



VILLAGE BIBLE CHURCH

SUGAR GROVE CAMPUS

Report Card Day

Ready: Strength for Today, Hope for Tomorrow | Part 10
Tim Badal | March 13, 2016 | 1 Thessalonians 5:12–22



We've been in this series entitled "Ready," looking at Paul's first and second letters to a first-century church in Thessalonica in the nation of Greece. He has been instructing them on how to be ready to serve and please God by living upright and holy lives, being ready for the Second Coming of our Lord and Savior Jesus Christ, and how to love one another.

Now in chapter five, Paul is closing out this first letter with some final instructions for them. In verses 12 through the end of the chapter, Paul delivers several instructions in machine-gun fashion—boom, boom, boom—knowing the people of God would know exactly what to do with them.

Today, this passage brings us things to work on as well. Paul brings these things up, not because the church was failing to do them, but simply as a reminder to them. And I think Village Bible Church is doing a phenomenal job as well; we can be proud of the work being done in the lives here. But that doesn't mean we can stop doing these things to which we are called by God, but rather be encouraged to keep doing them all the more.

Let's look at these instructions and then see how God has called us to serve and honor Him. Here's what Paul says, starting in 1 Thessalonians 5:12:

¹² We ask you, brothers, to respect those who labor among you and are over you in the Lord and admonish you, ¹³ and to esteem them very highly in love because of their work. Be at peace among yourselves. ¹⁴ And we urge you, brothers, admonish the idle, encourage the fainthearted, help the weak, be patient with them all. ¹⁵ See that no one repays anyone evil for evil, but always seek to do good to one another and to everyone. 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 what is good. ²² Abstain from every form of evil.

About two weeks before a specific school day would arrive, I would start getting nervous. I knew the day was coming. I knew what it was going to bring, and I knew the trouble I was going to find myself in. Report cards were coming out. It was going to be an evaluation that would remind me of all my laxness during the previous quarter. I knew what the teacher was going to say; I knew she would be honest and open. And I knew my parents' response would be swift and filled with justice and wrath. So I came to really despise that day. I wasn't all that great of a student, and I knew that day would mean I would be grounded and things would be taken from me.

Well, this last week was report card week in the Badal home. I told my youngest son on the way to church this morning, "I got your report card and I'm going to show it to the church." He freaked out. "Is it good? Is it bad? What will people say?" I said, "It's all good, son. You're going to be okay." He then responded, "Show it to everybody!"

What I want you to see this morning is that report cards categorize their evaluation. The first thing Luke's report card addresses is his relationship with the curriculum. How is the child handling the information he is learning? There's a grade. He's doing well. He's understanding and applying what he's learning. Second, it asks about the child's relationship with the teacher. When

the teacher tells him to do something, is he doing it? Is he helpful in class or causing harm? Does he promote a positive learning environment or cause distraction? Does he listen to rules?

Then the final relationship it evaluates—after his relationship to the curriculum and the teacher—is his relationship with other students. Does he play well with others? Is he courteous and respectful to everyone? Does he cooperate? Does he work well in groups, allowing group discussion to take place? Oh, and then it adds, does he use legible handwriting? He didn't do so well with that, or with punctuation. Badals aren't good at writing or knowing when to stop a sentence.

In a sense, Paul is giving the church at Thessalonica a report card covering four areas of concern:

- How are you doing in your relationship with your leaders?
- How are you doing in your relationship with God?
- How are you doing in your relationship with each other?
- How are you doing in your relationship with yourself? Are you listening to what the Word of God says?

What is true for the Thessalonian church is true for us today. We have to continually do an evaluation, and the Word of God is our teacher, telling us to ask ourselves certain questions.

So through the teaching of God's Word, I want you to grade yourself. "Am I satisfactory in this area? Or is my grade unsatisfactory? Am I living up to the level I should? Are massive changes needed here?"

1. Our relationship with leaders

In verses 12 and 13 he writes, *"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."* Please realize that Paul has a reason for everything he says, which is that he sees need for improvement. He's not coming up with these instructions out of thin air. Neither do our teachers. They don't think, "What can I say about the Badal kids today?" They don't make these evaluations just to fill paper. We expect our teachers to tell us real areas where the kids are doing well and real areas where they might improve.

Over and over in his letter, Paul tells the church they are doing a wonderful job—not perfect, but very good. He wants them to continue their good work, but also brings up areas that need improvement. He doesn't say "We implore you," or "We command you," or "We demand of you." Instead he uses the phrase, "We ask you." That word "ask" is a gentle word, telling the people to consider these things, to think about these things. They're already doing well, but he wants to see them do all the more—beginning with their relationship with their leaders.

There had always been leaders in the church, from the beginning when the apostles themselves led. They were men who had walked and talked with Jesus, who had been part of Jesus' earthly ministry. But in the book of Acts we find a transition in leadership from the apostles to the group called elders. By Acts 10, this transition was almost complete. The elders were given the charge of leading the church. In many ways, their primary job was to be examples of Jesus Christ. Apostles are not all elders, but elders could have been apostles. We know that Peter mentions in his letter that he was an elder within the church (1 Peter 5:1).

Our job as leaders is something like being a "middle manager" with Christ as our overseer. He's the Chief Shepherd (1 Peter 5:4) and our job is to serve as little shepherds and examples of Him. We're not perfect by any stretch of the imagination, but we are to be men who are above reproach, who honor God with our lives, and who can serve as models of Christlikeness in the real world.

The job of elder also includes other duties. I must say, this is a bit awkward for me to speak about, because I'm about to tell you how you need to treat me and the team of elders. I'm going to tell you that you need to respect us and recognize our role in the church, but I'm going to let the Word of God make these statements more fully.

First, I want to point out what the Word says about our responsibilities to you. The elders' job description is actually threefold. First, leaders are to *"labor among you."* That word "labor" in the Greek is a word that means to work with great effort, with a great exertion of energy. It speaks of one who toils intensely to the point of sweat and exhaustion, almost like someone who has just received a beating—which is the literal source of the phrase. So an elder is to be busy doing the work.

I want to address the pastors in our midst: the elders and especially those who, like myself, are vocational ministers. We cannot be lazy! The ministry, as described here in the text, tells us that we should be sweating as we do the work of the Lord. It's not called the vacation of the Lord. It's not called the fun of the Lord. It's called the work of the Lord. It is strenuous and at times causes us to be out of breath, sweaty and even weary.

Therefore, to the elders in the churches, Paul says, "Listen. If you think you can be God's servant in church, but you're not working hard, then you're not leading." Leaders labor, and we need to recognize that those who are called to serve are also called to obey.

Now to parishioners: you've probably heard the running joke that pastors only work one day a week. There are many who might say, "I sure would like to be a pastor—to be able to come in when I want, go home when I want, do what I want." They think that's what pastoral ministry is all about. I understand that many folks look at pastors and say, "They don't do much," or "That's an easy job."

Many of you know I'm bi-vocational. I work long hours to run my own catering business, which is hard work. In many ways I'm one of you—I work for a living, if you will.

Let me assure you that I give my all in catering, working 14–16 hour days. Yet it's easy to serve people food. I don't have to worry about them, or even really think about them. I don't have to wonder if they're doing okay. All I have to do is put food on their plates and send them out. That's it. It's a relatively easy task that I can do with ease.

Compare catering to shepherding the people of God. Dealing with people on that level can be so draining.

We're dealing with their life-or-death decisions and their eternal destination. We're kneeling next to them in the hospital or when their marriages are falling apart. We're addressing issues between people who are fighting. We're trying to figure out how to effectively manage the money God has put in our charge.

Here's the thing: At the end of my catering days, I can see that everybody has eaten and they're full. But when it comes to pastoring, Scripture says that teachers will be held to a stricter judgment (James 3:1). Ooh, I don't like that. It also tells me that I will one day give an account for the condition of the flock under my care. That means Jesus, the righteous Judge, is going to pull me aside—and every other elder who has served in any church—saying, "Let's have a conversation. How well did you do leading the church I gave you? Those were My people. I loaned them to you—how well did you work with them?"

There will not be a line for caterers with Jesus asking, "How did you do with that event?" God's not all that concerned about that. He figures if they got fed, they're taken care of. We didn't kill anybody. That's a plus, right? That's always a win. But when it comes to pastoral work, it is excruciating. We need to recognize that the men who serve in the church are going to labor with all their might to serve the Lord. It's a reminder to the lazy and it's a reminder to the laity: if you think serving God is easy, then you've never done it.

Along with laboring, the second thing leaders are to do is to lead. We read in verse 12 that they *"are over you in the Lord."* That can be hard for Americans to understand, because we are our own people, our own authorities. We don't want people treading on our lives. That's what the American Revolution was all about. We want to be represented, but we want to be able to tell that representation what they can and can't do.

But Paul says these elders have been called to lead the people *"in the Lord."* God is the One Who appoints leaders. We ask you to affirm leaders, but God first put that calling in each one's life. He's the One Who put that calling in my life. He puts leaders into positions of authority, and He's the One Who takes them out. So our job is to lead.

The Greek word for 'lead' is *proistemi*, which literally means to exercise a position of rule or direction, to preside over—or simply to lead. The phrase *"in the Lord"* describes the job as serving as advocates for our God. Your job as a congregation is to follow the leading of the leaders God has put in your midst. They have the job of following Christ, but if they don't do that, God says, "I'll take care of them."

Your first question might be, "What if leaders tell me to do something that's not right?" Within our membership commitment, the elders of our church say, "We want you to follow our leadership. We want you to submit to our leadership, to trust our leading. We want you to respect those in authority over you." But we put a disclaimer in there: you don't have to follow us if we're not following Christ. So we have phrased it, "Follow us as we biblically shepherd." If we tell you to do something outside the will and plan of God, outside the Word of God, you're not to do it. You're to disobey, because it's more important to obey His Word than

to obey man. This obedience comes to a group of people who lead and labor, but who do not lord it over. There's a difference between leading and lording it over. A lord is a guy who stands and points: "Go do this. Go do that." You ask, "Are you coming with us?" "No, I'm going to just stand here and supervise."

Here at Village Bible Church, you will not see that. You're not going to see a bunch of guys who make decisions in a board room who are not doing the work. Our elders are serving at the name tag table, serving in places that nobody will see, serving food, taking out trash, serving on the landscaping team. We need to be in the trenches, not making decisions for our subjects in an ivory tower. When we serve and when we lead in love, your job is then to follow.

Then notice the third thing. We are to labor well, we are to lead well—and then we are to lecture you. Now, that doesn't sound very nice. Paul's phrase is "*admonish you*." The word 'admonish' literally means to get into your head, which is done by teaching something over and over and over again. So every Sunday the elders admonish you through the role that I play. I am not just a pastor preaching; I serve as the "Director of Communications" for the elder team. They have guided me through their understanding of the Scriptures and what we need to be doing, then I'm their Press Secretary. My job each and every Sunday is to get a particular message into your head. So you'll hear over and over again, "Go this way. Go this way. Go this way." Every Sunday we read and admonish you from this Book, so it gets into your head to go the way of God, not the way of man.

The word "admonish" literally means to speak strongly into the life of another. We recognize, as elders but as sinners ourselves, that the world's voice contradicts Scripture, saying, "Be self-centered. Be self-sufficient. Be restless in your pursuit of your desires and preferences, instead of following Christ." We want to lecture over and over and over again, "Go to Christ. Don't go to the way of man."

So we lead, we labor and we lecture. But notice, all of this must be done in love. The church has to be led by leaders who love. I can assure you that when I get together with over 20 elders from all the Village Bible Church campuses, they are a group of men who love this church. They love to serve this church. They are concerned for the people of this church.

We are called to recognize leaders.

So then what's the response? As you have leaders who labor, who lead, who lecture well, and who love, you as a church need to recognize them. Paul says you are to "*respect those who labor among you*." The word 'respect' —*eiδο* in the Greek—literally means to recognize. It implies that you are not ignorant concerning someone. You know who they are, and know them well enough to also know what they are doing. So in order for you to recognize who they are, it's important that we continue to provide opportunities for our elders to be seen.

What Paul is encouraging here is that people get to know their leaders, understanding who they are and not ignoring them. It's easy to ignore leaders, or worse, we see what they're doing and we bad mouth them without really giving them the benefit of the doubt. But if we recognize that they're laboring, leading and lecturing well, in love, then if they make a decision we don't like, we're willing to give them the benefit of the doubt because they are men who are striving to honor God.

We are called to respect leaders.

Besides recognizing their leaders, Paul also says the church is to "*esteem them very highly*." It would have been enough for him to simply say "esteem them." But he adds the modifier, "very highly." There are two ways churches can go when dealing with their pastors and other leaders. As I've catered to other churches, I've been able to see how people respond to their pastors. There are two polar opposite ways they can go.

First, some churches see their pastor as being no different from anybody else. They say, "He's a man like us. He's got sins just like we do. He's got problems and idiosyncrasies, and is no different from any of us. So let's treat him that way." And the pastor is treated just like everybody else who comes and goes—not badly, just generically, without regard for their role or elevating them in any way.

On the other extreme, some churches take "high esteem" too far. We see evidence of this in exorbitant salaries, where the pastor is making a lot more than the average person in the congregation. Or he'll be given lavish opportunities: flying in private jets, going to ritzy places, taking vacations no one else can afford to enjoy. He'll have fringe benefits that are out of this world. He'll be given a title like, "The Most Reverend, Distinguished Bishop of..." He is given places of prominence. I've catered events in churches where the menu isn't finalized until the pastor does the choosing. He decides where he's going to sit, what he will eat and all the finer details. This is a real problem.

Looking through websites during my research, I came upon a church in Chicago that had a big section on their site called “The Pastoral Care Team.” I thought that might be interesting, so I checked to see what their elders were doing. I’m thinking the “Pastoral Care Team” is the pastors caring for the people. I was wrong. I followed that link and it pulled up a list of dozens of individuals whose job description was to give the pastor, his wife and his family the greatest comfort on the Lord’s Day. I thought, “I like that. Let’s talk about that!”

Then there was a job description of all the things that needed to be done. One group of people was to be at the pastor’s home every Sunday morning to serve him breakfast. There was a menu listing what the pastor wanted and how he wanted it fixed—down to how the toast was to be toasted. It mentioned in which particular arm chair the newspaper was to be placed.

Once the pastor and his wife were ready to go to church, another “Pastoral Care Team” member would pick them up, and they would be driven to church. While they were at the church, another team would come to his home to vacuum, dust and fold laundry. You name it—they would take care of it.

The thing I loved was that the “First Lady” of the church loved vacuum marks in her carpeting, and she wanted vacuum marks when she got home, so they were to vacuum in a certain way. When they got home, they would be welcomed with a complete lunch—a roast large enough to not only take care of the pastor and his family, but if he desired to invite another family home from church, there would be ample food for everyone. It also called for leftovers.

I’m telling you, I’m all for this. We’re going to get this ministry locked in here, okay? We’re signing up volunteers after today’s service.

Seriously, here’s the problem: The Bible makes it clear that if elders are to serve as examples of Christ, then we came to serve and not to be served. We need to understand that there’s a balance between the two extremes. No, you’re never going to hear from this pulpit that we need someone to go vacuum our house. That’s why we have children, amen? Not congregations—our own children.

But there’s a balance. The Bible says to take care of your pastors, to honor them with a double honor (1 Timothy 5:17). That is, you are to see that their daily necessities are covered so they can give themselves fully to the Lord’s work. You are to honor them with your words and affirmations. You are to honor them in the giving of gifts. You are to encourage them. In the spectrum—from being treated all the same to being treated as superstars—there is a place in the middle that Paul wanted the Thessalonians, and Village Bible Church, to recognize.

Your elders and leaders are special men who have been given a charge to lead you. Recognize that, respect that, but do that within the confines of what is acceptable. And Paul says to the people, “You’re doing it. You’re honoring them.”

Here at Village Bible Church, we’re currently in the process of doing staff evaluations. One of the questions each staff member has to answer is this: how is the church treating you? Here are some of their responses: “They don’t like us, they don’t take care of us, they don’t minister.....”? No! None of that has been said. Our staff is a very joy-filled staff. When you ask them, “How is Village Bible Church taking care of you?” they say, “They are loving us. They are caring for us. They are meeting our needs. They’re ministering to us as a family.” So my word to you is: keep up the good work. And my word to the elders is: labor for the Lord, knowing that the work you’re doing is right.

Notice why Paul says we are to do this. He says, *“esteem them very highly in love because of their work.”* The reason you want to take care of your elders in a God-honoring way is their work is focused on you. As we do our work—if we’re doing it right—then it’s ministering to you. You want to make sure that the elders’ responsibilities are not a burden, but a joy. The Bible asks, “What good is it to have leaders who are burdened?” Paul says it does you no good to make the leaders’ lives hard, but rather make their service easy. They’re doing Kingdom work for you.

How are we doing at following our leaders? It’s a report card we’ve got to work through.

2. Our relationship with one another

The second question Paul addresses has to do with fellowship. Remember, the report card asks first, “How are you doing with your teacher?” Now the questions are, “Do you play well with others? Can you work well with others?” Now that Paul has described our relationship with leaders, he goes on to say, *“Be at peace among yourselves. And we urge you, brothers, admonish the idle, encourage the fainthearted, help the weak, be patient with them all. See that no one repays anyone evil for evil, but always seek to do good to one another and to everyone.”*

Again, while the people are doing a good job, Paul is pointing out some areas where they might improve. Remember, Timothy has just brought back a report of what was going on in the church. So before Paul closes out this letter, he says, “We need to talk about fellowship.” Why? There’s a saying that goes like this:

To live above, with saints we love, oh that will be glory.

To live below, with saints we know, that’s quite a different story!

You see, we sing the old hymn, “When we all get to heaven, what a day of rejoicing that will be....we’ll sing and shout the victory!” But when we live with one another, and the agitations begin to cause friction, it’s hard to be a follower of Jesus Christ in a community, because people are very different. They have different personalities. They come from different backgrounds. They have different preferences. They have different ideas as to how church should go. Being in a church community isn’t easy. It’s going to cause conflict at times. With staccato reminders, Paul calls the people to evaluate themselves.

We must resolve to live in harmony with each other.

His first call is this: “*Be at peace among yourselves.*” The idea here is that there should be an absence of disturbances. In Romans 12:18, Paul writes, “*So far as it depends on you, live peaceably with all.*” That phrase is very important. It means you bend over backwards to be at peace with people. If you find yourself quick to be angry, quick to be judgmental, quick to attack someone who may have attacked you, Paul says your job and my job is to bend over backwards, stretching as far as we can to find peace instead of anger and wrath, instead of malice and slander, instead of gossip and lying about another individual. We need to resolve in our minds when we come to church, “I am going to bend over backwards, believing the best about people instead of wanting to haul off and hit them when they say dumb things.”

We must reprimand the unruly.

There will be people in the church whom Paul describes as “idle.” That word is a military term that literally refers to a soldier who goes AWOL—absent without leave. The division or platoon is going one direction, but one soldier takes off in a completely different direction. In the first century Greek context, the word paints a picture of one who “likes to color outside the lines.” The unruly or idle person doesn’t accidentally color outside the lines. The unruly one takes the marker and without regard for the lines colors his own way.

Paul says there are people in the church who are going to be unruly or idle or AWOL, coloring outside the lines. What are the lines? The passage is speaking of the lines leadership has established, based on their understanding of Scripture. An unruly person will say, “I don’t like what they’re telling us to do. Who are they to tell me what I can or can’t do? I’m going to color this page however I want.” It’s the job of leaders to reprimand such a person. The ESV uses the word “admonish,” which speaks of getting into the head of someone with some level of force.

Now, this process is also to be used by other people in the church. You might be in a small group where the conversation goes like this: “Those crack-pot elders—what’s this decision they came up with? I can’t believe they did that.” When you hear something like that, you’ve got someone coloring outside the lines and they need to be reprimanded.

We need to remind them, “The leaders are doing their best to labor, to lead and to love us. There’s more than one of them. We’re represented well by a collective body. So before you start coloring outside the lines, recognize that our leaders are good men.” Now, if the leadership is actually not good, that’s a different story. But if the leaders are good, those who are unruly need to be brought back into fellowship in a reprimanding way.

We must reinforce the timid.

In verse 14, Paul tells them to “*encourage the fainthearted.*” Those who are fainthearted lack the energy and boldness which the unruly have. One has too much, the other too little. Among the Thessalonians there apparently were those who were fainthearted. They worried about criticism. They worried about persecution. They worried about failing to follow the Lord. They worried about the future and the coming of their Lord and Savior Jesus Christ. Their worry made them fainthearted, which in the Greek literally means “small-souled” or “little-spirited.” It doesn’t imply a mental deficiency or a spiritual deficiency. They were fretful, discouraged and worried. They felt their resources were too small for the situation in which they found themselves, so they became despondent.

A good example of this is the character Eeyore in *Winnie-the-Pooh*. Eeyore could never see what his friends were talking about. “Oh, I don’t know, guys. I just don’t see it. I think this is going to happen. I think that’s going to happen. It’s not going to end up well.” As we discussed this in our small group, one person said, “Here’s the amazing thing. Eeyore is never left by himself.” Have

you noticed that? His friends—Winnie-the-Pooh and Tigger and Piglet and all the rest—they continually bring Eeyore back into their circle. But what they don't do is give Eeyore the power to define a situation—and we also shouldn't give those who are struggling in their faith the power of definition, or we'll all be despondent.

So our task is to put our arm around the Eeyores in our life who are struggling and worried and anxious and encourage them. We should remind them that we have a God Who is good, Who is going to answer our prayers, Whose plans are greater and higher than our plans and ways are. We must love them and minister to them, all the while reinforcing them in the face of their faintheartedness.

We must reach out to the weak.

Next on Paul's list is *"Help the weak."* These are people who lack strength or bodily vigor. Whether their weakness is physical or spiritual, these are people who are struggling to get through the day. We should come around them, serving them, taking care of them, and making sure they don't fall through the cracks. We need to see that all their needs are met. We build strength into their lives so they're not forgotten or left in the dust.

Paul says there will be some who are going to struggle to get to church, struggle to even leave their houses. We are to go to them to minister to them. The Bible mentions especially serving orphans and widows in their distress (James 1:27). We're to remember and reach out to them.

We must respond patiently to everyone.

Paul writes, *"Be patient to all."* Because there are so many different types of people and personalities, so many different backgrounds, our response is patience with all. The idea is to have a long fuse so you'll never explode. You see, some of us have a very short fuse. We used to play around with firecrackers when I was young, and every once in a while we'd light one that had too short of a fuse. Things got dangerous with short fuses.

Some of us in this church today have short fuses. The second the spark hits the fuse, you're blowing up. Paul says when you engage in community and ministry to others, if you don't have a long fuse, you're going to blow up—and it's going to hurt people. He says, "I want you to have a *makrothumia*." The words suggest a long fuse, a long temper that allows you to be longsuffering and not to explode on others. We need *makrothumia* as parents—long fuses. When our children drive us crazy, we need to not fly off the handle, but have a long fuse, being patient with them.

We must refuse retaliation.

Our patience, Paul says, allows us to refuse to retaliate. *"See that no one repays anyone evil for evil, but always seek to do good to one another and to everyone."* You see, it's going to be really tempting when people wrong us within the church to respond by giving back to them what they gave us. This isn't with unbelievers. This is in the church. Paul says, "No. If you want to be pleasing to God, then you have to be willing to turn away from retaliation, repaying good for evil." In Romans 12:20, he says to heap burning coals on their heads. Love them, even while they're hurting you. Proverbs 15:1 says, *"A soft answer turns away wrath."*

How are you doing in your relationship with others? This is report card time. Are you doing these things? Are you honoring others above yourself?

3. Our relationship with God through worship.

I'm not going to spend a lot of time here, but Paul deals with our worship next. Again he lists things very quickly: *"Rejoice always"* in your worship. *"Pray without ceasing"* in your worship. *"Give thanks in all circumstances"* in your worship, *"for this is the will of God in Christ Jesus for you."* So how are we to live? Remember, worship is not just Sunday morning. Everything we do is an act of worship. *"Whether you eat or drink, or whatever you do, do all to the glory of God"* (1 Corinthians 10:31).

We should be distinguished by joy, devoted to prayer and determined to give thanks.

Paul wants followers of Christ to exhibit these qualities. What a challenge! Think about it. It wouldn't be a problem if the instruction went like this: rejoice sometimes, pray occasionally, and give thanks when you feel like it. But he doesn't say that. The modifiers trip us up and cause us problems. *"Always...continually...in all circumstances."*

This suggests that the real impact of the gospel is going to be seen—not when we recite John 3:16 to somebody, but when they see that we are filled with joy, in all circumstances. Or when they see how dependent we are on prayer, continually. We go to

the Lord in the good times and the bad. We're saturating our minds with a spirit of prayer. And if they realize that no matter what happens we can find ways to give thanks, that is how the gospel will effect change in our communities, our schools and our workplaces.

These simple commands are examples of the true life-changing power of Christ. In this world you will not have joy. In this world you're not going to be devoted to prayer. And in this world, you will live ungrateful lives. But by the gospel, we can change that. We can be moved in such a way that we can live differently. We need to ask ourselves, "How are we doing with our joy, with our prayer and with our thankfulness?"

Paul closes this section by reminding us of three things that can hinder our worship:

We can hamper our progress by dismissing the Spirit's leading.

The Spirit should be leading you right now to make some changes, to do some things differently, to evaluate and reorganize certain aspects of your life. If you are holding the Spirit back, stiff-arming Him as He draws closer, then you will not live these things out. With the areas of improvement my boys should have in school, if they decide the teacher doesn't know what she's talking about or that she's against them or doesn't like them, then nothing is going to change.

Some of you hold God at arm's length. "I'm not going to change. It's not my problem; it's your problem." Paul makes it clear: "*Do not quench the Spirit.*" The Spirit is at work in the life of the believer. Let Him speak to you and be ready to change where you need to change.

We can hamper our progress by discounting biblical preaching.

Verse 20 says, "*Do not despise prophecies, but test everything; hold fast what is good.*" Don't discount the role of biblical preaching. When Paul spoke earlier of the end times, some were saying, "Who cares about prophecy? At the end of the day it really doesn't matter." Paul says, "No. All the teaching of God's Word is important and right. But hold to what is true, and let go of what is not." There are areas in our lives we need to let go of, and there are things we need to hold on to. How can we discern which is which? Through godly teaching and the preaching of His Word.

We can hamper our progress by delighting in our sin.

Finally, if you want to live right—if you want to come away with a solid report card—the Bible says, "*Abstain from every form of evil.*" We cannot delight in our sin and then think we're going to experience God's best in our lives. We must abstain from all sorts of evil. We've already discussed that, so I'm not going to spend a lot of time here, but we know where we should be and what we should be doing. The question is: will we live in light of the gospel?

We can turn away when our report cards come and say, "God, You don't know what You're talking about." Or we can say, "You know what, God? You're a good Judge. You're a good Teacher. There are some areas I need to work on. I'm going to prayerfully ask the Spirit to lead me, helping me do better in my pursuit of You. I want to follow You in greater ways."

When we open ourselves up to His evaluation, then the Spirit will work in us, and we will realize a more intimate and closer walk with Him—and we'll be blessed in the process.