

Embrace the Work of the Spirit (1 Thessalonians 5:19-22)

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My wife would tell you I have a very low tolerance for suspense. She gets a kick out of checking my pulse during the middle of an adventure movie. It's also not uncommon for me to get about halfway through a novel and then flip to the last chapter to assure myself that in the end, the good guy survives. Then I can rest easy and actually enjoy the middle of the story. Knowing the end changes my perspective on all the twist and turns in the middle.

That's what 1 Thessalonians is all about - living today in light of what we know about tomorrow. The primary author, the Apostle Paul, repeatedly reminds us that Jesus is coming back. The eternal Son of God who created the world will one day return to make right all that our sin has made wrong. Jesus will complete the work of cosmic restoration He began when he walked out the tomb on Easter morning, the firstborn from the dead. Wickedness will be punished, righteousness will be rewarded, and the Lord alone will be exalted on that day.

1 Thessalonians 5:6, "So then let us not sleep, as others do, but let us keep awake and be sober." The certain hope of Christ's return should make us spiritually sober, producing faith toward God and love toward one another. As Paul says in verse 11, "Therefore, encourage one another and build one another up just as you are doing."

How do we do that? How do we help each other live with the end in view? Verses 12-18 give us a few examples. We respect and honor our spiritual leaders. We admonish the idle, encourage the fainthearted, help the weak, and practice patience toward them all. We show our fellow Christians how to rejoice always, pray without ceasing, and give thanks in all circumstances. But there's another critical way we encourage and build one another up on this side of glory. We diligently exercise the spiritual gifts God has given us.

Brothers and sisters, we are not alone in the work of mutual edification. God has given us a Helper to keep us faithful to the end - the gift of the Holy Spirit. The Holy Spirit isn't a boogiemer. He isn't the crazy uncle of the Trinity. He is equal in deity, attributes, and nature with God the Father and God the Son, manifesting God's active presence in the world. He gave life to God's creation, gives life to God's new creation, and is the active agent of all the Lord's blessings in our lives, including spiritual gifts designed to build up the church. 1 Corinthians 12:7, "To each one is

given the manifestation of the Spirit for the common good.” The Holy Spirit, through the spiritual gifts he gives, empowers Christians to edify one another in a host of different ways.

Some of the gifts He gives are permanent. Some are occasional. Some appear natural. Some more remarkable. With the exception of those among the apostle who were commissioned as eyewitnesses of Christ to write Scripture, the full range of spiritual gifts remains at work in the church, both for our good and our witness to the world. In 1 Thessalonians 5:19-22, Paul focuses on our stewardship of the gift of prophecy, urging us to embrace the prophetic ministry of the Spirit with eager anticipation and careful discernment.

As one of the more remarkable or manifestly supernatural spiritual gifts, prophecy has often been misunderstood and sadly misused in the church. Depending on your church background, some of you are probably thrilled I’m speaking about this issue. Some of you are probably nervous. Regardless, I urge you to listen humbly, asking the Lord to instruct and equip you through his word.

1) OUR ATTITUDE TOWARD THE SPIRIT’S ACTIVITY DETERMINES OUR EXPERIENCE OF THE SPIRIT’S ACTIVITY

Paul begins with a simple negative. Verse 19, “Do not quench the Spirit.” I find that verse remarkably sobering. Throughout the Bible, the presence of the Spirit is symbolized by fire. In Acts 2:3-4, when the Holy Spirit comes upon the disciples on the day of Pentecost, Luke records, “Divided tongues as of fire appeared to them and rested on each one of them. And they were all filled with the Holy Spirit...” So if the Holy Spirit is like fire, the command to not “quench” the spirit in 1 Thessalonians 5:19 presumes what? That we have the ability, even as Christians, to restrain or suppress his activity.

That’s stunning. Why? Because we’re talking about God himself, the God who created the universe, who created you, who even now is giving life to your mortal body. He is not a weak God. He is a mighty God, a sovereign God. And yet He has ordained, in His perfect sovereignty, to manifest his presence in response to the expectant faith of His people.

Consider Acts 4:29-31, where the disciples ask God to give them a spirit of boldness in testifying to the truth of Jesus: “Grant to your servants to continue to speak your word with all boldness, while you stretch out your hand to heal, and signs and

wonders are performed through the name of your holy servant Jesus.' And when they had prayed, the place in which they were gathered together was shaken, and they were all filled with the Holy Spirit and continued to speak the word of God with boldness." Contrast their experience to the residents of Nazareth in Mark 6:5-6. Speaking of Jesus, "And he could do no mighty work there, except that he laid his hands on a few sick people and healed them. And he marveled because of their unbelief."

Do we ultimately control what the Holy Spirit does or doesn't do? No. We are not sovereign. But does the Holy Spirit work and move in proportion to the desire in our hearts for Him to work and move? Yes. He does not act in us or through us contrary to our will. He is, as it were, a gentlemen, which begs the question, exactly how do we quench the Spirit?

There are many ways, friends. verse 20, however, reveals Paul is concerned about one in particular. "Do not despise prophecies." How can we quench the Spirit? How can we resist or suppress his work in our lives? By despising prophecies. Understanding what Paul means here depends entirely on our understanding of prophecy. So let's take a few minutes to review what the Bible means by prophecy.

In the Old Testament, a prophet was a divine messenger appointed by God to speak or "prophecy" the very words of God. In 2 Samuel 12:25, the Lord "sent a message by Nathan the prophet." In Jeremiah 1:9, the Lord says to the prophet Jeremiah, "Behold, I have put my words in your mouth," such that what the prophet says, God says. It's why prophets like Jeremiah or Isaiah were able to write Scripture. God inspired their speech such that their words were God's words and carried his absolute authority.

Thus, the Lord instructed Israel in Deuteronomy 18:19, "And whoever will not listen to my words that [the prophet] shall speak in my name, I myself will require it of him." To disobey a prophet was to disobey God himself. Why? Because the Word of God, delivered through prophet, was perfect. The apostles Jesus commissioned exercised a similar authority in their teaching and writing. The Lord empowered them to speak exactly what he wanted them to speak, just like the prophets before them.

On the Day of Pentecost, however, prophecy changed. When the ascended Christ poured out the gift of the indwelling Holy Spirit in New Covenant measure, the gift of prophecy was no longer confined to a select group. All of God's people were

filled with the Spirit and empowered by the Spirit with spiritual gifts, including, in many cases, the gift of prophecy. And when the distribution of the prophetic gift changed, so too did the nature of prophecy.

Thus in 1 Thessalonians 2:13, Paul thanks God that when the Thessalonians “received the word of God, which you heard from us, you accepted it not as the word of men but as what it really is, the word of God, which is at work in you believers.” Clearly, they didn’t have a problem with despising or disdain God’s Word. So the fact that Paul says to the same people three chapters later, “do not despise prophecy,” strongly suggests prophecies are not the same thing as the Word of God.

And in fact, when we examine Paul’s letter to the church in Corinth, we discover exactly that – a clear distinction between the apostolic word and a prophetic word in the form of a command to the Corinthians to use the apostolic word, the words of Scripture, to test the truthfulness of a prophetic word. 1 Corinthians 14:37–38, “If anyone thinks that he is a prophet, or spiritual, he should acknowledge that the things I am writing to you are a command of the Lord. If anyone does not recognize this, he is not recognized.”

So if prophecy in the New Testament isn’t the authoritative word of God like it was in the Old Testament, what exactly is it? A prophecy is simply a report of a spontaneous revelation from God. As Wayne Grudem says, prophecy is “speaking merely human words to report something God brings to mind.” Paul’s instruction to the church in Corinth in 1 Corinthians 14 is probably the most helpful chapter in forming a biblical understanding of prophecy.

In 1 Corinthians 14:3, he explains the purpose of the gift: “The one who prophesies speaks to people for their upbuilding and encouragement and consolation.” Like every other spiritual gift – generosity, mercy, and administration included, the gift of prophesy is designed by God to build up the church. And in 1 Corinthians 14:29–31, he explains the source of the gift: “Let two or three prophets speak, and let the others weigh what is said. If a revelation is made to another sitting there, let the first be silent. For you can all prophesy one by one, so that all may learn and all be encouraged...”

You know what you’ll never find in the Old Testament? A direct command from the Lord to interrupt a prophet when their speaking. Why? Because they spoke the very words of God. The spiritual gift of prophesy today is different. Today, prophesy is

not an objective declaration of divine inspiration. It is a subjective report of divine revelation, a spiritual impression from the Lord that will be understood imperfectly and communicated imperfectly. 1 Corinthians 13:9-10, "For we know in part and we prophesy in part, but when the perfect comes, the partial will pass away." When will that happen? When Jesus returns!

Until then, the Holy Spirit helps us first and foremost by exhorting and encouraging us through the perfect Word of God. But He also helps us by encouraging, consoling, and building us up through the gift of prophecy, by which we are reminded that God sees us, God knows us, and God cares for us. Paul provides a beautiful description of what the Spirit can do through the gift of prophecy in 1 Corinthians 14:24-25: "But if all prophecy, and an unbeliever or outsider enters, he is convicted by all, he is called to account by all, the secrets of his heart are disclosed, and so, falling on his face, he will worship God and declare that God is really among you."

That's been my consistent experience over the years, whether I'm listening to a prophetic word shared with the entire church on Sunday morning when someone comes up to the ministry mic OR when a brother or sister has shared an impression God laid on their heart for me personally. "Lord, you know what I'm going through. And you revealed that, in part, to one of my brothers or sisters, as an expression of your care for me."

It's what we experience, for example, when someone says, "I believe there are people here today who are ashamed by their sexual sin. The Lord wants to remind you that he knows what you've done and is eager to forgive and cleanse you if you're willing to repent." Or, "The Lord put on my heart a group of folks who feel incapable of loving someone in your family. You feel stuck. You feel trapped. But I believe the Lord would say, 'Consider the work my Son did for you. When you had no hope of restoring your relationship with me, I moved. I worked. I acted supernaturally on your behalf. You may not know what the future holds, but you know me. Continue to trust me, knowing that what is impossible with man, is possible with God.'"

Is it safe to bet that in a gathering of this size someone is probably always ashamed by their sexual sin or struggling to love people who are hard to love? Absolutely. But it's that revelatory element, the supernatural insight into the specific needs of the moment, and a corresponding work the Holy Spirit is eager to do in our hearts

in that moment, that distinguishes the gift of prophecy from the gift of exhortation or teaching.

So if prophecy is a report of something God spontaneously brings to mind to build up the church, what does it mean to “despise” prophecy? To despise prophecies is to adopt an attitude that minimizes or rejects their value or worth such that we effectively quench the work of the Spirit in our lives. We do that when we fail to “earnestly desire” the gift because its supernatural character makes us uncomfortable. We do that when the Lord gives us a prophetic word but our fear of getting it “wrong” or other people thinking we’re crazy keeps us silent. We do that when we hear a prophetic word and don’t consider what God might be saying to us through it, or when we fail to make room in corporate gatherings large and small to exercise the gift.

In other words, verse 20 accomplishes verse 19. We “quench the Spirit,” we resist or hinder His activity in our midst, by despising prophecy, by neither seeking, valuing or making room for the Spirit’s activity through the gifts He gives, especially the gift of prophecy. The application to our lives is simple. If we want to experience the opposite, if we want to enjoy the Spirit’s activity – His upbuilding, encouragement, and consolation through prophecy – we need to have an attitude that eagerly anticipates and earnestly desires His activity.

We need to gather with God’s people with a heart of faith, expecting the Lord to speak to us and through us. We need to ask God to help us listen to the Spirit’s voice. We need to repent of the unbelief that concludes God will never use me to prophesy because He has yet to use me to prophesy. And we need to cry out to the Lord for courage to share the impressions or revelations He gives us, remembering God will use imperfect vessels and imperfect words to accomplish his perfect work. Our attitude toward the Spirit’s activity will determine our experience of the Spirit’s activity.

2) EXPERIENCING THE SPIRIT’S ACTIVITY REQUIRES DISCERNING THE SPIRIT’S ACTIVITY (verses 21-22)

One of the reasons many Christians and evangelical churches are reluctant to earnestly desire or make room for the gift of prophecy is the host of ways in which they have seen it misused. To stand before a church and say, “Thus says the Lord,” prior to speaking anything but the inerrant words of Scripture is both unwise and dangerous. Why? Because it creates confusion, causing people to lose sight of the

critical distinction between the normative role of God's perfect Word and the upbuilding, encouraging, and consoling role of our imperfect prophecies.

The difference between, "Thus says the Lord," and, "I believe the Lord gave me a word for you," is not just a matter of semantics. It's a matter of humility. Church history is replete with men and women who have gone off the rails spiritually because they ascribed an authority to a revelation they had or someone else had for them that should have been reserved for the Word of God alone.

However, the biblical alternative to abuse is not disuse. Does the fact that we can hurt one another with our words mean we should never speak again? Does the fact that we use our money in arrogant or selfish ways mean we should never use money again? Does the fact that we can hurt one another with our sexual activity mean we should never have sex again? No. All of God's gifts can be readily abused. But we must not reject a gift because it's been abused or restrict our pursuit of the gift out of fear it could be misused again. To despise prophecy is to despise the God from whom it originates.

The guiding principle in our attitude toward and exercise of all the spiritual gifts must be faith toward God and love toward one another. If there ever was a church where Paul could have been justified in banning the exercise of spiritual gifts altogether, it was Corinth. They were an absolute mess. Yet he didn't do that. He encouraged them to do exactly what He told the Thessalonians to do in verses 21-22. "Do not quench the Spirit. Do not despise prophecies, **BUT TEST EVERYTHING; hold fast to what is good. Abstain from every form of evil [or every evil form.]**" (Emphasis added.)

Or as Paul says in 1 Corinthians 14:29, "Let two or three prophets speak, and let the others weigh what is said." Who are the "others" who are supposed to evaluate a prophecy after it's been shared? It's the entire congregation. Why? Because Paul is speaking to the entire congregation in 1 Thessalonians 5:21 when he urges us to "test everything." That's not just my responsibility as a pastor. That's your responsibility as fellow believers. If you hear a prophecy or someone shares a word of prophecy with you, you need to evaluate two things.

First, evaluate the content of the word. Does it affirm what Scripture affirms and deny what Scripture denies? If so, hold fast to it as good. If not, reject it, or at least that part of it, as evil. 2 Thessalonians 2:15, "So then, brothers, stand firm and hold to the traditions that you were taught by us, either by our spoken word or by our

letter.” We need to evaluate everything we hear in the perfect light of God’s Word, no matter how “spiritual” or “right” the person speaking to us claims to be.

Second, evaluate the purpose of the word. Tone matters as much as content in communicating God’s attitude toward his people. Is the prophecy shared in a way that builds up, encourages, or consoles those who listen? Or is it delivered with arrogance, presumption, or a super-spiritual air that draw more attention to the speaker than the Christ whose body we are called to edify? That doesn’t mean every prophetic word will make you feel good about yourself. Conviction is a gift from God and will build you up if you’re willing to respond humbly. If the purpose is in keeping the purpose Paul lays out in 1 Corinthians 14:3, hold fast to it as good. If not, reject it, or at least that part of it, as evil.

I love how Gordon Fee describes our corporate responsibility. “Because such utterances are from the Holy Spirit, they must not be despised; but also because such utterances come through merely human vessels, they must be tested.” Experiencing the Spirit’s activity requires discerning the Spirit’s activity. I think there are two ways we can easily go wrong in “testing” prophetic words prior to taking them to heart.

First, we can think a prophetic word isn’t “valid” unless it’s accompanied by a portion of Scripture. Paul never says that and nor should we require it. And if you’re sharing a prophetic word or impression, don’t think you have to read a Scripture as part of what you share to “validate” what you share. If a particular Scripture is part of the revelation or impression God has given you to share with his people, by all means read it. Just know that doesn’t make your prophet word more biblical.

Second, we can test a prophetic word with something other than Scripture. We can say, “When that person spoke, I felt chills down my spine.” Or, when that person spoke, I just felt God’s arms wrapping me in His love.” Can biblical prophetic ministry have physical or emotional impacts? Absolutely. But a physical or emotional impact doesn’t make a prophetic word biblical.

Finally, please notice the same people that are told to “not quench the Spirit” and “not despise prophecies” are also told to “test everything.” It’s unfortunate how easily a church, even a church like ours, can split into two camps. You’ve got the charismatic types who come from a more Pentecostal background waving the “don’t quench the Spirit” flag and cheering anytime the planned order of service is interrupted by a prophetic word. Then you have the reformed types who come

from a Presbyterian or Baptist background waving the “test everything” flag and singing the praises of doing all things “decently and in order.”

Brothers and sisters, the Lord does not give some of us the privilege of “earnestly desiring” spiritual gifts, others the privilege of “testing everything,” and the rest of us the option of having no opinion or (even better) seizing the moral high ground with comments like, “You know, I prefer to just focus on the gospel.” No. all of us, regardless of our church background or personal preferences should embrace the prophetic ministry of the Spirit with eager anticipation and careful discernment.

CONCLUSION

My greatest concern for our congregation right now at this point in our history is not a failure to rightly test prophecies. My greatest concern is that many of us might A) count ourselves out from being used by God to share a prophetic word or impression from the Lord, or B) adopt a “great if it happens, fine if it doesn’t” attitude that effectively quenches the Spirit because we don’t earnestly desire His work in our midst.

Friends, spiritual gifts are not optional. They’re not items on the Christian menu we get to pick and choose at our leisure. They are absolutely essential if we are to continue growing and bearing fruit as a church, both individually and corporately. We cannot fulfill our mission, we will not help people enjoy a growing relationship with God, without the gifts of the Spirit, including the gift of prophecy.

I don’t know of a single Christian who would say, “I think rejoicing always, praying without ceasing, the giving thanks in all circumstances” was only something God wanted the church to do in the first century. We don’t say that about verses 16-18. So why do we so quickly conclude as much about verses 19-22? The entire sequence of imperatives at the conclusion of Paul’s letter to the Thessalonians is just as relevant for us today as it was for them.

The biblical attitude toward spiritual gifts is a far cry from “open but cautious.” When it comes to prophecy, the path God calls us to walk is marked by eager anticipation and careful discernment. May the Lord make us that kind of people, a people who earnestly desire and celebrate the gift of prophecy, so that our non-Christian friends cannot help but say, “Surely, God is among you.” May that be our testimony as a church, not only today, but for generations to come. 1 Corinthians



14:1, "Pursue love, and earnestly desire the spiritual gifts, especially that you may prophesy."