

1 THESSALONIANS 5:12-28

“VACUUM PACKED THEOLOGY”

Once a pastor officiated a funeral for a man named Clarence. He comforted his congregation with beautiful descriptions of the resurrection. Quoting 1 Thessalonians 4 he painted a thrilling picture of the trumpet sounding - of corpses rising triumphantly from the dead, clothed in the glory of God - *you could almost hear the voice of the archangel...* Toward the close of his service the pastor moved from the pulpit to the first few pews to comfort the family. He quoted Jesus... “Let not your heart be troubled. You believe in God believe also in me...” He reassured the grieving family, “Clarence has now entered his heavenly mansion.”

Then for the next 20 minutes the pastor actually preached to the open casket. He spoke to the corpse. In fact, he addressed him so boldly every time he paused the congregation half-way expected Clarence to answer. He began, “Clarence, there were lots of things we should’ve said to you, but you got away too fast.” He told story after story of wonderful acts of kindness Clarence had performed. *At last, the pastor reached a crescendo.* He shouted toward the deceased, “That’s it, Clarence! There’s nothing more to say. And when there’s nothing more to say, there’s only one thing to say... Good night... Good night, Clarence!” The pastor grabbed the lid of the coffin and got ready to slam it shut, “Good night, Clarence!” (Boom!) By this time the congregation was in a state of shock.

That’s when ever so slowly, the pastor raised his bowed head. He had a huge grin on his face. He said, “Good night, Clarence, because I know God is going to give you a good morning!” That’s when the choir jumped in and starting singing, “On that great morning, we shall rise, we shall rise.” No one else could *sit still or remain silent.* Everyone started dancing in the aisles and hugging each other. The joy of the Lord filled the house! With nothing but the promise of the resurrection the pastor had turned a funeral into a party. Even in the shadow of death a Christian can laugh, sing, and dance. *And this is where we should be at this point in the book...*

Over the last half of chapter 4, and the first half of chapter 5, Paul assures us of the hope we have in Jesus! *For our spirit there’s hope – “to be absent from the body is to be present with the Lord...” And for our body there’s hope –* when Jesus returns, the dead in Christ will rise first, and we who are alive will be snatched away. We’ll all live forever with Jesus! This should be reason enough to laugh, and sing, and dance! Paul is certainly excited. He has much more to say...

But Paul had a practical problem. Recall, by the end of chapter 3 Paul was wrapping up his thoughts. Chapter 4 began, “Finally then, brethren...” But what happens to most pastors was an issue for Paul – *he caught a second wind.* The hope of the rapture and the coming of the Day of the Lord stirred him. He ended up elaborating for another chapter-and-a-half. *Here’s what I think...* At this point in his writing, Paul looked at the space left on his scroll and realized he was running out of room to write. A ancient scroll was a limited canvass. Paul is nearing it’s end, yet he hasn’t finished.

Years earlier, when Paul first visited Thessalonica and planted the church, he had to leave them abruptly. Some thugs ran him out of town. His ministry was interrupted midstream, and it had left a few holes in the theology of the church at Thessalonica. That’s why he wrote these letters. But now he’s running into the same problem. Before he was run out of town. Now he’s running out of room... *He wants to say all he has to say!*

So from this point forward Paul compresses his thoughts. He squeezes some *big ideas* into a *few words*. You could say *Paul vacuum packs these verses...* **Verse 16** is two words – **verse 17** is three – **verse 20** just four. Here's some *freeze dried doctrine* – some *wisdom concentrate*. I've titled today's message, "[Vacuum Packed Theology](#)." To conserve space Paul condenses some deep truths into a series of pithy statements.

We begin in verse 12, "[And we urge you, brethren, to recognize those who labor among you, and are over you in the Lord and admonish you, and to esteem them very highly in love for their work's sake.](#)" And every pastor who reads these words shouts, "[Amen! Preach it, Paul! Hallelujah!](#)" First notice, Paul "[urges...](#)" This isn't a casual *suggestion* he hopes they'll mull over and act on later. It's more *urgent* – that's why he "[urges...](#)" It is urgent that all churches recognize its pastors and leaders.

Did you know the drop-out rate for pastors is astronomical? Focus on the Family reports that of all men who enter the ministry only 1 out of 20 remains a pastor until retirement age. The stresses on a pastor and his family are enormous. As if life in a fish bowl isn't enough pressure, a pastor's world is full of natural predators. He wears a target on his back. And here's where some recognition and appreciation, goes a long way. Hey, I know this firsthand - when I receive a letter thanking me for being some help - I keep it, and pull it out over and over. A good thank-you has the power to keep a pastor going for a couple of months. It refuels his tank!

This is why Paul "[urges](#)" the church to show their pastor a little love. Again, I like Paul's wording. He doesn't *suggest*, but neither does he *command*. If you have to order someone to be appreciative - if it's not heartfelt – if it has to be conjured up or coerced – it defeats the purpose.

Once, a church was hosting an event to show their pastor and his wife their appreciation. They sent out a reminder, "[Dear Pastor Ron, please remember next week is our Pastor Appreciation Dinner. Tell your wife we have her down for a meat, a dessert, a gallon of tea, and a bag of rolls.](#)" Obviously, when you have an appreciation dinner, without showing any real appreciation, you miss the point. That's why Paul doesn't *suggest OR command* – rather he "[urges](#)" the Thessalonians to recognize their leaders.

And notice how Paul identifies a pastor who deserves appreciation. He "[labors among you...](#)" and "[watches over you...](#)" and "[admonishes you...](#)" First of all, he "[labors among you.](#)" He works hard and sets an example. Despite popular opinion, a pastor doesn't just work a few hours on Sunday. **Myth busters** followed me around and proved that notion false. *Here's my work week...* Right out of the gate I've got two Bible Studies to prepare and teach every week... more if there's a funeral, or wedding, or I teach elsewhere... then I talk to church members about their problems, and answer questions, and manage a staff, and make hospital visits, and oversee church finances, and monitor the worship ministry, and make big decisions regarding our school, and report to the elders, and mentor other pastors, and write books, and plan events, and reach out to non-Christians, and keep up the facilities, and manage the staff (*didn't I say that already?*)

Well, speaking of our staff, they labor too! Here're the job descriptions... **Pastor:** Leaps tall buildings in a single bound. More powerful than a locomotive. Faster than a speeding bullet. Walks on water. Hotline to God. **Assistant Pastor:** Able to leap short buildings in a single bound. As powerful as a switch engine. Just as fast as a speeding bullet. Walks on water if the sea is calm. Talks with God when the pastor is asleep. **Worship Leader:** Leaps short buildings with a running start. Almost as powerful as a switch engine. Faster than a speeding BB. Walks on water if he knows where the stumps are. And is occasionally addressed by God. **Youth Pastor:** Runs into small buildings. Rides the Pink Pig.

Not as fast as a squirt gun. Knows how to use a water fountain. Mumbles to himself. **Church Secretary:** Lifts the building to walk under it. Kicks locomotives off the track. Catches speeding bullets in her teeth. Freezes water with a single glance. When God speaks, she says, "May I ask who is calling?" I hope you appreciate all the folks who "labor among you..."

But a good pastor also "watches over you." He isn't just *working beside you*, but he also *watches over you*. And this is vital. You don't want a pastor who only sees from your point-of-view. You need a pastor who steps back from the day to day, and keeps a sharp eye on the big picture. A pastor's job is to set the over-all direction and vision of the ministry. He's an overseer. He watches over the church.

And third, he "admonishes." It means "to caution or reproof gently." A pastor has the authority and responsibility to speak God's truth in love... Commentator Leon Morris writes of this word "admonish" - "It's tone is brotherly, but big brotherly..." A pastor has the role of an elder brother. I'm nobody's "Lord" or "father" – God is your only father. A pastor is just a big brother. My job is to keep you out of trouble and teach you the ropes.

And again, when we find church leaders who *labor*, and *oversee*, and *admonish*, how should we treat them? Paul tells us, "esteem them very highly in love for their work's sake." Don't just pass on the sappy platitudes you'd find on the back of a Hallmark Card - recognize and appreciate "their work." Everybody likes to be appreciated for what they do and contribute. In many ways the health of a church is dependent on the strength of its leaders. And we're certainly stronger when we're assured of your support.

If you really want to express your gratitude toward your pastor, then take heed to Paul's next words, verse 13, "Be at peace among yourselves." Here's how to bless your pastor - *drop your pettiness and get along with each other*. Nothing encourages a pastor more than when people love and serve... Nothing breaks his heart quicker than *bickering among believers*. A pastor's job is never more tiresome than when *he feels he has to do* for the church what the people should be doing among themselves... But when people *build bridges among each other - and take initiative to greet, and serve, and reach out, and care* – this is the pastor's greatest reward!

Well, verses 12-13 tell us to appreciate those who are in authority *over us*. While verse 14 encourages us to deal with those who are *out-of-order*. "Now we exhort you, brethren, warn those who are unruly..." The word "unruly" means "insubordinate." It was used of a soldier who refuses to keep rank. He marches off-beat. Imagine a military parade - 400 troops are marching in sync, but there's one soldier out of step – you don't see the 400 men marching in unison, you only see the one unruly soldier. *Why does somebody always insist on marching to his own drummer?*

Some people refuse to get in step because they see something amiss. If a beef is legitimate, then address it appropriately... *or find a new church*. But there are other people who could attend the Church at Jerusalem, and have Peter as a pastor, and they'd still find fault. It's the pride in their heart that keeps their feet out of step. They refuse to submit to even God-ordained authority. Paul encourages us to "warn those who are unruly..."

That means if you run across an "unruly" person, and he or she wants to bend your ear... "Hey, let me tell you what that ole Pastor James did..." *Don't even listen!* Tell him if he has a problem with James he should go to James. If he can't work it out, go to Pastor Sandy, or the

elders – *but you're not going to listen to someone's complaint!* When you lend a sympathetic ear to an “*unruly*” person, it's like pouring gas on a brushfire. And you're the one who's most likely to get burned.

One of the keys to being an effective church is learning how to interact with *all* people. Not just cooperative, easy-going folks, but *difficult people* as well. Most organizations eliminate problem people. They cull them out. *Not the church...* we're mandated by God to include everybody Jesus saves. The “*unruly*,” the “*fainthearted*,” the “*weak*” – have a place with us. Yet difficult folks should be handled properly. He says, “*Warn those who are unruly, comfort the fainthearted, uphold the weak, be patient with all.*”

The Greek word translated “*fainthearted*” means “*small-souled*.” Here's a shy, timid person. He's fearful. She lives within self-imposed boundaries. Last week I spoke to one of the five ladies who shared her testimony at the Christmas Tea. She told me this had been a stretching experience for her. She had never shared her testimony in public before... I like the way she phrased it... She told me, “*God is asking me to take a big girl pill!*” And I comforted her, but not by commiserating. *I said she could do it!* I gave her a cup of water to wash down *the big girl pill* God was making her swallow. This is the comfort we need – encouraging, challenging comfort. God wants “*small-souled*” people to become “*big-hearted*” people!

But you don't grow a *big-heart* by treating a person like a *big baby*. A difficult person doesn't need pity or pampering. Yes, you “*uphold the weak...*” but with the idea of teaching them to stand on their own two feet. Imagine a physical therapist working with an athlete recovering from an injury. At first the painful therapy feels like torture. You're pushing the limits in the weakened area... But you're rebuilding muscle, flexibility, strength. And this is how you mentor a troubled person. “*Uphold the weak...*”

Notice too, the words, “*be patient with all...*” There are three keys to working with difficult people: “*Patience... Patience... And more patience...*” We just need to show the same patience toward others that Jesus has shown us... *Healing takes time... People take time... Maturity takes time...* Some things can't be rushed, and spiritual maturity is one of them. The OKJ translates the term “*fainthearted*,” as “*feeble-minded*.” That's a better description of me. I'm a slow learner. Sometimes it takes me hearing a truth – not once, or twice, but multiple times before it clicks. Again, that's why I need patience, and this is why I need to show patience.

And verse 15, “*See that no one renders evil for evil to anyone, but always pursue what is good both for yourselves and for all.*” Our world is all about exchanging evil for evil. Hit me and I'll hit you back... It's tit for tat... This is what makes the world go round... evil is a chain reaction.

Until somebody smacks a Christian. We're God's shock absorbers! We react, we fight back - but we take the animosity and angst out of circulation, and exchange it with love. We put back something good... In this way we're changing the world one interaction at a time.

Well, here's how to deal with difficult folk: “*warn grumblers, challenge the small-souled, help the injured recover, give everybody enough time to grow, and when somebody pushes back with evil, counter it with good...*” Next, Paul will tell us how to maintain a healthy relationship with God. He'll talk about *joy, prayer, praise - spiritual stuff*. But just remember before Paul fine tunes us *spiritually* he expects us to be right *relationally*.

I know folks with zero tolerance for difficult people, *yet they pretend to be tight with God!* In fact, they're mean to their wife – and neglect their children – yet they walk around with a pompous self-righteousness. Don't be fooled by a knucklehead who claims to love God, but hates the people in his life. He obviously, doesn't know what real spirituality is about. The true measure of our Christianity is how we get along with people.

Actually, compared to difficult people, our relationship with God is a breeze. Beginning in verse 16, Paul tells us how to interact with God... He begins with two words, "**Rejoice always...**" When you live in fellowship with God there's always a reason to rejoice. Even in life's darkest moments – even in the most painful situations – if God is a part of your life's equation there's always be a reason to take joy.

Happiness is based on circumstances, but joy comes from God. Joy is a fruit of the Holy Spirit. God can bring uninhibited joy even in difficult times. I think of Paul and Silas in the Philippian jail. *They were arrested unfairly - beaten with rods – their bodies stretched in the stocks – hungry rats nibbling at their toes.* Yet Paul and Silas were found at midnight singing and praising God. Even in the worst pain they were filled with joy.

Throughout the Bible, "**wine**" – the fruit of the vine - is a symbol for "**joy.**" And it's no accident, that you don't get sweet wine until you first crush the grapes. Sometimes our deepest joys are found in our heaviest trials. I love God's promise in Hebrews 13:5, "**I will never leave you nor forsake you.**" God is always with us. That's why we can "**Rejoice always.**"

American playwright, Eugene O'Neill, wrote a play entitled, "**Lazarus Laughed.**" It was about Lazarus' life after Jesus raised him from the dead. There's a scene in Bethany. A dinner where Lazarus, his friends, and Jesus all attend. Everyone has noticed that Lazarus is a changed man. There's a look in his eye – a far-away gaze. There's no more worry or fear. After dinner, Lazarus kneels before Jesus and kisses his feet. As Jesus walks away, Lazarus starts to laugh softly. It's as if the two men are privy to an inside joke. O'Neill puts the following words into the mouth of one of his characters, "**Such a laugh I never heard! It made my ears drunk! It was like wine! Though I was half-dead with fright, I found myself laughing, too.**" In light of the resurrection and the soon return of Jesus, *no matter how down we get, we're about to go up!* There's always a reason to rejoice!

Then Paul commands, "**Pray without ceasing..**" In other words, maintain an open-ended conversation with God. Pray and never say, "**Amen.**" Now, there is such a thing as a "**closet prayer**" – where we shut out all distractions and focus in on our communication with God alone. But here Paul is commanding "**constant prayer.**" All throughout the day – under the surface of our lives – we can carry on a uninterrupted dialogue with God.

It's interesting the implications of this verse. We're told "**pray without ceasing,**" but God would never command of us anything we can't do. That helps narrow down what constitutes true prayer. **Prayer must be more than words** - I can't *verbalize without ceasing* or I wouldn't eat or sleep... **Prayer must be more than posture** - I can't close my eyes or raise my hands behind the wheel of a car, yet that's a good time to pray... **Prayer must be more than a place** - I can't be at church 24/7... Real prayer is an unbroken stream of thought between us and God.

"Rejoice always, pray without ceasing..." And in verse 18, "**In everything give thanks; for this is the will of God in Christ Jesus for you.**" Notice, Paul doesn't say "**for everything give thanks.**" That would be difficult at best. How can I give thanks for the death of a child? Or a home

fire? Or a serious accident? Maybe years down the road and after deep reflection... I might be able to salvage a good from the devastating circumstances. But that's not the point here. Paul doesn't say "for everything give thanks," but "in everything give thanks..." Even in the wake of a terrible loss, even with questions swirling through my head... I can still hold on to what I do know... *I can thank God He loves me... that I'm forgiven... that I'm His child... that I have a home in heaven... that my blessings in Christ can never be stolen... that the Holy Spirit ministers to me inexplicable joy...* I can even be thankful "that all things work together for good to those who love God, to those who are the called according to His purpose."

And understand, "this is the will of God in Christ Jesus for you..." For the Christian every day should be Thanksgiving! It's interesting, the word "gratitude" is a derivative of "grace." Our response to God's amazing grace is *gratitude!*... Not for everything, but in everything, let's give thanks.

And verse 19, "Do not quench the Spirit." As Paul said earlier don't get caught off-guard. Jesus is coming back soon. We need to work while it's still day. And the Holy Spirit is our helper. With Him nothing is impossible. Through the power of the Holy Spirit God shook the Roman empire. In a few short years He humbled Rome. Pagan Rome gave way to Christianity. And the Church had nothing going for it, except the power of the Spirit.

In reality, this is still the only real advantage a church possesses. We also have this power of the Spirit - *but we can sin against the Holy Spirit and shoot ourselves in the foot.* There are ways we can hinder the Holy Spirit and limit His work. The greatest inhibitor is our lack of faith. Understand how Christian ministry operates. We don't provide the spark that changes a life. The power isn't ours. It's God's effort from start to finish. All we do is provide a environment conducive for the Spirit to move.

Revival is like a fire. You can't create a fire on your own. A spark, and a source of oxygen, and combustible material have to join to produce a fire. But we can either fan the flame – or we can douse it with our unbelief. Paul is saying don't do anything to snuff out the work of the Spirit...

He even goes further in verse 20, "Do not despise prophecies..." A prophecy occurs when God speaks to us through the spontaneous words of another believer. It's a personal message from God conveyed through a third party. Your friend makes a statement, and you know its from God. It might sting, or heal, but it's a "Thus says the Lord..." moment. It's an exciting form of communication. *God is calling you out!*

But prophecy is also a risky form of communication. Just down the road from Thessalonica, in the city of Corinth, believers were going nuts - abusing and misusing this and other spiritual gifts. They were posing their own notions as the will of God. They'd gone overboard. The Corinthians were the Pentecostals. Their church was an anything goes, confusing environment... Whereas, the Thessalonians were the Baptists. They took the opposite approach. They just said "no" to prophecy. But both groups were wrong. There was a balance needed. You should never throw the baby out with the bath water. *Be open... but be on guard...*

Add verse 21 to verse 20 and Paul adds what was lacking, "Do not despise prophecies. Test all things; hold fast what is good." Don't discourage legitimate spiritual gifts. God still dials us up through prophecy. He uses human mouthpieces, *but along with humans come errors.* That's why you can be open, but not gullible. Just because someone adds the prefix, "Thus says the Lord..." doesn't make it so. Check it out

with Scripture. Check it out with the Church. Is it compatible with the nature of Jesus? **If so**, take it as God's word! **If not**, it might've been the pizza.

And then Paul adds, verse 22, **"Abstain from every form of evil."** Some evils are easy to identify. There's a skull and crossbones on the label. Other evils come incognito. *Overtime with a woman at work... or an association with an unsavory friend...* Some evils even dress up and come to church. We need to abstain from all evil - *the blatant and the bashful*.

Paul closes his letter with a benediction, verse 23, **"Now may the God of peace Himself sanctify you completely; and may your whole spirit, soul, and body be preserved blameless at the coming of our Lord Jesus Christ."** Some Scriptures divide human personality into four parts. In Mark 12:30 we're told **"love the LORD your God with all your heart, with all your soul, with all your mind, and with all your strength."** *Heart, soul, mind, strength*. Other passages such as Romans 6 and 1 Corinthians 7 divide the nature of man into two - *inner man* and *outer man* - or *spirit and body*. But here Paul sees us as threefold - **"spirit, soul, and body."**

Here's Paul's point, however you carve him up, he wants every part to belong to Jesus. He desires to be God's - not just part and parcel - but **"completely."** He wants his *entire* life preserved and ready for Jesus' return. *Don't you want the same?* What a thought, that one day we'll stand before Jesus and be declared **"blameless."** Notice, Paul doesn't ask to be preserved **"sinless."** He knows in this life he'll slip up and sin. But he can be **"blameless."** He's counting on the blood of Jesus to cleanse, and cover, and blot out any guilt or blame. Paul intends to one day stand **"blameless"** before Jesus, *and so do I*.

I love verse 24, **"He who calls you is faithful, who also will do it."** Hear about the guy who walked into a fancy restaurant? He wasn't wearing a necktie so the maître d' refused to seat him. The man was livid. He stomped out to his car, and draped his jumper cables around his neck. As he re-entered the restaurant he shouted at the maître d', **"Is this good enough?"** The guy replied, **"Yea, but you better not start anything!"**

Understand, what God starts in you, He intends to finish! He's faithful to **"sanctify"** us and make us His own. He's faithful to keep us **"blameless."** When will we learn that God's forgiveness knows no bounds!

Verse 25, **"Brethren, pray for us."** Here's how to bless and thank your pastor for what he does... **pray for him!** *This pastor needs your prayers!* **"Greet all the brethren with a holy kiss."** *If you're a big burly guy don't take this literally.* JB Phillips renders it, **"Give a handshake all around..."** Try a **"holy kiss"** on some guys, and could get punched in the *kisser*. Even today, there are cultures where the common greeting - *even among men* - is a peck on the cheek... And if we were in the Middle East or Mother Russia I probably wouldn't mind, *but we're not!* We're in the ATL. And the proper greeting in South Gwinnett is a *handshake* - maybe a *hug*. *If you score a touchdown to win the game we can hug.* But when we're greeting each other a warm and sincere handshake will do the trick.

But don't miss the point, *greetings count*, no matter what form they take. After you've battled the flesh, the world, and the devil all week it's nice to know you're still welcome in God's family. You come in *beaten up* and *bruised up*, but you still *belong*. We still accept you. You're still one of us. You might not have had the best week... but you're still at home.

Paul ends his letter to the Thessalonians, “I charge you by the Lord that this epistle be read to all the holy brethren.” The NT letters predated the printing press by 1400 years. In Paul’s day *God’s Word* was conveyed through public reading. Few people *read the Word* - they *heard the Word*. How blessed are we to have a half-dozen Bibles sitting on our shelf?

Paul closes, “The grace of our Lord Jesus Christ be with you. Amen.” And there we have Paul’s first letter to the Thessalonians.

I hope you’re ready. The Day of the Lord comes as a thief in the night. Jesus is coming for a Church that turned from idols - that shared their faith - that received the Word – that endured persecution... that maintained their purity... We’ve read about that Church, now let’s be such a Church!