

Living
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1 Thessalonians 5:12-24

“A list to live by” –Several years ago Multnomah publishers produced a series of books by Alice Gray, Steve Stephens, and John Van Diest entitled, “Lists to Live By.” I have several of the volumes. In them are compiled lists of what I would call “best practices.” The authors said their goal was not just about “things to do” but “how to be.” In these books are lists on the topics of success, friendship, virtue, marriage and romance, parenting, family, faith, wisdom, and more. Some lists are practical and some are poetic.

For example, they included this one from Ralph Waldo Emerson on how to be successful in life:

“To laugh often and much: To win the respect of intelligent people and the affection of children, to earn the appreciation of honest critics and endure the betrayal of false friends; to appreciate beauty, to find the best in others, to leave the world a bit better whether by a healthy child, a garden patch, or a redeemed social condition; to know even one life has breathed easier because you lived. This is to have succeeded.”⁴

“A list to live by” is how I would describe these closing verses of Paul’s first letter to the church in Thessalonica. In these verses the founding pastor of this small church gave them spiritual “best practices” that apply to any congregation of Christ-followers. The list contains both practical and timeless “best practices” for church members. Tucked in the middle are three “best practices” that are a worthy “motto” for us as individual followers of Christ.

Here’s the truth that should change us: Salvation in Christ isn’t about what we profess; it’s about how we live. God’s word is filled with practical “lists to live by.”

Paul begins with instructions on how the church should treat our spiritual leaders:

12 We ask you, brothers, to respect those who labor among you and are over you in the Lord and admonish you, **13** and to esteem them very highly in love because of their work. Be at peace among yourselves.

- Every flock needs a shepherd to keep them safe and productive. This is the leadership model God ordained for His Church.
- The roles of pastor, elder, or deacon are challenging because they labor both “among us” and “over” us. They are part of the congregation yet they are also called by God to lead the group by His Spirit.
- The God-honoring church leader won’t be either a buddy or a dictator.

- They are called to lead with both love and biblical authority and yet, they are human and make mistakes like all of us. It's not an easy task.
- Paul said we are to “respect” and “show love” to the leaders of our church.
- That assumes our leaders are leading us biblically (see 1 Peter 5:1-5.)
- What are some practical ways we can support the leaders of our church?
- One of the best ways we can lift the load of our church leaders is to “be at peace” in the congregation.
- Now Paul shifts to how church members/group members live together.

14 And we urge you, brothers, admonish the idle, encourage the fainthearted, help the weak, be patient with them all. **15** See that no one repays anyone evil for evil, but always seek to do good to one another and to everyone.

- The word for idle is a picture of a “soldier straying from the ranks.”ⁱⁱ
- This could refer to immoral conduct. While scripture talks about rebuking a brother or sister who is living in sin, this can be tricky. If it's gross immorality, it's likely to be best handled by church leaders (Matt. 18.)
- The more common problem is when members of the group become a little lazy or disengaged from the ministry of the church. Admonish is a strong word. Instead of shaming or blaming, what if we reached out to say we miss seeing them or ask for their involvement and help with a project?
- Instead of saying, “get in line” we can invite them to join us “in the line.”
- I would describe the “fainthearted” like Eeyore in Winnie the Pooh. They have a tendency to be down and discouraged. We must encourage them!
- The “weak” might be those with physical illness. We can help them in practical ways like doing yard work for someone who is sick.
- The “weak” might refer to spiritual immaturity. They might be caught up in legalism (i.e. the “weaker” brother or sister mentioned in Romans 14:1-15:3.) or simply weak in their knowledge of scripture and how to apply it. We need to “help” them through discipleship.
- Dealing with members who get out of line, who are lazy, gloomy, or legalistic sounds like a pretty “taxing” job. How can we help them without getting irritated or frustrated? “Be patient with them all.” Patience isn't something we manufacture in ourselves; it's a fruit of the Spirit of God.
- Patience will help us do what verse fifteen instructs: don't repay evil for evil. **1 Peter 3:9 (NLT) — 9 Don't repay evil for evil. Don't retaliate with insults when people insult you. Instead, pay them back with a blessing. That is what God has called you to do, and he will grant you his blessing.**
- Human nature pushes us to respond to evil with more evil. Jesus calls us to love our enemies. We can only do this by the power of the Holy Spirit! That's a great transition to what's next on Paul's “list to live by.”
- How can I be an effective member of my church or group without becoming frustrated or discouraged with my fellow brothers and sisters? How can I be a joy and a blessing and not a downer or a grouch?

- Here's the real question: How can I tap into the power and resources of the Holy Spirit whom God placed in me at salvation?
- Here is Paul's prescription for being a joyful, victorious Christ-follower:

16 Rejoice always, **17** pray without ceasing, **18** give thanks in all circumstances; for this is the will of God in Christ Jesus for you. **19** Do not quench the Spirit. **20** Do not despise prophecies, **21** but test everything; hold fast what is good. **22** Abstain from every form of evil.

- I've always loved the simplicity of verses 16-18. Do these three things consistently and repeatedly because it's God's will for you to do them.
- Rejoice always – What does the prefix “re” at the front of a word mean (renew, return, etc.)? Do it again and again! REPEAT.
- Re-joice means to RENEW, REPEAT, and REMEMBER the true source of our joy as a follower of Christ. As the Bible Knowledge Commentary states it: “A Christian's joy does not spring from his circumstances, but from the blessings that are his because he is in Christ.”ⁱⁱⁱ
- Sometimes we feel like we have “lost” our joy. A follower of Christ can't lose our joy but we CAN forget the reasons we have to be joyful!
- Even in the saddest circumstances, I have the joy of knowing God loves me, is with me, and will one day bring me to Heaven with Him for eternity.
- When we RE-member what it means to be IN CHRIST we will RE-joice!
- Pray constantly – This speaks of an open line of communication to the Heavenly Father all the time. One commentator used a term our generation would understand: “We are to “keep the receiver off the hook” and be in touch with God so that our praying is part of a long conversation that is not broken.”^{iv} Our kids won't get that so tell them it's like texting!
- It's a conversation that goes kind of like this: “Lord, how should I respond to that? Lord, I'm feeling anxious and need your help. Lord, help me to keep my mouth shut right now! Lord, help me remember what I need to know in this meeting. Lord, thank you for another safe landing!”
- Closely related to praying and rejoicing continually is giving thanks in everything. Example: “My car is banged up, I'm shaken up, but I'm thankful to God that no one was seriously hurt.”
- Even in the throes of dementia my Mother would say, “Well, we have a lot to be thankful for.” I wasn't so sure, but you don't talk back to your Mama!
- Don't quench the Spirit – This is a picture of a flame. No one can extinguish the Holy Spirit but we might ignore His guidance. That's like sitting in a dark room while we ignore a lighted candle in the other room.
- Lord, help me to be sensitive to Your Spirit whom You placed inside me.
- “Despising prophecies” means ignoring or taking God's word lightly.
- “Testing all things” means comparing any kind of teaching or advice TO God's word as the only source of absolute truth we have.
- You've heard me say it before, if the teaching at your church is contrary to God's word (or not based on God's word), find another church!

- “Holding on to what is good” and “staying away from every kind of evil” -- I’ve often said a lot of the outcome of our lives comes from what we embrace and what we let go of.
- We have a choice to embrace, obey, and apply God’s word to our lives or to embrace evil. We can’t do both at the same time.
- The best way for me not to pig out on jelly donuts is not to buy them. The best way to avoid accidentally embracing evil is to stay away from it.
- Paul closed with a prayer and a word of encouraging truth:

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. **24** He who calls you is faithful; he will surely do it.

So, What’s the Takeaway?

- Salvation in Christ isn’t about what we profess; it’s about how we live. God’s word is filled with practical “lists to live by” and this is one of them.
- Within this list are three verses that could also be a “motto” for the follower of Christ. A motto is “a short expression of a guiding principle.”^v
- Examples of mottos: *“Hope for the best and prepare for the worst.”* *“Be Prepared (Boy Scouts.)”* *“Be the change you want to see in the world.”* *“This too shall pass.”* Etc.
- The truth of scripture can become a great motto to live by. For example: *“Love God and love others.”* I like Micah 6:8: *“Do justice, love kindness, and walk humbly with your God.”* That’s a motto I can embrace!
- If you leave today with only one thing you remember about these verses, I want to encourage you to embrace verses 16-18 as a motto to live by.
- Rejoice always, pray continually, be thankful in every circumstance.
- Here’s how you can remember them. I said the prefix “re” means repeat. Remember (another “re” word) these three “best practices” with the letters: R, P, T (kind of like repeat.)
 - R-ejoice
 - P-ray
 - T-hankful
- As the old shampoo commercials said, “rinse and repeat.” Rinse out the chaos and discouragement of life by repeatedly doing those three things.
- Now, that’s a motto from scripture we can all live by. If we’ll do our part, God will do His part because “He is faithful; He will do it!”

ⁱ <https://www.forbes.com/quotes/7868/>

ⁱⁱ Explore the Bible Leaders Guide – Lifeway 2022

ⁱⁱⁱ Constable, T. L. (1985). [1 Thessalonians](#). In J. F. Walvoord & R. B. Zuck (Eds.), *The Bible Knowledge Commentary: An Exposition of the Scriptures* (Vol. 2, p. 708). Wheaton, IL: Victor Books.

^{iv} Wiersbe, W. W. (1996). [The Bible exposition commentary](#) (Vol. 2, p. 189). Wheaton, IL: Victor Books.

^v <https://www.merriam-webster.com/dictionary/motto>