

Bible Study: Letters of Paul

Central Presbyterian Church

September 21, 2025

Session 3: “1 Thessalonians – Sanctification and the Spirit”

Readings: 1 Thessalonians 5: 12-24

Recap of the Q/A of Session 2

A question was raised on the veracity of Paul’s description of the Parousia (the return of Christ). Specifically, the comment was made that Paul’s text is “extra-Christological”, that is, Paul’s words were not Christ’s words. By implication, Paul’s words concerning the Parousia are not to be trusted.

The closest parallels to Paul’s eschatology in 1 Thessalonians 4:13-18 in Jesus’ own words are found in:

- John 5:25-29, John 6:39-40, and John 11:25-26 for the resurrection of the dead, emphasizing believers rising to eternal life at the last day or at Christ’s call.
- Matthew 24:30-31 (and parallels in Mark 13:26-27, Luke 21:27) for the return of Christ and the gathering of believers, with shared imagery of the trumpet, angels, and clouds.
- John 14:1-3 for the gathering of believers to be with Christ forever and the encouragement to not be troubled, aligning with Paul’s pastoral aim.
- Luke 21:28 and Matthew 24:44-46 for the theme of hope and readiness in light of Christ’s return.

These types of questions are always welcome in the spirit of learning more about God. Questions that attempt to prove *a priori* that Paul is wrong or deficient in some way must be addressed more rigorously in view of the Marcionite Heresy in 140AD. Marcion had edited the emerging Canon to include only those which in his understanding were correct. He accepted only 10 letters of Paul but heavily edited them to reflect his *a priori* convictions. He rejected Hebrews. He cut parts of the Gospel texts that he considered erroneous. In colloquial parlance, Marcion went about “picking and choosing” that which he thought was consistent with his own beliefs and rejected those that did not support his theology. He was excommunicated by the early church for his teachings. His heretical views disappeared by the 5th-century.

In the Appendix is detailed AI-generated response to skeptics who argue that Paul's teaching on the Parousia is absent from the Gospels.

1 Thessalonians 5:12-24

(Lexham English Bible)

¹² Now we ask you, brothers, to respect those who labour among you and rule over you in the Lord and admonish you, ¹³ and to esteem them beyond all measure in love, because of their work. Be at peace among yourselves.

¹⁴ And we urge you, brothers, admonish the disorderly, console the discouraged, help the sick, be patient toward all people. ¹⁵ See to it that no one pays back evil for evil to anyone, but always pursue good toward one another and toward all people.

¹⁶ Rejoice always, ¹⁷ pray constantly, ¹⁸ give thanks in everything; for this is the will of God for you in Christ Jesus. ¹⁹ Do not quench the Spirit. ²⁰ Do not despise prophecies, ²¹ but examine all things; hold fast to what is good. ²² Abstain from every form of evil. ²³ Now may the God of peace himself sanctify you completely, and may your spirit and soul and body be kept complete, blameless at the coming of our Lord Jesus Christ. ²⁴ The one who calls you is faithful, who also will do this.

Exegesis:

1. Historical and Cultural Context**

The church in Thessalonica, a bustling port city in Macedonia, was a young, predominantly Gentile congregation facing persecution and social pressure (1 Thess. 1:6; 2:14). Paul, along with Silvanus (Silas) and Timothy, wrote this letter to encourage the believers, address their concerns about the return of Christ, and provide practical instructions for Christian living. The passage in 5:12-24 concludes the letter with a series of exhortations, reflecting Paul's pastoral care and desire to strengthen the community's faith and unity as they await Christ's return (the *parousia*).

The Thessalonian believers likely faced challenges such as maintaining unity, respecting leadership, and discerning spiritual practices in a pagan culture. Paul's instructions aim to foster a vibrant, Spirit-led community that remains faithful amid trials.

2. Literary Context

1 Thessalonians 5:12-24 is part of the letter's closing section (5:12-28), following teachings on eschatology (4:13–5:11). The passage shifts from theological instruction to practical

exhortations, addressing interpersonal relationships, spiritual practices, and ethical conduct. The rapid-fire imperatives (e.g., “respect,” “admonish,” “rejoice,” “pray”) reflect a paraenetic style common in Paul’s letters, where short, direct commands guide ethical behavior. The passage can be divided into three thematic units:

- A. Community Responsibilities (5:12-15)**: Instructions for relationships within the church, including respect for leaders and care for one another.
- B. Spiritual Disciplines (5:16-22)**: Commands for worship, prayer, and discernment in the Spirit-filled life.
- C. Benediction and Prayer (5:23-24)**: A prayer for sanctification and assurance of God’s faithfulness.

The tone is pastoral and urgent, reflecting Paul’s desire to equip the church for perseverance until Christ’s return.

3. Exegesis of the Passage

*A. Community Responsibilities (5:12-15)***

Verse 12:

Greek Analysis**: The verb “ask” (*Ἐρωτῶμεν*) conveys a polite but firm request. The phrase “those who labour among you” (*τοὺς κοπιῶντας ἐν ὑμῖν*) uses *κοπιᾶω*, implying strenuous effort, often associated with ministry (cf. 1 Cor. 15:10). “Are over you” (*προϊσταμένους*) suggests leadership or oversight, not authoritarian rule but protective guidance “in the Lord” (*ἐν κυρίῳ*), emphasizing spiritual authority. “Admonish” (*νουθετοῦντας*) implies corrective instruction for moral or spiritual growth.

Interpretation: Paul urges the Thessalonians to respect their leaders, who work diligently, provide guidance, and offer correction. This may address tensions in the young church, where new believers might resist authority or struggle with accountability.

Verse 13**:

“And to esteem them very highly in love because of their work. Live in peace with one another.”

Greek Analysis: “Esteem very highly” (*ἡγάσθαι αὐτοὺς ὑπερεκπερισσοῦ*) uses emphatic language, suggesting deep appreciation. “In love” (*ἐν ἀγάπῃ*) grounds this respect in Christian love, not mere obligation. “Live in peace” (*εἰρηνεύετε*) is a present imperative, calling for ongoing harmony.

Interpretation: Respect for leaders should flow from love, rooted in their service, not status. The call to peace addresses potential conflicts, urging unity in a diverse congregation facing external pressures.

Verse 14:

“And we urge you, brothers, admonish the idle, encourage the fainthearted, help the weak, be patient with them all.”

Greek Analysis: “Urge” (*παρακαλοῦμεν*) is stronger than “ask,” indicating earnest exhortation. The “idle” (*ἄτάκτους*) literally means “disorderly” or “unruly,” possibly referring to those neglecting work due to eschatological fervor (cf. 2 Thess. 3:6-12). “Fainthearted” (*ὀλιγοψύχους*) denotes those discouraged or anxious, perhaps about persecution or the *parousia*. “Weak” (*ἀσθενῶν*) may refer to spiritual, moral, or physical weakness. “Be patient” (*μακροθυμεῖτε*) emphasizes enduring kindness.

Interpretation: Paul assigns the community responsibility to care for its members: correcting the idle, uplifting the discouraged, supporting the weak, and showing patience to all. This reflects a holistic approach to pastoral care, addressing diverse needs within the church.

Verse 15:

“See that no one repays anyone evil for evil, but always seek to do good to one another and to everyone.”

Greek Analysis: “See that” (*ὁρᾶτε*) is an imperative, urging vigilance. “Evil for evil” (*κακὸν ἀντὶ κακοῦ*) reflects a common ethical challenge in a retaliatory culture. “Always seek” (*πάντοτε τὸ ἀγαθὸν ἰδιώκετε*) uses *ιδιώκω*, implying persistent pursuit of good.

Interpretation: Paul prohibits vengeance, a radical ethic in a Greco-Roman context where retaliation was common. Instead, believers must proactively do good, both within the church (“one another”) and to outsiders (“everyone”), reflecting Christ’s love (cf. Rom. 12:17-21).

B. Spiritual Disciplines (5:16-22)

Verse 16:

“Rejoice always.”

Greek Analysis: *πάντοτε* (“always”) emphasizes unceasing joy. *χαίρετε* is a present imperative, indicating a continual attitude.

Interpretation: Christian joy is not dependent on circumstances but rooted in God's salvation and the hope of Christ's return. This command counters the Thessalonians' trials, encouraging steadfast hope.

Verse 17:

“Pray without ceasing.”

Greek Analysis: * ἄδιαλείπτως προσεύχεσθε* uses * ἄδιαλείπτως* (“unceasingly”), suggesting persistent prayer. * προσεύχεσθε* is a present imperative, indicating ongoing practice.

Interpretation: Paul calls for a life of constant communion with God, not mechanical prayer but a posture of dependence, especially vital for a persecuted community awaiting the *parousia*.

Verse 18:

“Give thanks in all circumstances; for this is the will of God in Christ Jesus for you.”

Greek Analysis: “In all circumstances” (*ἐν παντί*) parallels “always” and “unceasingly,” emphasizing universality. “This is the will of God” (*τοῦτο γὰρ θέλημα θεοῦ*) underscores divine purpose.

Interpretation: Gratitude in all situations reflects trust in God's sovereignty, even in suffering. This aligns with Paul's view that God's will is expressed through a transformed life in Christ.

Verse 19:

“Do not quench the Spirit.”

Greek Analysis: “Quench” (*σβέννυτε*) metaphorically suggests extinguishing a fire, often associated with the Spirit's work (cf. Acts 2:3). The present imperative implies ongoing caution.

Interpretation: The Spirit's activity (e.g., prophecy, gifts) must not be suppressed, possibly addressing skepticism or fear of charismatic excess in the Thessalonian church.

Verse 20:

“Do not despise prophecies.”

Greek Analysis**: “Prophecies” (*προφητείας*) refers to Spirit-inspired messages, not necessarily predictive but proclamatory (cf. 1 Cor. 14:3). “Despise” (*ἐξουθενεῖτε*) suggests treating with contempt.

Interpretation: Paul affirms the value of prophetic speech but implies a need for discernment, as some may have dismissed it due to misuse or cultural suspicion of ecstatic practices.

Verse 21:

“But test everything; hold fast what is good.”

Greek Analysis: “Test” (*δοκιμάζετε*) means to examine or discern, often for authenticity (cf. 1 Cor. 12:10). “Hold fast” (*κατέχετε*) implies clinging to what is “good” (*καλὸν*), meaning morally or spiritually beneficial.

Interpretation: While open to the Spirit’s work, believers must critically evaluate prophecies and other spiritual phenomena, retaining only what aligns with God’s truth.

Verse 22:

“Abstain from every form of evil.”

Greek Analysis: “Abstain” (*ἀπέχεσθε*) is a strong command to avoid or separate from. “Every form of evil” (*παντὸς εἴδους πονηροῦ*) is broad, possibly referring to false teachings, immoral behavior, or anything contrary to God’s will.

Interpretation: This concludes the exhortations with a call to holiness, urging the Thessalonians to reject anything that undermines their faith or witness, especially in a pagan context.

C. Benediction and Prayer (5:23-24)

Verse 23:

“Now may the God of peace himself sanctify you completely, and may your whole spirit and soul and body be kept blameless at the coming of our Lord Jesus Christ.”

Greek Analysis: “God of peace” (*θεὸς τῆς εἰρήνης*) reflects God’s character as the source of harmony. “Sanctify completely” (*ἀγιάσαι ὑμᾶς ὁλοτελεῖς*) emphasizes total consecration. The triad “spirit, soul, and body” (*τὸ πνεῦμα καὶ ἡ ψυχὴ καὶ τὸ σῶμα*) likely denotes the whole person, not a strict anthropological division. “Be kept blameless” (*ἀμέμπτως...τηρηθεῖν*) is an optative, expressing a prayerful wish. “Coming” (*parousia*) is a key eschatological term in the letter.

Interpretation: Paul prays for God to fully sanctify the Thessalonians, preparing them holistically for Christ’s return. The emphasis on blamelessness reflects the ethical and spiritual readiness required for the *parousia*.

Verse 24:

“He who calls you is faithful; he will surely do it.”

Greek Analysis: “Faithful” (*πιστὸς*) underscores God’s reliability. “He will surely do it” (*ποιήσει*) is a simple future, expressing certainty.

Interpretation: Paul assures the Thessalonians that their sanctification and preservation depend on God’s faithfulness, not their own efforts. This offers hope, especially for a community anxious about the future.

4. Theological Themes

- Community and Leadership: The passage emphasizes mutual respect, care, and accountability within the church, reflecting the body of Christ as a unified, supportive community (cf. 1 Cor. 12:12-27).
- Spirit-Led Living: The call to rejoice, pray, give thanks, and engage with the Spirit’s work highlights a vibrant, dynamic faith empowered by the Holy Spirit.
- Holiness and Eschatology: The exhortations and prayer for sanctification are tied to the *parousia*, underscoring that ethical living and spiritual readiness are preparation for Christ’s return.
- God’s Faithfulness: The assurance in v. 24 grounds all exhortations in God’s reliable promise to complete His work in believers.

5. Application

- Church Life: Respect and support leaders, care for the vulnerable, and pursue peace, even in diverse or conflicted communities.
- Spiritual Practices: Cultivate joy, prayer, and gratitude as constant disciplines, trusting God in all circumstances.
- Discernment: Be open to the Spirit’s work but test all things against Scripture and truth, rejecting what is evil.
- Hope in God: Rely on God’s faithfulness for sanctification and ultimate salvation, especially in times of uncertainty or trial.

6. Conclusion

1 Thessalonians 5:12-24 encapsulates Paul’s pastoral heart, urging the Thessalonian believers to live as a unified, Spirit-filled community that reflects God’s holiness while awaiting Christ’s return. The passage balances practical ethics with theological assurance, emphasizing that God’s faithfulness undergirds the Christian life. By fostering mutual care, spiritual vitality, and discernment, the church can stand firm in faith, ready for the *parousia*.

Discussion Questions

- What does Paul mean by “sanctified entirely”?
 - How does the Spirit enable holy living?
 - How can we cultivate openness to the Spirit’s work?
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Notes

Appendix

Skeptics who argue that Paul's teaching on the Parousia (the second coming of Christ) in 1 Thessalonians 4:13-18 is absent from Jesus' words in the Gospels often point to differences in imagery, terminology, or emphasis between Paul's writings and the Gospel accounts. They may claim that Paul's eschatology, particularly the vivid description of Christ's return with a trumpet call, the resurrection of the dead, and believers being "caught up" to meet the Lord, introduces novel concepts not found in Jesus' teachings. To respond to such skeptics, we can demonstrate that while Paul's language and emphasis in 1 Thessalonians 4:13-18 are distinctive, the core themes of the Parousia, resurrection, and gathering of believers are firmly rooted in Jesus' own words as recorded in the four Gospels (Matthew, Mark, Luke, and John). Below is a concise yet comprehensive response, addressing the skeptic's position by drawing on parallels from Jesus' teachings, acknowledging differences, and providing a reasoned defense.

Response to Skeptics

Skeptics who claim that Paul's eschatology in 1 Thessalonians 4:13-18 is absent from Jesus' words in the Gospels overlook the substantial overlap in themes between Paul's teaching on the Parousia and Jesus' eschatological sayings. While Paul's imagery (e.g., "caught up in the clouds," "trumpet call") is specific, the core concepts of Christ's return, the resurrection of the dead, the gathering of the faithful, and the hope of eternal life are clearly present in Jesus' teachings. Below, I outline these parallels, address differences, and argue that Paul's eschatology is consistent with and likely derived from Jesus' words, as understood within the early Christian tradition.

1. Christ's Return (Parousia) in Jesus' Words

Paul's description of Christ's return in 1 Thessalonians 4:15-16—with a "loud command," "voice of the archangel," and "trumpet call"—finds direct parallels in Jesus' teachings about the coming of the Son of Man:

Matthew 24:30-31 (cf. Mark 13:26-27; Luke 21:27): Jesus says, **"Then will appear the sign of the Son of Man in heaven... They will see the Son of Man coming on the clouds of heaven, with power and great glory. And he will send his angels with a loud trumpet call, and they will gather his elect from the four winds"* (Matt. 24:30-31, NIV). The imagery of a "trumpet call" and angels gathering the elect closely mirrors 1 Thessalonians 4:16-17. Jesus' reference to coming "on the clouds" aligns with Paul's "meet the Lord in the air," both drawing on apocalyptic imagery from Daniel 7:13-14. The term "Parousia" (Greek for

“coming” or “presence”) used by Paul is also implied in Jesus’ description of the Son of Man’s return (e.g., *ἔρχομαι* in Matt. 24:30).

Luke 17:24: Jesus declares, *“For the Son of Man in his day will be like the lightning, which flashes and lights up the sky from one end to the other”* (Luke 17:24, NIV). This emphasizes the sudden, visible nature of His return, consistent with Paul’s depiction of a dramatic, universal event in 1 Thessalonians 4:16.

Matthew 25:31: Jesus states, *“When the Son of Man comes in his glory, and all the angels with him, he will sit on his glorious throne”* (Matt. 25:31, NIV). The presence of angels and the glorious return parallel the angelic imagery and majesty in 1 Thessalonians 4:16.

These passages show that Jesus taught about His return in glory, accompanied by angels and cosmic signs, aligning with Paul’s eschatological framework. The skeptic’s claim that the Parousia is absent ignores these clear Gospel references.

2. Resurrection of the Dead

Paul’s assurance in 1 Thessalonians 4:13-14, 16 that the “dead in Christ will rise first” is grounded in Jesus’ own teachings on resurrection:

John 5:25-29: Jesus says, *“A time is coming when all who are in their graves will hear his voice and come out—those who have done what is good will rise to live”* (John 5:28-29, NIV). The idea of the dead hearing Christ’s voice and rising directly parallels Paul’s “loud command” triggering the resurrection in 1 Thessalonians 4:16. While Jesus includes the resurrection of the unrighteous for judgment, the resurrection to life applies to believers, akin to Paul’s “dead in Christ.”

John 6:39-40: Jesus states, *“This is the will of him who sent me, that I shall lose none of all those he has given me, but raise them up at the last day... Everyone who looks to the Son and believes in him shall have eternal life, and I will raise them up at the last day”* (John 6:39-40, NIV). The resurrection “at the last day” for believers corresponds to Paul’s resurrection of the dead in Christ at the Parousia.

John 11:25-26: Jesus proclaims, *“I am the resurrection and the life. The one who believes in me will live, even though they die”* (John 11:25, NIV). This assurance that believers who die will live again directly supports Paul’s comfort to the Thessalonians about deceased believers (1 Thess. 4:13-14).

These sayings confirm that Jesus taught a future resurrection of the faithful, undermining the skeptic’s claim that Paul’s resurrection theology is absent from the Gospels.

3. Gathering of Believers

Paul's depiction of believers being "caught up" to meet Christ in 1 Thessalonians 4:17 finds parallels in Jesus' words about gathering His people:

Matthew 24:31 (cf. Mark 13:27): Jesus says, **"He will send his angels with a loud trumpet call, and they will gather his elect from the four winds"** (Matt. 24:31, NIV). The gathering of the "elect" at the trumpet call is nearly identical to Paul's description of believers being gathered to Christ. While Paul's "caught up in the clouds" is unique, the concept of assembling the faithful at Christ's return is consistent.

John 14:1-3: Jesus promises, **"I will come back and take you to be with me that you also may be where I am"** (John 14:3, NIV). This assurance of believers being united with Jesus at His return aligns with Paul's "we will be with the Lord forever" (1 Thess. 4:17). The focus on eternal communion with Christ is a shared theme.

4. Encouragement and Hope

Paul's call to "encourage one another with these words" (1 Thess. 4:18) reflects the pastoral purpose of his eschatology, which is also evident in Jesus' teachings:

John 14:1-3: Jesus says, **"Do not let your hearts be troubled... I will come back and take you to be with me"** (John 14:1-3, NIV). This comfort to the disciples parallels Paul's aim to reassure the Thessalonians about the fate of the dead.

Luke 21:28: Jesus instructs, **"When these things begin to take place, stand up and lift up your heads, because your redemption is drawing near"** (Luke 21:28, NIV). This call to hope in the face of eschatological events mirrors Paul's encouragement in 1 Thessalonians 4:18.

Addressing Differences

Skeptics may point to differences, such as Paul's phrase "caught up in the clouds" or the specific sequence of the dead rising first, which do not appear verbatim in the Gospels. However:

Imagery Variations: Paul's language draws on Jewish apocalyptic traditions (e.g., Daniel 7:13, Isaiah 26:19) and early Christian oral traditions, which adapt Jesus' teachings for a Gentile audience. The "clouds" and "trumpet" are standard apocalyptic motifs (cf. Matt. 24:30-31), not innovations.

Oral Tradition: Paul likely relied on Jesus' teachings as transmitted orally in early Christian communities (cf. 1 Cor. 11:23, where Paul cites Jesus' words). 1 Thessalonians 4:15 references "the word of the Lord," possibly alluding to Jesus' teachings or a saying not recorded in the Gospels.

Contextual Emphasis: Jesus' sayings in the Gospels focus on readiness (e.g., Matt. 24:44) or judgment (e.g., Matt. 25:31-46), while Paul addresses a specific pastoral concern about deceased believers. These differences reflect audience and purpose, not contradiction.

Broader Context

Paul's eschatology aligns with the broader Jewish and early Christian expectation of a Messiah who returns to judge, resurrect, and gather God's people. Jesus' teachings in the Gospels, rooted in Jewish eschatology (e.g., Daniel 12:2, Isaiah 26:19), provide the foundation for Paul's theology. Scholars like N.T. Wright and Larry Hurtado argue that Paul's Christology and eschatology are deeply rooted in Jesus' self-understanding as the Son of Man and the early church's interpretation of His resurrection. The absence of the exact phrase "caught up" in the Gospels does not negate the shared themes of return, resurrection, and gathering.

Conclusion

The skeptic's claim that Paul's Parousia teaching in 1 Thessalonians 4:13-18 is absent from Jesus' words is unfounded. Jesus' teachings in Matthew 24:30-31, John 5:25-29, John 6:39-40, John 11:25-26, John 14:1-3, and Luke 21:28 clearly articulate the return of the Son of Man, the resurrection of believers, the gathering of the elect, and the hope of eternal life—core elements of Paul's eschatology. Differences in language reflect Paul's adaptation of Jesus' teachings for a specific audience, not an invention of new doctrine. Paul's reliance on "the word of the Lord" and shared apocalyptic imagery further ties his teaching to Jesus' words, affirming continuity between the Gospels and Paul's letters.
