“You Cannot Hide the Soul”: 1 Thessalonians 5:12-22

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In Herman Melville’s *Moby-Dick*, a wonderful line occurs when Ishmael, after spending the first night with his future friend and companion, sees Queequeg the next morning at breakfast. Melville describes Ishmael’s observations in this way:

> With much interest I sat watching him. Savage though he was, and hideously marred about the face—at least to my taste—his countenance yet had a something in it which was by no means disagreeable. *You cannot hide the soul.* Through all his unearthly tattooings, I thought I saw the traces of a simple honest heart; and in his large, deep eyes, fiery black and bold, there seemed tokens of a spirit that would dare a thousand devils.¹

It is that line, “you cannot hide the soul,” which seems to pulse through Paul’s very direct and succinct admonitions in 1 Thessalonians 5:12-22. If, as Paul believed, the time was near for the return of the Lord (1 Thess 4:13-18), then one should be concerned about how one is living his or her life in this interim period. For Paul each person’s life was a miniature apocalypse, that is, each person reveals his or her spirit before God, community, and society. Therefore, how one lived was of utmost importance, because “you cannot hide your soul.” For this reason, Paul ends his letter with a series of explicit and direct moral exhortations intended to guide the infant Christians at Thessalonica into the proper way in which to bare their souls to each other and to the world.

**Moral Exhortations**

Moral Exhortation is a major component for much of Paul’s writing and is typically called parenesis. Parenesis is not an unfamiliar concept since at its most basic level it is simply advice. The advice columns of “Dear Abby” or the ubiquitous, pop-psychology, radio-talk shows are contemporary examples. For either the modern version or the ancient form of advice, parenesis can be defined

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the same. It is advice either to start doing some commendable action or to stop some reprehensible behavior.

While parenesis can be defined as starting or stopping particular behaviors, the strategies to motivate such behaviors varied in the Greco-Roman world of Paul. He could employ three different tactics to inculcate parenesis: memory, model, and maxim. With memory Paul could call his listener's attention back to what he had already taught, "For you know what instructions we gave you through the Lord Jesus" (1 Thess 4:2). With model, Paul could demonstrate in a vivid way behavior to imitate, "we were gentle among you, like a nurse taking care of her children" (1 Thess 2:7). Sometimes these strategies could be combined as when memory and model are joined in 1 Thessalonians 2:9, "For you remember our labor and toil, brothers and sister, we worked night and day, that we might not burden any of you . . . ."  

For the verses at the center of this exposition, 5:12-22, the most significant parenesis strategy is the use of maxims. Maxims were short sayings like the popular ones of the eighteenth century associated with Poor Richard's Almanac, such as, "a penny saved is a penny earned," and "small leaks sink great ships." The aphoristic bits of advice found in 1 Thessalonians were especially tailored for those in a society in which ninety-seven percent of the people were illiterate. For most of those who gathered around Paul's letter when it was originally delivered, they could hear it but not read it. Therefore, if admonitions were to be appropriated for living, they needed to be short and pithy. These characteristics allowed for portable sayings which could be carried around in one's head and recalled during the experiences of everyday living.

Living in Community (and the World): verses 12-15

Within verses 12-22, Paul provides two distinct focuses for his moral exhortation. The first, as found in verses 12-15, is mainly directed towards relationships within the community of faith. Paul begins by appealing to the community regarding its relationship to its leaders (vv. 12-13). He next moves to the leaders' responsibility to and for the community (v. 14). In verse 15, Paul concludes this first section by letting no one off the hook. He presents a foundational behavior that includes the relationship of the entire community to each other and to outsiders.

Admonitions to the Community Regarding Leaders: verses 12-13. Paul begins his moral exhortations by using a verbal cue that lets the listener know that he or she is receiving parenesis. He uses the word erotomen, which is translated as beseech, appeal, beg, implore, exhort or urge. Having captured their attention, Paul describes the leaders in Thessalonica, perhaps also including himself and his traveling co-workers, as ones who labor among, care for, and admonish the Thessalonians. For this three-pronged leadership work, the community is to respond with respect (v. 12) and esteem (v.13). Both of these words occupy the social-field of meaning associated with honor. As is typical in the ancient world, the most significant core value for social interaction and status was honor. It was more desirable than land, money or power. Therefore, the
community’s response of honor to its leaders is the highest form of acknowledgment of their ministry work.

As much as some may want to impose an egalitarian structure of leadership upon the New Testament, one has to look in a different place than here. Paul clearly understood that some of the saints in Thessalonica had hierarchical positions over others. Charles Wanamaker writes that one should not be surprised at this non-egalitarian form of leadership, “. . . this is precisely the way leadership in the Diaspora synagogues emerged and it reflects the hierarchical character of Greco-Roman society.” Yet, in one sense early Christian leadership was egalitarian, because it was open to all, male, female, Jew, Greek, and even slave and free. Gender, race and social status did not disqualify one from leadership. Rather, leadership was affirmed by the gift of the Spirit and the positive response of honor from the community.

Perhaps Paul is encouraging the Thessalonian community to render honor to the leaders because of tensions between the leaders and the community as a whole. This position might be supported by the imperative in verse 13b: “Be at peace among yourselves.” However, another possibility exists. First, no evidence demonstrates serious tensions between the leaders and the community at Thessalonica. Second, one should consider that the leaders within the community, by their very prominent roles, could be experiencing abuse and dishonor from religious and secular leaders in Thessalonian society. DeSilva characterizes the position of the Thessalonians in general in this way:

Paul is addressing people whose honor, whose basic measure of worth, has been challenged by society—indeed, has been questioned and negated by society. . . . These are people who realize that attachment to Jesus and his new community has cost them the respect they formerly enjoyed from their neighbors, and to that extent has made them question their own self-worth.

The ones most keenly sensitive to society’s stinging barb of dishonor would be the leaders of this new movement in Thessalonica. They would feel the social ostracism from the synagogue community and the Gentile community in which they might have been leaders in the past. Paul himself could understand such an experience as he had “already suffered and been shamefully treated at Philippi” (1 Thess 2:2). The leaders needed the affirmation that their patronage and instruction among the community was “pleasing to God” (1 Thess 4:1). The affirmation of the brothers and sisters to their leaders provided a positive pastoral response to counterbalance any social ostracism the leaders might have experienced from harassing groups in Thessalonica.

Admonitions to the Leaders Regarding Community: verse 14. Once again Paul lets the listener know that parenesis is being presented by his use of parakaloumen (exhort, urge, appeal) which is synonymous with erotomen in verse 12. Several scholars posit that Paul is not directing his moral exhortation to the leaders specifically but rather to the community as a whole. Yet, verse 14 describes the recipients of the parenesis as ones who are admonishing
(noutheteite) others. This same word is used in verse 13 for one of the three activities the leaders perform in ministering to the community.

Paul envisioned reciprocity between the community and the leaders. If the community is giving honor to the leaders, they in turn have a responsibility for the community. It is a responsibility rooted in pastoral care. As the narrator of *Moby-Dick*, Ishmael, says, "... Heaven have mercy on us all... for we are all somehow dreadfully cracked about the head, and sadly need mending." The Thessalonians were not only "cracked about the head," but also about the heart and spirit. The mending the leaders of the community are commanded to do is to admonish the obstinate, encourage the fainthearted, help the weak and, within the whole pastoral process, have patience. That patience is the cumulative behavior for leaders to demonstrate is an interesting point. Leaders, perhaps even Paul himself, could be caught up with the powerful pull of the Lord's hoped for imminent parousia. A leader with such a motivation might be tempted with impatience and coercion towards those still immature in the faith. For this reason, Paul baptizes all the actions of leaders towards the community into the waters of patience.

**Admonitions to the Community/Leaders Regarding Everybody: verse 15.** In what will become a letter-writing technique, Paul concludes his first focus by making sure that no one is omitted from his moral exhortation regarding relationships. He casts a wide net with a two part general aphoristic instruction. The first half is a negative command, do not "repay evil for evil." The second half is the positive command, "seek to do good to one another and to all."

This creedal-type exhortation is found within other New Testament contexts. Paul uses this same statement in addressing the Christians in Rome (Rom 12:17). The Petrine tradition records the command in this form: "Do not return evil for evil or reviling for reviling; but on the contrary bless,..." (1 Peter 3:9). In Matthew 5:39a this admonition is phrased slightly different: "Do not resist one who is evil...." From these examples, this admonition represents an early catechetical tradition which Paul is passing on to the Thessalonian Christians. This directive is sharp counsel for those living in an agonistic society. This type of society, which is characteristic of the ancient Mediterranean, is one in which every action provokes a response back. If someone attempts to shame or dishonor a person, in other words "to do evil," then one must respond back. The prescribed norm is to respond back in kind. Therefore, what is exceptional about this saying is the addition: "but always seek to do good." One is commanded to go beyond simply withholding evil actions toward another, as if that were enough. One is instead to repay evil with good.

What is also most striking about this exhortation is that the Thessalonians are instructed to render good not only within the community but "to all." This conclusion is startling based upon what Paul has stated previously in his letter about outsiders. They are examples of unrestrained lust (4:4) and children of darkness (5:5). They have no hope (4:13) and no sense of the coming of Jesus (5:6). Beyond even these negative characteristics, the very afflictions experienced by the Thessalonians are due to the direct actions of those outsiders (1:6). Yet, even with such a résumé, Paul urges the Thessalonian Christians to do good to
outsiders. Far from withdrawing from society like the Qumran sect, the Jesus movement was to be engaged in constructive ways with society.

Early Christians demonstrated that this admonition was foundational for their ethics; they took it seriously. Consider this reflection from Aristides, an early Christian apologist (c. 140 C.E.):

Their oppressors they appease and make them their friends; they do good to their enemies. . . they love one another, and from widows they do not turn away their esteem; and they deliver the orphan from him who treats him harshly. And he, who has, gives to him who has not, without boasting. And when they see a stranger, they take him into their homes and rejoice over him as a very brother; for they do not call them brethren after the flesh, but brethren after the spirit and in God. And whenever one of their poor passes from the world, each one of them according to his ability gives heed to him and carefully sees to his burial . . .16

This imperative is not restricted only to the saints of the ancient world as is demonstrated by the parents of Amy Biehl, an American student killed by mob violence in South Africa on August 25, 1993. Amy, a Fulbright Scholar, was working in some of the poorest townships of South Africa educating the people about voting procedures regarding the all-race elections scheduled for April. By a tragic circumstance, she was killed by mob violence. Her parents in response to this personal tragedy acted in a remarkable way. They helped establish a bakery, a school, and a brick-making factory for the people in the same township in which their daughter was murdered. They also supported the Peace and Reconciliation Committee's recommendation regarding commuting the sentences of their daughter's killers.

"How?" This was the question put to a South African professor by a reporter. "How could Amy Biehl's parents act in such a forgiving manner?" She shook her head and replied, "I don't know," and then, as if an afterthought she added, "it must be divine grace." Why does one bestow good instead of evil? It is an imperative of Christian faith. How does one render good in the face of evil, and how can one act against the natural response to lash out in kind? These are more difficult questions to fathom. To repay good for evil goes against the very makeup of who people are, yet it goes to the heart of who people can become when they bestow divine grace upon others.

Spirituality and the Practice of Christian Piety: verses 16-22

Verses 16-22 present Paul's second major parenesis focus. He turns his attention from community dynamics to the pillars undergirding the piety of early believers. He presents this parenesis in a form that is extremely short and easy to remember. These verses comprise some of the shortest verses in the New Testament. For example, verse 16 is only composed of two Greek words.17 These short sayings are reminiscent of the Christian samplers that often adorned a
home during colonial times. However, these admonitions were not meant to be
stitched and placed upon the wall but memorized and held in one’s mind.

Two distinct sections can be discerned in verses 16-22. The first section in
verses 16-18 presents three pillars which undergird the group’s piety: rejoicing,
prayer and giving thanks. These pillars are described as what is willed for all by
God in Jesus Christ. The second section in verses 19-22 focuses on the life of the
Spirit within the community. One feature which ties both of these sections
together is that all the verbs in verses 16-22 are imperatives.

Verses 16-18: A Spiritual Disposition and a Triad of Piety. Paul does not
describe this triad of piety, rejoicing, praying, and giving thanks, as intermittent
behavior dependent upon external circumstances. Rather, the one characteristic
uniting these three imperatives is the constancy which is contained within the
actions. Note the words Paul selects to illustrate what he considers the
significant underlying feature of these actions: always, constantly, and in all
circumstances. At the heart of rejoicing, praying, and giving thanks is a
Christian’s spiritual disposition of persistence. It is a value which beats like a
steady pulse in every activity of living in community and society. Roberta
Bondi’s description of a disposition of love could also describe what Paul expects
in this triad of piety: a disposition “... has to do with a chosen and cultivated
long-term attitude of the heart.”18 Paul is not after a new legalism which demand
prayer twenty-four hours a day. He seeks a rejoicing, praying, and giving thanks
which demonstrate long-term attitudes of the heart.

The triad of piety, rejoicing, praying and thanksgiving, also have a natural
unity about them. Paul’s letter itself demonstrates this natural flow of one into
the other: “For what thanksgiving can we render to God for you, for all the joy
which we feel for your sake before our God, praying earnestly night and day that
we may see you face to face...” (1 Thess 3:9). For Paul the spiritual life was not
a single pool of moral exhortation, but a series of interlinked pools with baffles
that let one spiritual imperative flow into another.

Some interpretations of verse 18b have Paul ending this section with an
emphasis like the question found in Micah 6:6: “With what shall I come before
the Lord?” For this interpretative approach, Paul indicates that these three
actions are directed to God and are the “requirements” for the proper spiritual
life.19 Most translations, however, place the emphasis not upon these actions as
requirement, but upon the actions as “what God in Christ intends and makes
possible for this people.”20

Verses 19-22: Living in the Spirit. Paul in this last parenetic section focuses
upon the Spirit and its role in the community, and the community’s discernment
of the Spirit. He arranges his admonition about the Spirit in a series of two
negative commands and three positive commands. The positive command in
verse 21a, “test everything,” seems to be the stackpole around which the other
negative and positive commands revolve.

The first negative command, “not to quench the Spirit” (v. 19), carries with it
the metaphorical image of the Spirit as fire. J.B. Phillips translates this passage as
“Never damp the fire of the Spirit.”21 The metaphorical image of the Spirit as fire
is found in various places in the New Testament. The image of dousing water upon the Spirit, however, is unusual. It seems that the Thessalonians had the opposite problem as found in the Corinthian church. Far from damping the fire, the Corinthians were throwing on gasoline.

For Paul the quenching of the Spirit implies a serious and deep theological consequence. It meant denying the new age had broken into this old age. It is negation of the good news of the resurrection of Christ and the giving of the Spirit as a guarantee that the new age had begun (2 Cor. 1:11). Even more, it was a step back into the old age and into the powers and principalities of that age. If the Spirit is dampened and denied, one can be certain that some spirits of the old age will come to fill the vacuum. Walter Wink's provocative and insightful study on "principalities and powers" is helpful in illustrating the seriousness with which Paul commands the Thessalonians not to banish the activity of the Spirit from the midst of their community. Wink writes, "an institution becomes demonic when it turns its back on its divine vocation." To quench the Spirit, or turn one's back upon it, is not only to stop fulfilling one's divine vocation, it is to allow that which is demonic and evil to become the spirits to which allegiance is given.

Perhaps Paul had in mind what happens when all the spiritual gifts are lost by quenching the Spirit, but he specifically notes one, prophecy (v. 20). Without the Spirit, no prophecy exists. For Paul, this gift above all gifts was critical for a community to survive. It was by prophecy that the community was edified, exhorted, and encouraged. To despise prophecy, was to despise the very words of moral exhortation and encouragement that Paul himself was writing to the Thessalonians! How could they survive as a new kinship group in Christ, without knowing God's will for them through prophecy? For the infant Thessalonians, Paul knew that prophecy would be their mother's milk.

Verse 21a, "Test everything," is the centripetal focus for exhortations in verses 19-22. Paul's exhortation is for the discernment of prophecy and by extension discernment of the spirits. In a neglected article, "The Discernment of Spirits—A Neglected Gift," James D. G. Dunn points out that

Paul . . . appears to have grasped most clearly the danger of an inspiration whose source was demonic and whose utterance could not be trusted. Wherever he is confronted with prophecy as a living force he is quick to indicate that prophetic inspiration alone is no guarantee that the inspired word is of the Spirit. So much so that every prophetic utterance must be subjected to careful scrutiny and evaluation.

Consider the society in which Paul and the Thessalonians lived. It was an oral and illiterate world in which the spoken word predominated. It was also a world inhabited by spirits. No wonder Paul issues a call for testing everything. Our contemporary society, however, has few connections to the dynamics that caused a worried Paul to issue such an admonition. Far from being an oral and illiterate society, contemporary individuals are literate and live within a vast
Gutenberg ocean. Yet while the medium is different than the ancient world, the same infectious spirits that mislead and injured in the past can be read and heard today. The gift of discerning the spirits both in the spoken word and the written word is no less an imperative today than it was in the first century.

As is the way with aphoristic instruction, Paul leaves open the questions about who is to do the discerning of prophecy and the criteria to use. The gift of discernment, however, appears in other of Paul's writings as "the prerogative of all—not to be exercised by just a few, but to be exercised by the whole community." In relationship to criteria, both the Old Testament and New Testament traditions related to prophecies provide some guide for how to practice discernment. Three criteria are found in the biblical tradition regarding testing: (1) the character of the prophet, (2) the norm of earlier revelation, and (3) community benefits. These criteria continue to be appropriate measures of discerning the Spirit in proclamation oral and written. It is especially the last criterion, community benefits, which perhaps relates best to the last two positive imperatives of Paul in this section (v. 21b-22): "hold fast what is good [for the community] and abstain from every form of evil [that can enter the community]."

Conclusion

An aphoristic parenesis, often cynically recited, is: "Do as I say and not as I do." For Paul this saying is unthinkable. Closer to the truth is the phrase, "Do as I write and as I do." Paul not only commanded the parenesis of 5:12-22 as a form of non-negotiable behavior for the Thessalonians, he also took the commands upon himself as a model for them. Paul, the Christ-haunted apostle, lived his life and urged the Thessalonians to live their lives openly before God, community and society. For Paul knew that in this Age and in the Age to Come, "you cannot hide the soul."

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1 Herman Melville, Moby-Dick or The Whale (New York: W. W. Norton, 1976), 50.
4 Some translations, i.e., RSV, have "over you." However, the verb proistemi describes caring for someone versus lording over.
5 I. Howard Marshall, 1 and 2 Thessalonians, The New Century Bible Commentary (Grand Rapids, MI: Wm. B. Eerdmans, 1983), points out that "The Greek construction shows that these are three aspects of the work of the same group of people and not a list of three categories of people" (p. 147).
7 Ibid., 196.
8 David A. DeSilva, "'Worthy of His Kingdom': Honor Discourse and Social
One has only to note the Acts account of Paul's experience in Thessalonica to see the reaction of some groups to the leadership of this new movement. According to Acts 17:1-9, both the Jews in Thessalonica (v. 5) and the local people and city authorities (v. 8) were disturbed by the leaders of this movement. If the forces of discredit and dishonor are directed at the leaders of this movement, how much more is honor needed by these same leaders at least from the brothers and sisters of the community. In the ancient world, one could not survive for long without some group giving you a recognition of honor.

A representative of this perspective is Abraham J. Malherbe in Paul and the Thessalonians (Philadephia: Fortress Press, 1987). He states: Paul does not "... have in mind two clearly defined groups, one that has assumed the responsibility for pastoral care and another that habitually receives it" (p. 89). See also Waranaker, Commentary, 196; Ernest Best, A Commentary on the First and Second Epistles to the Thessalonians. Black's New Testament Commentary (London: Black, 1977): 229. For an opposite point of view, see Paul Holmberg in Paul and Power (Philadelphia: Fortress Press, 1978). As he points out, logic dictates two separate groups: "... a general exhortation such as 'Admonish the idle (or: disorderly)' or 'Help the weak' (I Thess 5:14) presupposes the fact that some people in the church are more orderly, are stronger, and more capable of admonishing and helping than others are" (p. 112).

For a discussion on the Thessalonian situation and the need for pastoral care, see John M. G. Barclay, "Conflict in Thessalonica," The Catholic Biblical Quarterly 55 (July 1993), 512-530.

The sense here is more than idlers (RSV, NRSV) or loafers (Moffatt). This group is not lazy but refuses to work and become obstinate. There is a willfulness about their actions, therefore the translation of "disorderly" (RV and the Centenary Translation of the New Testament). See Robert Jewett, The Thessalonians Correspondence: Pauline Rhetoric and Millenarian Piety (Philadelphia: Fortress Press, 1986), 104.

Walter Wink, Engaging the Powers: Discernment and Resistance in a World of Domination (Minneapolis: Fortress, 1992), 186.


Aristides, The Apology of Aristides, 15.

One should note, however, that the verse breaks in 16-22 are arbitrary and assist little in accenting the parenesis.


An example is: "This is what God wants of you, in your life in Christ" (GNB).

Marshall, 1 and 2 Thessalonians, 156.


Ibid., 88-89.

Ibid., 83-86.
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