Paul’s To Do List: 1 Thessalonians 5:12-22

As Paul draws to a close, we come to that part of the letter which addresses practical behaviour; it is not at all unusual for Paul to end his letters in this way.

In vv.12-15 he looks at interpersonal relationships within the church. Note the language he uses to introduce the topics he wants to address at the beginning of vv.12, 14, 15: Paul isn’t giving orders here or laying down the law. Is it possible that, by addressing his readers in this way, he is modelling how he wants them to address each other?

Paul starts by focusing on how they should treat leaders in the congregation (12-13). In what three ways does he see the leaders relating to the congregation? You can check this out by the three different verbs he uses which have ‘you’ as their object in these verses. Can I invite you to pause and reflect on the different kinds of work that our ministers and deacons do among us? The first verb used here suggests hard work: what factors do you think make the work of a leader arduous? Being ‘over’ us in the Lord is not simply about occupying a position of authority: the same verb is used of an overseer in 1 Timothy 3:4-5. How do these verses cast light on the responsibilities of someone who is ‘over’ a congregation? And what do we learn from Romans 12:8 about the manner in which they should lead? One of the tasks of a leader is to admonish or rebuke – never an easy thing to do, and really difficult to do it right. Can you think of an example of a leader admonishing or rebuking in a good way? How did they do it?

How does Paul say a church should treat its leaders? What does that look like in practice? As Paul stops talking about leadership, he tells the Thessalonians to be at peace with each other. This does not necessarily indicate that there were tensions between the leadership and the congregation. Maybe he is speaking on behalf of the leaders at this point, and expressing their desire to see people living peacefully with each other in church. In practical terms, what does it look like when we are at peace with each other?

Paul then gives the Thessalonians four injunctions in v.14: each verb has a different object: what different kinds of people does Paul refer to here, and how does he say they should be treated? Can you see a common theme that links the first three types of people? It may be that Paul is addressing a problem within the church where a number of people aren’t doing very much or working very hard, and recognising the very different reasons why this might be the case. There is a word of warning here for us: it is very easy to attribute the wrong motives to people who don’t seem to be pulling their weight, or to jump to the wrong conclusions about what is going on in their lives. In each case, Paul carefully matches the imperative to the issue in people’s lives– muddle up the imperatives and their objects and you can see how ineffective and / or damaging that would be for the people concerned! What different factors deter people from giving of their best in the life and work of a church and how can we address this? However frustrated we might feel sometimes, let’s not forget that Paul says we should be patient with everyone.

In v.14, Paul does not address those who aren’t working hard directly; instead he tells the Thessalonian church how such people should be treated. Similarly, in v.15, instead of addressing those who have been wronged directly, Paul urges the congregation to see that any victims of wrongdoing don’t pay back evil for evil. Does the way in which Paul addresses these issues through the congregation as a whole suggest that we all have a responsibility for one another’s wellbeing, that we are called to ‘watch over each other’ as we walk together? How can we help keep each other on the straight and narrow without poking our nose into other people’s business, or upsetting them in the process? What is the key to doing this gently and effectively?

We know that good and evil are opposed to each other. The English Standard Version draws out the contrast that Paul draws between these two qualities in its translation of v.15: ‘See that no one repays anyone evil for evil, but always seek to do good to one another and to everyone.’ The first half of the verse depicts reactive behaviour; the second half advocates proactive behaviour: Paul calls us to be consistent in doing good for others, no matter how they treat us.

Verses 16-18 address our individual spirituality, with two brief exhortations, followed by a third exhortation which is developed at greater length. Again, Paul has consistency in view here. What difference does it make in our lives if we live this way on a daily basis?

It looks as though Paul is addressing the church’s spiritual life in vv.19-22, maybe focusing on their worship, or perhaps on the way in which they sought God’s guidance together. The first two injunctions are negatives: are we at risk of quenching the Spirit or despising prophecies at Brighton Road? If so, how? And how do we test what is said? What is the good that we should embrace and what forms of evil should we reject?

‘O God, may the fire of the Holy Spirit burn up the dross in our hearts, warm them with love and set them on fire with zeal for your service’ (Ancient Collect, from *The Hodder Book of Christian Prayers*).