

Signing Off by Moving On in Grace (1 Thess 5:25-28)

Today we approach the final verses of what is generally considered to be the first inspired letter to a church in the NT. Paul is signing off, as it were.

But in so understanding it we must not think of it as we tend to do when we read letters – so often we take the ‘yours sincerely,’ etc as purely a convention, and so we tend not even to read it, yet alone seriously think of it in terms of it being a statement of the persons alleged motivation and ethics in writing the letter.

Yet if you are like me in closing my letters myself I struggle to find just the right way to avoid the air of formality where possible – especially and all the more so when writing to other Christians to write in some way that encourages while exhorting them in the things of the Lord Jesus and His sovereign grace.

In coming then to these words let us get out of our 21st century habit, and remember that every word of the Bible is important and instructive. Here we will still find biblical truth that the Holy Spirit wants us to come to grips with for our lives and ministries.

Now what does the Word of God tell us here? In concluding Paul returns to the note that so permeates and comes to the foreground in this letter – that of our relationship with one another because of our relationship with Jesus Christ. Paul is careful to finish with the display of his and their common need and yet resource of the grace of God.

In returning to the fact of our relationship together as Christians Paul is stressing:

1. Our Responsiveness – vv.25-26

We notice in vv.25-26 two separate, yet united, issues.

The two key words here are *Pray* and *Greet*. What unites them is that they both express the way in which we respond to others.

We further note that these are both requests that come to us with all the power of passion, indeed with the force of an apostolic and therefore gospel command.

(1) PRAYER: Paul calls for prayer. Paul is not so proud – or foolish – to think he is beyond the need of the prayers of the congregation. Though he is an Apostle and has seen much fruit from his ministry, he knows that he cannot labour and will not see fruit of labour without divine involvement. He knows he is daily in a spiritual war and faced with demands beyond the ability of any person. He knows that the only way he can do what he is called to do is by the grace of God, and that the way to lay hold of that grace is by believing prayer. And so he prays; nor is it beneath him to ask for the help of the brethren. And so he calls people to pray for the missionary team in their labours.

The book of Acts records God’s mighty acting in sending an angel to release Peter from prison (Acts 12:2–9). Thomas Watson underlined the effectiveness of prayer when he said, ‘*The angel fetched Peter out of prison, but it was prayer that fetched the angel.*’

Prayer should be seen to hold a dear and special place in the life of the local church. Prayer is not merely a private privilege, it is a corporate privilege – and responsibility.

Prayer is not an add-on task to everything else a church does – preaching, evangelism, diaconate work... No, as Andrew Young observed, ‘*It forms at the very heart of the work itself as God’s appointed means of obtaining His necessary power.*’ In fact, we learn here that there is a special need for preachers of God’s Word to be aided by the prayers of God’s people.

Have you seen it that way? That it is a responsibility and privilege to pray together? Do you value and engage in prayer during the church’s worship? Do you pray for and across the congregation during the week? Are you particularly praying for the work of the Kingdom and for Kingdom workers?

(2) GREET: Paul also knows that he can’t be with them, but wants to show his love for them in a tangible and culturally acceptable way. So he asks them to do for him what he can’t do because of distance – “*greet one another with a holy kiss.*” Now the emphasis here is on the greeting, not the kissing.

Kissing was a custom of the times, a way to demonstrate affection to another, showing that you regarded them as a friend. Early church practise was to do just that (but men to men, women to women); but sadly in later years due to a degree of unseemly enthusiasm that crept in as it was extended to men-women the Church Councils actually banned the practise. That it must be “*holy*” shows Paul was well aware of the

temptation for inappropriate practice, that of a lecherous spirit!

The issue though that we need to focus in on is not the kissing, though, but on the greeting. Paul's desire was to greet one another in a way that reflected the reality and wonder of their mutual relationship in Jesus Christ.

Our parallel, culturally, might be a warm well-meaning handshake (as distinct from limp and indifferent). In some circles maybe even an appropriate kind of hug (sideways or a-frame). Yet never imposing our comfort zone or cultural expressions upon others. But again, to merely transpose handshake or hug here is to miss God's point. ***The underlying principle is that of an outward demonstration of fellowship love.*** Paul is not talking about a Christian custom, but the need to show in a practical way that you really care for one another, of genuine relationship, a level of openness, of trust and commitment, of genuine friendship that operates outside of this place of meeting and yet is heightened and celebrated here.

'How wonderful it is to realize that in the church we enter into relationships that will literally last forever and engage in personal ministry that will make an eternity of difference.' (Richard Phillips)

Now let us step back and think about all this for a moment. The thing that strikes me is that this is hardly what we might be tempted to call a 'spiritual' activity. ***Praying – yes, but greeting?*** Yet Paul groups them together, making a big thing of it, stressing that a young church needs to cultivate real friendships, close caring relationships. How more important it is many older churches because they have forgotten this need.

I know that distance and age-related difficulties, even time-poorness are genuine concerns for a congregation like ours, but we are to find ways – and we must think of how we might do even better at it.

2. Our Responsibility – v.27

Put simply, our responsibility is to maximise the proclamation of the Word of God.

Notice how Paul is emphasizing the primacy of God's Word in the life of the church. He wants his letter read in the church. But also wants steps taken so that those who are absent should not miss out, so that they also will hear it.

Now the Word of God here is placing this responsibility on the whole church. Indeed Paul uses a very strong word – "*charge*," which means put under oath, solemnly require.

Paul is putting the church, leaders and members on their honour to ensure that the letter was read, to make sure that those who missed out were identified so that they could also hear. So important did he consider his apostolic teaching for their spiritual good. This is not rhetorical egotism, it is rather an expression both of his love for God's people but also an awareness of their need of this Word. That what is needed and suited to one local congregation is needed and suited to all, despite other differences of place and time.

That is why this responsibility is being pressed so forcibly on them. So important is all that he had written none should miss out on hearing it, on receiving the blessings that flow through it. John Calvin on this text condemned those church authorities that withhold the Scriptures from the people.

Do you understand this responsibility? It places on us a two-fold obligation:

1. ***To do all within our power to be under the regular ministry of the Word of God as it is read and explained.*** Church attendance, in other words, is not to be haphazard but consistent. That is so because of Who we worship in our gathering, but also because we understand that by this means God is communicating directly with us.

2. ***To help those who were not here to come to some understanding of the message.*** Passing on of sermon notes is surely a most useful tool, as is drawing attention to the sermons on the church's website. But can we not also tell them something of how God ministered to you through it, by which you may encourage them to read or listen.

They may be sick, they may be away, but they must not be left outside the circle of truth or fellowship. Don't leave it up to someone else – that's how people fall through the cracks. Can you make a pact with another believer so that where one is away the other exercises this pastoral support for them, brings the word to them that they may too know some of its blessings? That it is not to big-note the preacher, but to appreciate the role of the Word both for ourselves and in love for others.

It also reminds us that '*The Christian life is not for dabblers.*' It was to be taken seriously, and the Word read and explained was to be given a high priority in our lives. You don't just pick and choose when you will attend, or

what you will attend. It calls for commitment on our part – a commitment to learn and to grow in grace and knowledge. Therefore let us be those who value the Bible as our greatest earthly treasure!

3. Our Resource – v.28

Here we see Paul ends as he began – highlighting the reality of God's grace.

As James Denny points out '*Whatever God has to say to us ... begins and ends with grace.*' Further he asks, '*What more could one soul wish for another than that the grace of the Lord Jesus Christ should be with it?*' Nothing, says Paul.

Grace is clearly a favourite word of Paul's, the keynote of his theology – and also of his longing for them. We are saved by grace, we live by grace, all that we do magnifies grace. It is that which believers long for more of, it is the secret of our power – grace – God's unmerited activity in our life.

Our attention is being drawn to it as our ongoing need but also its ongoing reality. It is our resource to live as God's people. Here is our strength.

In effect what God's Word is highlighting the availability of God's grace

Paul does not send us, or himself, on a potential errand. A shop advertises a bargain, but we never know that there will be enough for us. Have you ever queued up waiting for Aldi to open, hoping you may get that bargain? Well there is no need of such panic here.

Indeed it is available in the One through whom we have been brought to God, the Lord Jesus Christ. That is why the Holy Spirit in Heb 4:16 calls us to the throne of God with boldness through Christ. Why? For there we will find "*grace and help in a time of need.*" That is the same thing. It is saying that God has not left us to ourselves in seeking to be the Christians we ought to be, in seeking to be the church fellowship that we ought to be. He is here with us, ready and willing to help us, in and by the Lord Jesus.

But also this reminds us of the sufficiency of God's grace.

Not only does God delights in being gracious to us, as we desire it and look to God He will give us grace sufficient to our need.

Yes, there may be fellow Christians you find hard to relate to let alone get close to, but it is not impossible. Yes, you may find it hard to pray for them, they may be more like complaints about them, but it is not impossible to have a heart for them in prayer.

God's grace is not only an available grace, it is an empowering and enabling grace. Our resource is God, and His supplies are richer than the need, and are never ending or depleted by the strength of the need.

So as we leave this letter we are called to look to God. We ought not look at ourselves or at others without clearly looking to God first and last. What a comfort to know that this is what He will bless: *that as we act by grace we will be a holy, healthy and joyous fellowship in Christ.*

As we leave this letter – even as we leave the worship service – we do so being assured also of the same grace of God. How we need it!

So while Paul is signing off his letter, let us sign on – to his and its intent and spirit. May God increasingly make us so. Amen.