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1st Thessalonians 5:12–28, NRSVue.

¹² But we appeal to you, brothers and sisters, to respect those who labor among you and have charge of you in the Lord and admonish you; ¹³ esteem them very highly in love because of their work. Be at peace among yourselves. ¹⁴ And we urge you, brothers and sisters, to admonish the idlers, encourage the fainthearted, help the weak, be patient with all of them. ¹⁵ See that none of you repays evil for evil, but always seek to do good to one another and to all. ¹⁶ Rejoice always, ¹⁷ pray without ceasing, ¹⁸ give thanks in all circumstances, for this is the will of God in Christ Jesus for you. ¹⁹ Do not quench the Spirit. ²⁰ Do not despise prophecies, ²¹ but test everything; hold fast to what is good; ²² abstain from every form of evil.

²³ May the God of peace himself sanctify you entirely, and may your spirit and soul and body be kept sound and blameless at the coming of our Lord Jesus Christ.

²⁴ The one who calls you is faithful, and he will do this.

²⁵ Brothers and sisters, pray for us.

²⁶ Greet all the brothers and sisters with a holy kiss. ²⁷ I solemnly command you by the Lord that this letter be read to all the brothers and sisters.

²⁸ The grace of our Lord Jesus Christ be with you.

Thanks in all circumstances.

I have been very impressed at how many people, either at the end of their lives or when they are facing a non-terminal but highly debilitating medical condition, express great thankfulness for all that they have. A while back, I was asked by a friend to visit a friend of his in the hospital. The man didn't belong to a church, but he was a believer – and he wanted a member of the clergy to talk to. I knocked gently on his hospital room door, the nurse having warned me that the patient was

extremely uncomfortable and did not want the light turned on. I walked up to the bed, my eyes slowly adjusting to the darkness. I could see the fifty-year-old man there, looking thin, his hair pure white, and his eyes closed. Then I realized that there was a young woman asleep on the sofa in the room. She was covered in blankets, her arms tucked around a pillow. I decided not to bother anyone. I was just beginning to back out when the man's eyes opened. "Hi," I said softly. He smiled. I explained who I was and apologized for waking him up. He replied softly that it was okay, that he hadn't been asleep. We began to talk. He said that the girl was his nineteen-year-old daughter, that she was his only child. His ex-wife lived on the east coast. His daughter was a college student. When he was diagnosed with cancer five weeks before, his daughter had come out to be with him. We will call him Carl and her Ellen. He said some amazing things to me.

Our quote is from a letter that we are certain that Paul did personally write. Interestingly, it is not believed that he is the true author of 2nd Thessalonians; this letter might have been written by a follower of his and attributed to him. 1st Thessalonians is almost certainly the oldest of the surviving letters written by Paul. Paul, as we see often in his letters, is offering advice to this church, which, like so many other churches, Paul founded. The Christians there were facing persecution. There were problems with their theology and their moral practices. Thessalonica

is now the city called Thessaloniki, the second largest city in Greece, after Athens, the capital. Thessaloniki is in northern Greece, in what in ancient times was called Macedonia. It was founded in 316 B.C. by General Cassander of Alexander the Great's army. The city was named after the general's wife, the half-sister of Alexander. In 146 B.C. Macedonia, with Thessalonica, became part of the Roman Empire. It was located on an important east-west road, and it contained harbor facilities on the coast of the Aegean Sea. It was thus a very important commercial city. It was also known as an important political center. The people of Thessalonica represented many religions, including those who worshiped Greek, Roman, and oriental gods. There were Jews in the city, and they represented an important part of its commercial activities. Paul preached in a synagogue there, but we do not know precisely where in the city it was located. A conjecture is that it was in the harbor's marketplace. Paul, along with Silas and Timothy, ventured to Thessalonica on what we call Paul's second missionary journey, and this is described in the Book of Acts. Paul stayed there for quite some time, at least a few months. Paul wrote this letter later, from Corinth, probably in the year 50.

Our passage is very famous and frequently quoted. Chapter 5 deals with the second coming of the Lord and how people should live between now and then. But we're going to look at the closing of the chapter. Here is an abbreviated version:

Be at peace among yourselves. ¹⁴ We urge you, brothers and sisters, to admonish the idlers, encourage the fainthearted, help the weak, be patient with all of them. ¹⁵ See that none of you repays evil for evil, but always seek to do good to one another and to all. ¹⁶ Rejoice always, ¹⁷ pray without ceasing, ¹⁸ give thanks in all circumstances, for this is the will of God in Christ Jesus for you. ¹⁹ Do not quench the Spirit. Hold fast to what is good; Do not despise prophecies, ²¹ but test everything; hold fast to what is good; ²² abstain from every form of evil.

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Paul is summarizing his most important advice to the new believers in Thessalonica:

Live in peace among yourselves and don't have any discord within the church; watch over each other and don't put up with sin; encourage those who are struggling with their faith, and be patient with everyone; never respond to evil with evil; no matter what is happening in your lives, always be thankful; keep the Holy Spirit strong within you and hold fast to whatever is good. Paul then offers his blessing to the church, asks everyone to pray for each other and for him, and instructs them to have his letter read to every member of the church.

He says to not quench the Spirit; we see here the common visualization of the Holy Spirit as a flame. Notice how much he focuses on our ability to reason, to use our minds to serve God. He wants us to think about what we do, whether our behavior is good or evil. He wants us to talk to God, to encourage and support each

other. He's not laying out a bunch of religious rules that we are supposed to blindly obey. Rather, he knows that God gave us the ability to reason, to figure out on our own exactly how to serve God and each other. He also shows his own vulnerability by including himself among those who need prayer. Finally, he wants us to remember the most important gift any of us have been given: the grace of God.

I said that Carl said some amazing things to me. His cancer had metastasized; he was dying. He said that he had worked since the age of eighteen at a variety of tough, manual jobs that he did not enjoy. He did cleanup work on construction sites, eventually getting to the point where he built scaffolding. The people he worked with always asked for him to be sent to new job sites; they wanted him in charge of their scaffolding – because they knew that he would be relentless, even in the blazing sun of the summer, making sure that anyone who worked on that scaffolding was completely safe. He worked on road crews, filling potholes and laying down pavement, breathing in the sickening smell of petroleum. He worked in the pit of an oil and grease business, changing the oil on dozens of cars a day. He drove a garbage truck, washed windows, and cleaned rain gutters. Carl said, with absolutely no resentment in his voice, that he hated all these jobs. They were tough physically, and he ended up with joint and back problems. The reason he hated doing these things, though, he said, was that they just weren't satisfying. He didn't

find any meaning in them. Then Carl said that just a few months before he had been diagnosed with cancer, he had found what he decided was his true calling: he got a job as a care provider for the elderly. It didn't pay well, but his only child, Ellen, who was asleep on the sofa in his hospital room, was mostly grown and his wife was long gone. He didn't need to be earning much anymore. Carl talked about one older man who had Parkinson's and needed help with taking his medications, showering, cooking, eating, dressing - almost everything. Carl said he just felt good doing things for other people, bringing a little comfort to them. He loved to listen to people who had no one else to talk to during the day. He said that one thing he did with all the people whom he cared for was affirm whatever was important to them. They were people who lived alone, and he was assigned mostly to men. He gave them companionship and found the stories of how they had earned a living, of the things they had been through in life, genuinely fascinating. But just when Carl had found the thing that he wanted to do in life, he had started to feel sick. He discovered that he was beginning to have trouble when he was helping others. He got tired extremely easily. He couldn't lift much. He lost weight. One night, when he was back home in the house, he shared with his daughter Ellen on the phone that he had had a horrible episode of terrible pain. He wanted to tough it out, but

Ellen insisted that he go to the emergency room. He was diagnosed with metastasized cancer the next morning after being admitted to the hospital.

Carl told me all of this with no bitterness. He was sad, yes, that he was dying, that he was going to leave his daughter, that he had had to leave his new-found vocation. He was in pain, too. In his room in the hospital, via his IV, the nurses had installed a pain pump that allowed him to periodically inject himself with some sort of opiate. As I talked to him, he would periodically push the button. One long beep, he explained, meant that the pump was giving him a hit of pain killer; three short beeps meant that it wasn't time yet for another hit and he had to wait a bit. But Carl pointed over at Ellen and said that God had blessed him incredibly. Look at that, he said, see her sleeping there? When I called her up and told her that I was extremely sick, he said, she got in the very used car that I had bought her and left the apartment she had been living in while in college, and she drove straight through. She got to the hospital in the middle of the night, and instead of waiting until morning, she entered through the emergency room and talked her way into being taken to his room. At that moment, both Carl and I realized that Ellen was waking up. She had heard the last part of what her father had said. She sat up and asked me if I was a nurse. I told her I was just a visiting pastor.

“He’s a fantastic dad,” she said. She went on, telling me how kind her father was, how secure he had always made her feel. When she was a little girl, her father would come home filthy and exhausted, but he always came to her room, to see how she was doing, if she needed to talk about anything. Then Carl asked me to pray with them. He said that he wasn’t much of a church goer, but that he had always studied the Bible and had raised Ellen to always think about what she was doing. Every time you do anything in life, he taught her, stop and think about whether it’s right or wrong. Ellen said that he had also told her to always be thankful for what she had.

I told Carl that I was sure he was a great caregiver, that his voice was caring, very empathetic. I told him that he was gracious. But here is what is so amazing about what Carl said. The words were different, and he was more articulate than most people, but he said the same thing that many very, very sick people have said to me. He sounded like someone who had read our passage from 1st Thessalonians and had reread it every day of his life. He did indeed “*give thanks in all circumstances.*” What’s intriguing is that the only thing he talked about as being a blessing from God was his daughter. He hated all the jobs he had had, except the last one, which he wasn’t allowed to enjoy for very long. He had very little money. His marriage had ended early, and he had never remarried. But as soon as Ellen

was old enough for the courts to care about her opinion, she had said she wanted to live with her father. She had been a great joy to him.

God doesn't give most of us an avalanche of gifts. What I've been impressed with is that often, it is the people who have been given very little in life who seem to be the most thankful. Perhaps having too much makes it too hard to appreciate anything. Maybe having one, single, magnificent gift, in the form of a loved one, in particular, makes it so much easier to be thankful. There's one line in our passage today that might seem confusing. Paul says: "*Do not despise prophecies,²¹ but test everything; hold fast to what is good.*" What Paul is saying here is to listen to Christian teachers, even if what they tell you seems to put limits on what you can do. I've met many people like Carl whose sense of thankfulness was uncrushable and who seemed to always intuitively understand how to emulate the ways of Jesus Christ. And often the Christian teachers they listened to were themselves. Please pray with me.

God, fill us with the fire of the Holy Spirit. Do not let us become spoiled. Do not drown us in gifts. Do not let us get to the point where we become unthankful. Let us have only the blessings that allow us to be give thanks in all circumstances. Help us recognize the magnificent gifts you give us in the form of other humans in our lives, as they are so much more valuable than physical things. Amen.