks in all circumstances, for this is the will of God in Christ Jesus for you. Do not quench the spirit, do not despise prophecies, but test everything and hold fast what is good. Abstain from every form of evil.

And now may the God of peace himself sanctify you completely, and may your whole spirit and soul and body be kept blameless at the coming of our Lord Jesus Christ. He who calls you is faithful. He will surely do it. Brothers, pray for us. And greet all the brothers with a holy kiss. And I put you under oath before the Lord to have this letter read to all the brothers. The grace of our Lord Jesus Christ be with you.

Amen. And may God bless to us his word. Well, good evening, friends. Very good to see you all here. Let's turn to 1 Thessalonians chapter 5, and beginning at verse 12, that's our passage. And my title for this evening is, When the Church Family Functions Well. And I do hope this will be an encouragement to those who are joining our church this evening.

The greatest privilege that any human being can enjoy is the privilege of belonging to Jesus Christ, of being saved by him, knowing that our sins are all forgiven, knowing that because of his kindness, one is destined for heaven. There is nothing greater than that. But part and parcel of that privilege is the joy of belonging to the Lord's family, the church. Because you can't belong to the Lord without also belonging to his family. It's a worldwide family, and it's a local family. The local church at Thessalonica, in about 49 AD, received this letter from Paul the Apostle, and he'd written it to them because he loved the people, and he was concerned to strengthen their confidence, to help them to understand the gospel and its implications.

[4 : 05] And of course, all of Paul's letters are designed to shore up the faith and understanding of the churches that he's writing to. Now, we've just had some powerful theology in chapters 4 and 5, concerning the death of Christians and the return of the Lord Jesus. But when Paul reaches chapter 5, verse 11, he hasn't finished. We can imagine him putting his pen down for a moment at chapter 5, verse 11, and saying to himself, this letter needs rounding off. What final encouragements and instructions can I pass on to my dear friends at Thessalonica, which will help them to live the Christian life more authentically, more strongly and confidently? Well, these final verses are his answer, and they contain a rich variety of instruction. Almost all of Paul's letters contain a final section a little bit like this, some of them very short, just two or three verses. Others, like this one, are much longer. I've made the mistake in the past of thinking that these concluding sections are a bit less important than the meatier sections of Paul's letters. I've said, oh, these final verses, they're a bit miscellaneous. Quick-fire instructions, greetings to people, a bit like when you write to your aunt and you end your letter by saying, oh, we're all well here, auntie. I hope you're well. I hope Uncle Richard is feeling better. Lots of love, Theodore.

However, I've repented of that attitude. I've come to realize that these concluding sections are extremely revealing and very important. They tell us a great deal about how the church actually functions, how relationships work in a local church, how priorities are formed.

Now, we need the big theology sections, of course, but we need these final instructions too, because they teach us how to get on with each other, how to care for each other, how to value each other.

Now, this section here is full of variety. The overarching theme is that Paul is teaching the church how to behave well, how to be united and loving and purposeful. But there's great variety here. And that's why I want to unpack the apostles' teaching this evening under eight headings.

That may sound like a lot of headings, but I think the material needs to be split up like that. But can we first notice the background assumption that lies behind everything that Paul is saying here?

[6 : 41] And that is that the church is a brotherhood, a brotherhood and sisterhood, a family in which all the members are siblings. Just look how often Paul addresses them as brothers.

Verse 12, we ask you, brothers. Verse 14, we urge you, brothers. Verse 25, brothers, pray for us. Verse 26, greet all the brothers with a holy kiss. Verse 27, have this letter read to all the brothers. Or look back to chapter 5, verse 1.

Now, concerning the times and seasons, brothers. Chapter 4, verse 13, we do not want you to be uninformed, brothers. Or back to chapter 4, verse 9.

Now, concerning brotherly love. It's a thought-provoking idea. And the logic of it is simple. When you become a Christian, you become a child of God.

[7 : 40] And you discover that God has many other children also. They are your brothers and sisters. In fact, Jesus, Paul tells us in Romans chapter 8, is the firstborn among many brothers.

So we belong to the same family as Jesus. And therefore, once we belong to him and to God the Father, it means that we belong to each other. Now, we don't belong in that sort of way to people who are not Christians.

Imagine yourself doing your Christmas shopping in Socky Hall Street or Buchanan Street on a busy Saturday in December. It's not far ahead. There are thousands of people milling around, looking at handbags and bars of soap and fancy chocolates.

You don't feel a family connection with them, do you? You're aware that you're all human beings. You'd help them if they were in difficulty. But you're not siblings. In fact, you can feel vaguely threatened by them.

But the church is a group of brothers and sisters. And that means joys and responsibilities. Now, compare these two sentences.

[8 : 49] First, I go to the Tron church. Second, I belong to the Tron church. Imagine you're a student and you're preparing to go home for the Christmas holidays.

When you get back home, you visit your grandfather. And he says to you, do I hear that you're going to church in Glasgow, Fiona? Yes, granddad. What church is that then?

It's the Tron church, granddad. But I don't just go to the church. I belong to the church. Belong to it? Is it some kind of a cult? No, granddad.

We just follow the Bible's teaching about belonging to each other as brothers and sisters. It's about joys and responsibilities. Sounds peculiar to me, says granddad.

Well, it will sound peculiar to him if he's never had the experience of belonging to the church. But it's the bedrock of real Christian experience. Brothers and sisters, joys and responsibilities.

[9 : 52] So what is Paul teaching the brothers and sisters here? Eight things that make for a happily functioning church. First, he teaches us to respect and love our church leaders.

Verse 12. We ask you, brothers, to respect those who labor among you and are over you in the Lord and admonish you, and to esteem them very highly in love because of their work.

Now, Paul doesn't give the leaders any title here like presbyters or overseers. He describes them here in three ways in verse 12. Those who labor among you, those who are over you in the Lord, and those who admonish you.

First, those who labor among you. Now, the verb there is a verb describing hard work, draining labor, sweat pouring off your face labor.

I remember once when I was a young minister, I dropped into a corner shop one Saturday in Manchester to buy myself a loaf of bread. I was wearing one of those old-fashioned clerical collars.

[10:56] The man behind the counter was elderly and obviously not very well. So I said to him, how are you? And he said, I'm not so good. Then he looked me up and down and he saw my collar and he said to me, but you're all right, aren't you?

What he meant was, of course you're all right because you only work one day a week. Now, friends, it's not actually like that. Ask one of our young ministers here.

Ask Willie Philip if he works one day a week and he will give you a lovingly withering glance. Now, I can tell you it's wonderful work, but it is comprehensively demanding.

That's why those who do it need to be respected and esteemed. Then secondly, Paul says they are over you in the Lord. Over you.

Now, there's a paradox here because Christian leadership is servant leadership. Jesus washed the feet of his disciples. He said, I am among you as one who serves.

[11:56] But the Christian leader, although a servant, is also entrusted with a degree of authority. In fact, the leader of a congregation has two main responsibilities.

First, to teach the Bible. And secondly, to look after the church family. He can't do those things unless his authority is respected. And then third, Paul says they admonish you.

That's a verb that means to instruct, when necessary to warn, and when really necessary to discipline. Church leaders who act responsibly are like shepherds who bring the straying sheep back into the right path.

A church leader who sees a member of the church family going astray must lovingly and firmly bring that person back. And we all need to be admonished from time to time.

Now, in a church like ours, leadership is rightly shared by many different people. And Paul assumes this in verses 12 and 13. Because he writes of those who labor among you and esteem them very highly.

[13:03] In our church, I think we have at least 50 people, possibly rather more than that, who have leadership responsibilities of one kind or another. A church needs to have a leadership training culture, where we're constantly training up new leaders.

So if you're ever asked to be a trainee leader, jump at the chance. Even though almost certainly you'll feel you're not ready for it. But it's the way to grow into a responsible Christian.

You learn a great deal, and you learn it quickly. Now, Paul's instruction here is, respect your leaders and esteem them very highly in love.

Because of their work. It may be that certain church members at Thessalonica had been causing problems for the leaders, and Paul felt that he must correct them. Sometimes in a church, a leader may make a decision that we don't really agree with.

Well, we can discuss it with the leader, as long as we do that calmly and respectfully and lovingly. Sometimes we must patiently live with a decision that we don't fully agree with.

[14:08] But notice the last sentence of verse 13. Be at peace among yourselves. Now, why should Paul add that? Because he knows that when church members fall out with each other, the leaders have to sort out the problems.

And they have plenty on their plates already. Really, belonging to the Lord's family is very much like belonging to your family back at home. It involves learning to live peaceably and lovingly with others, and learning to curb our natural desire to have our own way.

The sort of things that we can get selfish over are usually pretty trivial things. Hymn tunes. We sang that hymn to the wrong tune. The color of the new carpet for the church, or the style of the new chairs, or the timing of Sunday services and midweek meetings.

Paul is saying, don't selfishly insist on your own preferences. Be at peace with each other. Be glad to be together. That's the important thing, even if you don't like the color of the carpet.

So there's the first thing. Respect and love our church leaders. That's the way to protect peace and unity in the church. Now, secondly, Paul teaches us to care for those who struggle with various problems.

[15:26] Verse 14. Now, these words are addressed to the whole church, not just to leaders and pastors.

So if there's an idle person in the fellowship, somebody who ought to be at work but isn't, we need to show care for him by admonishing him, not by turning a blind eye to his idleness.

What he needs is to have a boot lovingly applied to his rear quarters. When I was a young university student, aged about 19, I was idle at university.

I was having a great time. University, here I am. Now, my tutor could have just turned a blind eye to my idleness. He could have said to himself, that man, Lobb, he's a waste of space.

I won't bother. But he didn't. He gave me a brief but lacerating dressing down. And it did the trick. I was so ashamed of myself, I got to work and I kept working.

[16:30] Now, what else is Paul saying here? Encourage the faint-hearted and help the weak. That's an instruction that is full of love and care. Some people are constitutionally faint-hearted, lacking confidence, lacking a robust approach to life.

Others are weak because they succumb to temptation more quickly than most people. But Paul is saying, look after such folk. They're part of the family. Love them. Encourage them.

Go to them. Speak to them. Keep in close touch with them. And the fact is that all of us, even those who seem strongest, face episodes of weakness because of illness or bereavement, unemployment, distress within the family, financial difficulty.

We are all of us, at times, faint-hearted and weak. And Paul is saying the church needs to be a community where people who are up against real difficulty find constant support.

Many of us here, myself included, have found just that kind of support in our times of weakness.

And look at that final phrase in verse 14. Be patient with them all.

[17:42] That's easy to be patient with 98% of our brothers and sisters for 98% of the time. Paul is saying it's that last 2% that counts. Be patient even with that person who can be particularly irksome.

And then verse 15 adds another challenge. See that no one repays anyone evil for evil, but always seek to do good to one another and to everyone.

Now, if somebody does evil to you, hurts you in some way, your natural reaction is to hit back, isn't it? You black my eye, I'm going to black yours. In fact, I'll black both of them. No, says Paul, if somebody hurts you or harms you, respond by doing good to that person.

I think of the example of Jesus. Just after the nails had been driven through his hands and feet and the cross was put into the ground, he prayed, Father, forgive them.

They don't know what they're doing. He sought God's forgiveness for those who were causing him unimaginable pain. Just think of somebody who's caused you great pain.

[18:55] Can you ask God to forgive that person? Are you willing to do good to them even when they have done evil to you? It is possible to behave like that, but only by the grace of God.

So Paul is teaching us to care for the idle, the faint-hearted and the weak, and those who have treated us maliciously. Now, third, look at verses 16, 17, and 18.

It's a little trio of verses. In that section, Paul is teaching us how to behave in adverse circumstances. Now, look at verse 16. Rejoice always.

He wouldn't need to say rejoice always if life were constantly a bowl of cherries. The assumption behind rejoice always is that life is often very difficult.

You probably know Paul wrote an expanded version of this in Philippians chapter 4, where he says rejoice in the Lord always, and again I will say rejoice. In fact, we sang it a few minutes ago, didn't we?

[19:57] Now, Paul was in prison when he wrote those words to the Philippians. What was it like to be in a Roman prison in the first century? Chains, filthy clothes, no chance of washing them, no soap, rats, cold, diarrhea, terrible food, fellow inmates coughing and cursing.

How could anybody rejoice in such circumstances? The reason must be that you can think at all times of certain things that are always true.

For example, God loves me. Jesus has died for my sins. I'm forgiven. I'm on my way to heaven. I belong to the church.

I can read my Bible. Paul was in prison. You and I will sometimes feel imprisoned by circumstances, perhaps trapped in a most painful place from which we feel we can't get out.

But there's always so much to rejoice in. Think of it like this. We can simultaneously, simultaneously experience pain at one level and joy at another level.

[21:09] Paul is saying whatever difficulty you're having to endure, don't stop rejoicing. And verse 17, don't stop praying. Pray without ceasing.

Doesn't mean try and pray 24 hours a day. Nobody can do that. What he means is never stop being prayerful people. Don't give up praying. In Luke's gospel, chapter 18, Jesus tells a parable to teach people always to pray and not to lose heart.

And that's what Paul is saying here. Never give up on prayer. And verse 18. Give thanks in all circumstances. All circumstances, which must mean in difficult circumstances.

Now he's not saying give thanks for all circumstances, but in them. Let's say I've just had a nasty accident. I've been out walking the dog.

I've fallen down a steep bank. I'm lying at the bottom of the bank with a broken leg. And it hurts a lot. And I'm shouting. Eventually, the ambulance comes, scoops me up, and gets me to hospital.

[22 : 15] Now I don't say, thank you, Lord, for my broken leg. Thank you, Lord, for the pain that I'm feeling. I'd be soft in the head to say that. What I say is, thank you, Lord, for these kind paramedics.

Thank you, Lord, that you've given bones the power to heal and knit together again. And thank you, Lord, for the gospel. Just look at the second half of verse 18.

For this is the will of God in Christ Jesus for you. So what is God's will for Christians? It is that we learn to rejoice always, to pray without giving up, and to give thanks even in adverse circumstances.

Do you remember chapter 4, verse 3, which we were looking at a week or two back? We have God's will also mentioned there. In chapter 4, verse 3, God's will is our sanctification, our growth in holiness.

And here in chapter 5, 16 to 18, his will is that we become people who respond in adverse circumstances with a mixture of rejoicing, prayerfulness, and thankfulness.

[23 : 25] Well, let's ask him to help us to be people like that. The world, the non-Christian world, responds to adversity with resentment and cursing. Paul is showing us a better way.

Now, fourth, in verses 19 to 22, Paul is teaching us to listen to Christian speakers with discernment. Verse 19, do not quench the spirit, do not despise prophecies, but test everything. Hold fast what is good, abstain from every form of evil. Now, when Paul wrote this letter, there was no New Testament.

In fact, this letter is possibly the first book in the New Testament to have been written down. So when Paul and the other apostles preached the gospel, they were not expounding parts of the New Testament.

They were expounding the Old Testament and showing how Jesus fulfilled all its prophecies and promises. But the apostles were not the only people who were preaching about Jesus.

[24 : 29] There were many people in the Mediterranean world speaking in public about Jesus, and many of them would have been described as prophets. Some of them spoke accurately and preached the truth about Christ.

Others were inaccurate and ill-taught, and some were downright charlatans. It was a great mixture. And Paul knew that traveling preachers of many kinds would be visiting the Thessalonian church and speaking to the Christians.

So Paul is saying in these verses, don't write off every speaker who comes to you with a message purporting to be from God. Don't despise these folk, because if you do, you may be turning a deaf ear to the Holy Spirit.

But be careful. Be discerning. Test everything. Take on board and hold fast everything which is good in what they say, but have nothing to do with anything that appears to be evil and wrong. So by what standards were the Thessalonians to test the truthfulness of these messages? They didn't have the New Testament as the standard of truth. Well, Paul doesn't tell us here by what standard they were supposed to judge these things.

[25 : 38] Perhaps because he'd already given them a standard when he'd been with them on his previous visit. But if we pick up clues from his other letters, his standard for testing would probably be these.

Are these prophecies consistent with the gospel as I, Paul, have taught it to you? Are they consistent with what you know of the Old Testament? Are they consistent with the truth about Jesus, that he is fully God and fully man?

Are they teaching salvation by works or by grace? And very importantly, what about the character of these speakers?

Jesus said, watch out for false prophets. They're wolves dressed up as sheep. By their fruits you shall know them. So look at their lives. Do their lives display true Christian character?

Or are they really interested in taking advantage of you in some way? Now for us today, the situation is more straightforward because we have the New Testament as well as the Old

Testament.

[26 : 42] The whole Bible is our standard. But in today's world, there are many conflicting voices that are claiming to speak in the name of the Lord Jesus. Different groups claiming to be Christian in some way are saying very different things.

So we have to be discerning. Discernment is one of the greatest needs of the modern church. And the Bible is our standard. The gospel taught by Matthew, Mark, Luke, John, Peter, and Paul. That is the true teaching about Jesus and about salvation. And let's notice a very striking thing here. Compare verses 19 to 22 with verse 27.

27. I put you under oath before the Lord to have this letter read to all the brothers. Paul does not say, test this letter of mine and accept it if it passes your test.

Certainly not. Paul is the apostle of Jesus. He's the mouthpiece of Jesus. His teaching is to be received and obeyed, not tested. For us, then, the whole Bible, the word of God, is to be received and obeyed.

[27 : 54] But everything else is to be tested by the Bible. That's the way to be sure of the gospel. So as we read books claiming to teach Christian truth, as we listen to all sorts of speakers and sermons, let's be discerning, holding fast to what is good, but rejecting everything that seems to be evil and false.

We mustn't accept teaching simply because it's claiming to be Christian. We must test it. Now, fifth. Paul is teaching the Thessalonians that God can be relied on to keep them safe right through until the return of Jesus.

Verse 23. It's a wonderful prayer. Now, may the God of peace himself sanctify you completely, and may your whole spirit and soul and body be kept blameless at the coming of our Lord Jesus Christ. Now, that phrase, your whole spirit and soul and body, simply means everything that you are, the totality of your person. It's a bit like the Old Testament command to love God with all your heart and soul and mind and strength.

So Paul is praying that God will sanctify the Thessalonians completely so that when the Lord Jesus returns, he will find them fully as he would want them to be.

[29 : 15] Isn't that a lovely thing for Christians to want? Not to be sanctified in a half-baked way, but fully refashioned in the likeness of Jesus himself. But those Thessalonians, and you and I also, we might think, but is that really possible?

My current experience of battling with sin and temptation is so up and down. I'm so often like Paul in Romans chapter 7. The good things that I want to do, I find myself not doing.

And the bad things I want not to do are the very things I find myself doing. I'm a wretch in human form. Is it possible that I can be kept blameless at the return of the Lord Jesus?

Well, look at verse 24, where Paul answers these cries from our hearts. 24. He who calls you is faithful. He will surely do it.

Do what? Sanctify you completely. What he's saying is you can't do it, but he can. And he will. He will surely do it. Now, friends, let's believe that.

[30 : 23] What is impossible for us morally frail creatures to do is gloriously possible for God. Verse 24 comes really as a promise from God himself.

To rephrase it in the first person singular, he is saying to us, I have called you. I am faithful. I will fully sanctify you and keep you until the Lord Jesus returns to gather you up and bring you to me. I will do it. I will do it. Now, sixth from verse 25. Paul is teaching the Thessalonians to pray for world mission.

It's a very short verse. Brothers, pray for us. What Paul means is pray for the work we're engaged in. Do you remember how back in chapter 1, verse 1, we saw that the letter is written by Paul, Timothy, and Silas.

And at this stage in the development of the gospel work, they were leading the way forward. They were spearheading the evangelistic work of the church. They were traveling tirelessly for hundreds of miles every year.

[31 : 28] Sometimes by sea, very often overland on foot. It was dangerous work. People often died traveling. There were robbers and bandits.

There was bad weather. Paul survived at least three shipwrecks during his years of travel. There were no motorways. There were no BMWs. There were no airports. And above all, there was persecution.

Paul was beaten several times, stoned at least once, hated, hounded, regarded as the scum of the earth. In this verse 25, he's not really asking them to pray that his painful ankle or his hacking cough is going to get better.

He's reminding them that his God-given task is the evangelization of the world. Brothers, pray for us. The opportunities are very great and our strength is very limited.

Perhaps you just turn over the page to 2 Thessalonians, chapter 3, verse 1. Because Paul draws out this same request, and I think he makes his meaning clearer.

[32 : 34] 2 Thessalonians 3, 1. Finally, brothers, pray for us. That the word of the Lord may speed ahead and be honored, as happened among you, and that we may be delivered from wicked and evil men, for not all have faith.

That's what he means by pray for us. That the gospel work may go forward rapidly, and that we, the evangelists, should be protected from those who wickedly oppose the work.

So for us today, let's keep on praying that the good news of Jesus will penetrate to every corner of the globe, and that those who preach it will be divinely protected.

Now, seventh, from verse 26. We're nearly there, folks. We're nearly there. But look at verse 26.

Paul is teaching the Thessalonians a basic elementary ingredient in a happy church life, and that is to learn to be people who greet one another.

26. Greet all the brothers with a holy kiss. Now, why should Paul need to say that? And why do we need to hear it? Well, the answer must be that most of us are like little snails that prefer the protection of being inside our shells to the danger of gliding forth down the garden path where we might get squashed by a heavy boot.

[33 : 59] We're naturally a bit fearful of each other, aren't we? Especially of those that we don't know so well, and especially of those who come from a different cultural background from ours.

And it's because Paul knows that most people are naturally shy that he gives this command in verse 26. It's a command, not a suggestion. I've heard of churches, even in Scotland, which have a culture of not greeting one another, where people slip into church half a minute before the service begins, and as soon as the final prayer is said, they're rushing to the door and they disappear into the blue yonder.

And nobody gets to know anybody at all well. But the joy of belonging to the Lord's people is that we form real bonds of friendship, and to a considerable extent, we share our lives with each other. Now, I'm a pretty shy person, and I have had to force myself over the years to learn to be friendly. Let me give you an example of how I might greet a new person, maybe after the service tonight. I see somebody I haven't met before, so I go to him and I say, hello, I'm Edward. He says, oh, I'm Angus. I say, where do you come from, Angus?

[35 : 16] He says, I come from Trumna Drochet. Ah, I say, Loch Ness Monster Country. Yes, he says, and I photographed the monster recently.

Do you want to see it on my mobile phone? And he brings out his phone, and I can tell you, we're away. A friendship begins. The ice is broken. And if Angus and I keep on greeting each other at church, and perhaps in due course have a meal together, or walk along the banks of Loch Ness looking for things, a friendship will then be formed, which will be really helpful when either he or I goes through times of difficulty.

The friendships formed in a church immensely strengthen the church. God gives us each other, and those friendships start with greeting.

With a holy kiss, says Paul. Oh dear, you say, I do not want to be kissed. Well, I think we can apply a little cultural adjustment here. Paul came from a culture where a kiss was normal.

In other cultures, it's different. It might be a handshake. In some places, you might take a step back and bow like this. Here in our culture, increasingly, you wave your hand and you say, hiya.

[36 : 32] It's all a question of appropriate cultural body language. But Paul is simply saying, do it, and do it sincerely and lovingly. And notice the second word of the verse, all.

Greet all the brothers with a holy kiss. Don't leave anybody out, especially those who are by nature particularly shy. Make sure that they're included. Now in our church, we have people from lots of different cultures these days.

From Asia, the Middle East, Africa, the Americas, North and South. Down under, Europeans, British. Martians are yet to join us.

But let's develop friendships with those who are very different from us. Those friendships across ethnic and cultural divides are so special and important. Every tribe, every nation, every language. That's the Lord's church. Eighth and last, verse 28. The grace of our Lord Jesus Christ be with you. Now that, that grace, is the fountain of divine love that enables the whole church family to function well.

[37 : 44] Grace from heaven. Grace from the loving heart of our Savior. It's that grace that sustained the Thessalonians. And it's the same grace which is at work amongst us today.

Let's pray together. Our loving Lord Jesus, we thank you for the church, global and local. We thank you for the extraordinary privilege of being able to belong to the family destined for eternal life. Strengthen our bonds of love and friendship, we pray.

Help us to love your people and to serve them. And help us to proclaim the gospel with clarity and joy. So that more and more people will come to trust you as Savior.

And serve you as Lord. We ask it for your name's sake. Amen.