

# Christian Testimony in the Light of the Lord's Return

by John F. Walvoord

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*The sermon emphasizes the importance of Christian testimony in various aspects, including leadership, brethren, and God, and provides practical advice on how to live a holy life.*

**Topics:** "Church Leadership", "Spiritual Sanctification"

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## Description

John F. Walvoord preaches on the importance of our testimony towards Christian leaders, urging believers to recognize and respect those who labor among them and to be at peace with one another. He emphasizes the need to esteem leaders for their work's sake and to accept their admonition with love. Additionally, he highlights the significance of warning the unruly, comforting the weak, and supporting those who are spiritually weak, while also encouraging patience and giving thanks in all circumstances. Walvoord stresses the importance of not quenching the Spirit, discerning between truth and error, and abstaining from every form of evil, ultimately aiming for complete sanctification in spirit, soul, and body until the coming of the Lord.

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## Transcript

1 Thessalonians 5:12-28

Testimony Toward Christian Leaders

While First Thessalonians unfolds many great doctrinal revelations, it closes with a very practical note. First, the general theme of our testimony is presented. What do others see in our Christian life? In verses 12-13 the rather unusual point of view is presented concerning our testimony toward those who are our spiritual leaders. Paul exhorts them in these verses: "We beseech you, brethren, to know them which labour among you, and over you in the Lord, and admonish you; and to esteem them very highly in love for their work's sake. And be at peace among yourselves."

There was an unusual situation in this church at Thessalonica, arising from the fact that the church had been in existence only a few months. Every member of this church was a new convert. Some of them had probably been saved on the same day, or in the same week. God had taken this church and had called out a few of their number to be leaders. They had not had any seminary or college or Bible institute training. All they had was what Paul had given them and what the Spirit of God had taught them in the

days and weeks which followed. But God had put His hand upon some to be teachers and leaders, and some overseers of God's people. Paul's message to this Thessalonian church is, "Give recognition to those who have the gift of leadership."

It is naturally difficult for two Christians who start out the same way and have come from the same background to recognize that one is better than the other as far as administering the Lord's work is concerned. Some may have said of a leader, "Who is he to take the place of leadership in the church?" Paul is telling them to recognize people according to their ministry, not for what they are, but for what they are doing as ministers of the Lord. Thus Paul writes: "I ask you," or "beseech you, brethren, to know them which labour among you"--to know them in the sense of respecting them. He refers to the leaders as those "who are over you in the Lord."

Christians are all alike in the sense that both the clergy and laity are on the same level. But the Bible also teaches that we do not all have the same gifts. Some can teach; some can administer; some can help; some can pray. There is a difference in the opportunity and the way in which we serve the Lord. If a believer has gifts of teaching and of being a leader, other members in the church should recognize that and respond to these gifts and the exercise of them which God has given. The Thessalonians were exhorted to do this, and to accept the admonition given to them by those who teach.

In verse 13 Paul exhorts, "to esteem them very highly in love for their work's sake." How carefully Paul expresses it! He does not say: "Accept them because they are unusually fine looking, or because they are well dressed, or because they have such fine gifts of oratory." There were many things, no doubt, that were commendable about those leaders, but that was not the point. They should be esteemed because of the work they were doing. In other words, when we recognize that God is using a man, it is in the end a recognition of God and His sovereign choice, of divine grace and gifts, and not of the man himself. The glory must remain with God even though we recognize the instrument. We are to esteem them highly for their work's sake. While God expects us to be discerning and not to accept that which is contrary to the Word of God, any criticism should be in love and for the furtherance of the work of God. We are very definitely taught that we should esteem God's servants, even the humble ones, very highly for their work's sake.

Then Paul adds, "And be at peace among yourselves." The relationship of recognizing leadership to peace is a very obvious one. It is impossible for any work of God to be run by everyone. There must be someone who is responsible for different parts. It is possible to have too many cooks in the kitchen. That is also true in the work of the Lord. We can have too many people trying to run the church. We should recognize leaders and pray for them, at the same time being willing to follow the leadership that is given. Peace among ourselves requires also that each person do his own work and not the work of someone else, responding to the plan and program as God has led in it.

#### Testimony to Christian Brethren

In verses 14-15 our testimony toward our Christian brother is discussed. Paul encourages them and commands, "Brethren, warn them that are unruly." The word used here for warn is the same word used in verse 12 for admonish. It is the idea of warning in a sense of instructing or admonishing them, encouraging them to do that which is right. We are to admonish those who are unruly, who are not cooperating in the work of the Lord, who are doing the wrong thing. Apparently they had trouble even in that day with people who did not get in line and do the thing they ought to do. Then Paul also told them to

"comfort the feebleminded," as we have it in the Authorized Version, or, better translated, "to comfort the feeble in spirit," or "the weak spirited." There are some who are discouraged very easily. Perhaps they have an inferiority complex and they need much encouragement. All of us have had the experience in life of being very discouraged at times and when someone spoke an encouraging word it helped us a great deal.

We are also to support the weak. The weak here apparently refers to weakness in our spiritual life. Some Christians are just weak, that is, they are easily led astray. They have not learned to lean upon Christ to support them, and to help and encourage them. In this church of young Christians, they were exhorted by Paul to support the weak and at the same time commanded to "be patient toward all men." While some must have specialized treatment when it comes to patience, there is not a Christian living who does not need to have a little patience administered to him at times. Do not expect anyone to be perfect, but have a little patience whenever it is required. "Be patient toward all."

In verse 15 a great Christian principle is stated: "See that none render evil for evil unto any man; but ever follow that which is good, both among yourselves, and to all men." Someone has said that there are three standards: first, the standard of the heathen wicked world which does evil in response to good; second, there is the attitude of the so-called cultured world which is to do good toward those who do good to them; third, there is the attitude of Christian faith to do good to them who do evil to us. This is contrary to the natural man; it is contrary to natural ethics, but it is according to the Word of God. The Thessalonian Christians are admonished here not to pay back evil for evil, not to try to get even, not to take things into their own hands. They were being persecuted for their faith and were having a hard time. How easy it would have been for them to "get even," as we say. But Paul said, No, that is not the Christian way. The Christian way is to take evil and respond with good. Certainly that is what God has done for us. God has surely shown His love particularly for those who have trusted in Christ. God has taken the evil which resulted in the crucifixion of Christ, and in response to our sins God has done us good. He has given us grace and salvation. He has given us hope in the Lord Jesus.

### Our Testimony Toward God

In verses 16-23 the third aspect of our testimony is presented, our testimony toward God. Our testimony toward those who minister over us was considered in verses 12-13, and our testimony toward our Christian brethren was discussed in verses 14-15. Now the most important of all -- our testimony before God-- is examined. The world can see only our outer life, but God really knows what we are doing. He knows our hearts, our attitude, and the real character of our spiritual life. Paul raises the ultimate question of all, "What does God think about us?" In answer to that question, he gives the most simple and yet profound exhortation to be found anywhere in the Word.

In verses 16-18 three exhortations are grouped together. It is not as clear in the English as it is in the Greek New Testament. In verse 18 it begins, "This is the will of God in Christ Jesus concerning you," and it seems clear from the Greek that these three commands--"rejoice," "pray," and "give thanks"--are summed up as a unit, as combining the will of God. Here is Christian testimony in relation to God in a very concise statement. What are these three things?

### Rejoice Evermore

First, in verse 16 the command is given, "Rejoice evermore." This verse is the shortest verse in the Bible. Some think that "Jesus wept" (John 11:35) is the shortest, and in the English it is. In the New Testament in

Greek, 1 Thessalonians 5:16 is the shortest verse in the Bible. It contains two words and they are short words, whereas in the original for "Jesus wept" there are three words and they are longer words. Even though it is the shortest verse in the Bible, it certainly says a great deal.

One of the amazing things about the Word of God is that it can say so much in a few words. Suppose that all that was known about a Christian was that he rejoiced evermore. How much would you know? You could be sure that he was genuinely saved. The world may have its pleasure, but it knows nothing of rejoicing evermore. For the Christian who is living in the will of God, there is the possibility of rejoicing evermore. It shows that a person is living in the realm of faith, trusting the Lord. Does that characterize our lives as God knows our lives? Consider the simple sin of murmuring as recorded in the Book of Exodus and other books which tell of Israel's journey from Egypt to the promised land. God punished them severely for their murmuring. They complained about the same things which we are apt to complain about: our food, our drink, our circumstances. Here we have the opposite to murmuring, that Christians should rejoice evermore.

### Pray Without Ceasing

The next verse is, "Pray without ceasing." What does it mean to pray without ceasing? Does it mean to stay on one's knees twenty-four hours a day? No, our Lord did not do that, and Paul did not either. Then, what does he mean by praying without ceasing? It means, first of all, that Paul maintained his stated times of prayer. Daniel prayed three times a day. When the decree was given that he should not do it, what did he do? Did he stop? Did he cut out one of them? Or did he close the windows? No, he went right on faithfully, three times a day. He continued in prayer without ceasing. He went right on praying at his stated times. It represents the fact also that we are always in touch with God. Certainly two friends can be in the same room and be in harmony and fellowship one with the other, even though they may not be talking with each other all the time. Paul is saying, "Do you want a really rich experience? Begin a walk of fellowship with the Lord, not only at stated times of prayer, in which you bring all your needs to the Lord, but also the unbroken walk of communion -- praying without ceasing."

### In Everything Give Thanks

In verse 18 Paul adds the third exhortation, "In everything give thanks." Put these three things together. "Rejoice evermore. Pray without ceasing. In every thing give thanks." There is no easier or a more simple recipe for a happy Christian experience. What does it mean, "In every thing give thanks"? It does not necessarily mean for everything give thanks. It means this: that in every circumstance of life, no matter where God puts you, no matter what your difficulties are, in those circumstances you can thank God for all He has done for you. You may be praying earnestly that He will change your circumstances. You may be praying for victory. You can thank God that in it all you will be victorious in Christ. So in everything give thanks. This recipe, of course, is the will of God, as we have it stated so plainly here, "this is the will of God in Christ Jesus concerning you."

### Quench Not the Spirit

In verses 19-22 there is a further admonition. These four verses relate to the first command of this section, "Quench not the Spirit." This tremendous doctrine in a word is this: When Christ went to heaven He sent the Holy Spirit. On the Day of Pentecost every true believer in Christ was indwelt by the Spirit. Ever since, whenever a person really trusts in Christ as his Savior, the Holy Spirit comes into his mortal body and makes it a holy sanctuary, a temple of God. The Holy Spirit is there to minister to us. He is there to teach

us, to guide us, to direct us, to rebuke us, to show us the way to unfold the Scripture, to give us joy and peace and love, and to transform our lives and our character and our experience. How manifold are the ministries of the Holy Spirit! Yet, you and I have within us under the providence of God the capacity to quench or stifle the Spirit. Sometimes we see Christians who we know are saved, but their lives do not reflect the fragrance of the presence of God. What is wrong with them? They are resisting the Holy Spirit. What is it to quench the Spirit? It is just saying "no" to God. We should instead always be saying, "Yes, Lord."

In thus yielding to the Lord, the Thessalonian Christians were told they should, first of all, not despise prophesyings. Further, they were to "prove all things; hold fast that which is good." In other words, everything they heard was not necessarily prophesied. They had to distinguish between truth and error, even as we do today. They had to hold to what was good and put away that which was bad. In verse 22 Paul summed up what it means to quench not the Spirit, "Abstain from all appearance of evil," or, as it is better translated, "Abstain from every form of evil." We have the broad statement that regardless of what it is in our life that may be contrary to the will of God, it should be taken out of our life.

### Complete Sanctification

In verse 23, in conclusion, Paul contemplates the time when we are going to be perfect in the presence of God. In a word, it is the truth that God has set us apart to holy living. It does not mean that we are perfect now. Paul was not perfect; John was not perfect. It does mean that we should be holy, belonging to the Lord. "The very God of peace sanctify you wholly," that is, in every respect. He continues, May "your whole spirit and soul and body be preserved blameless unto the coming of our Lord Jesus Christ." The word whole here refers to the parts of our natural life: our spirit, our soul, and our body. Each of these three parts should be preserved holy to God and be used by God. That means that everything we are belongs to the Lord--our physical bodies, our spiritual or intellectual life, and our psychological or natural life.

In verse 24 Paul reminds us, "Faithful is he that calleth you, who also will do it." No one can sanctify himself. God has to set us apart as holy to Himself, and the great truth here is, "Faithful is he who is going to do this."

Verse 25 is a very understandable exhortation. Paul writes: "Brethren, pray for us." We need prayer. It takes prayer and the work of the Holy Spirit to accomplish any true work for God. After this appeal, Paul closes with a greeting to all the brethren. He charges them to have the epistle read. He was conscious of the fact that this was the very Word of God. Finally, he concludes with that great benediction: "The grace of our Lord Jesus Christ be with you. Amen." As Paul wrote this to the Thessalonian Christians, so may the grace of God, His favor, His enablement, be made real in all our lives.

### Questions

1. What should be the relationship of Christians to Christian leaders and how does this relate particularly to the Thessalonian church?
2. What should characterize our testimony toward our Christian brethren?
3. What should characterize our testimony toward God?
4. What should characterize our rejoicing, prayer, and giving of thanks?

5. What is meant by the command: "Quench not the Spirit" and what does Paul include as evidence of it?
6. What does Paul mean by his prayer that God will "sanctify you wholly"?
7. Who does the sanctifying?
8. What is Paul's final request?

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