For the last five weeks, we have talked about the church, what it is, what it’s not, what its history is, what its future is, who its leaders are, how they should lead. And last week, we even went over what a healthy church looks like. What does it look like when a church is being what it’s supposed to be vs. what most of us have already experienced. And we talked frankly that a lot of our church experiences have been dysfunctional at best. So what I want to do to finish that thing up, is just to go over where we go from here. In light of all that we’ve learned about what the church is, what it’s not, where do we go from here?

Which takes us to 1 Thessalonians 5. We’re going to pick it up in verse 14. It’s going to start out with a series of commands, and that means that God says, “Do this...do this...do this...” And what I want you to think about as we read through the first three or four verses is, “What are the ramifications of us being obedient to those commands?” What would it look like if we actually did what God is asking us to do here, and how foreign would it be to us if we actually did what God’s asking us to do here? And then from there, I’m going to talk about what the heart of God is in these commands. Verse 14, “And we urge you, brothers,...” Now “urge” is a stronger word than “ask,” is it not? Asking is one thing, urging is another. There is a little bit more zeal in urging. “And we urge you, brothers, admonish the idle,...” That means, “Warn the idle.” So think of the communal ramifications of this. In doing life with one another, think about if we were obedient to the command to warn those who are idle. Because that’s not even, “Warn someone who has strayed off into sin.” That’s just, “Warn the idle. The guy that’s not moving, warn him;” “…admonish the idle, encourage the fainthearted,...” I love that. Warn those who are idle and encourage the weak. “…help the weak, be patient with them all. See that no one repays anyone evil for evil,...” I’m fifteen years into my sanctification and my knee-jerk reaction still is to want to punch you in the face. “See that no one repays anyone evil for evil,...” Always? That’s the most difficult command in the whole list so far. I’ve had quite a few experiences that I’d rather not rejoice in. “Rejoice always, pray without ceasing, give thanks in all circumstances; for this is the will of God in Christ Jesus for you.” How many circumstances? All of them. “Do not quench the Spirit. Do not despise prophecies, but test everything; hold fast what is good. Abstain from every form of evil.” We say it like this. What is it that stirs your affection for Jesus Christ? Fill your life with things that stir your affection for Jesus Christ and abstain from those things that rob your affections for Jesus Christ. It’s Christian living.

Now, the heart of God in these commands is found in verse 23. Why the commands? 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.” So God’s heart in all the commands in front of verse 23 is that you and I might be sanctified completely by the power of God. So here’s where we’ve got to wrestle a little bit. The point of salvation is not just justification but sanctification after conversion. So God’s plan for you is not that you walk an aisle and have somebody dunk you but that God wants to grow you into maturity, into holiness and back into the rhythm that He created the universe to operate under. Any understanding of grace that does not lead people to holiness is a misunderstanding of grace and in the end is evidence that it’s not there. May we obey these things. Why? So that He might sanctify you. Is anybody else a little confused by this? It seems when it comes to justification, we have no role. It’s meritless. You didn’t do anything. God didn’t look down and go, “You know, that guy’s got a personality. My team!” That’s not how it works. Your salvation is meritless. You have nothing of value to God almighty. I think the horror of watching humanity play out is
that every human soul is going to bring glory to God. The one that humbles himself before Him will bring glory to God
by the grace of Christ alone, and the ones who rail their fists and deny His existence will bring glory to God by being a
representation of His justice. So the Scriptures are saying here, “Do this...do this...do this so that I might sanctify you.”
Justification is completely an act of God, but to be sanctified involves not only the power and presence of Christ, but
movement on our part.

Now here’s where everybody gets nervous. “Here it comes. The rules. I knew it. I knew you were eventually going to
do this to me, Chandler. You’re like, ‘Grace...grace...grace...’ and now that I’m here, I knew this was coming.” Okay, is it
your thinking, in what you’ve gathered from Scripture, that God has no desire to sanctify and grow you into the fulness
of what He called you to be? Is it really your understanding that God has saved you to let you do whatever you want to
do without trying to lead you into greater holiness which creates greater joy? Is that really what you want to embrace?
That’s not biblical Christianity. I don’t know what it is. There are commands of God in Scripture that God has asked us to
be obedient to because it brings us into how He created the universe to be, increases joy and worship and reflects more
purely the glory of His name. So there’s an unbelievable amount of weight on this command for us. Because I don’t have
one text that tells us to make converts, not one. You can go look. There’s not a text that commands me as a teacher/
preacher/elder to try to make converts. What I am commanded to do is make disciples and to teach them to obey all
that He has commanded. It’s not, “know all that God has commanded.” It’s not, “go to church on the weekends.” No, it’s
Teaching them to obey all that He has commanded. For whose joy? Yours. For whose glory? His. The grace of God is the
kindness of God that leads us to repentance, that leads us to pursuit of God in obedience as an act of worship.

So how are we going to do that? That’s been our big question here. Because we had great plans, and then you all
showed up. We had these great ideas of “Here’s how we’re going to do it.” And then, “There’s a thousand people here.
Okay, let’s go back and draw it up. Okay what if we try this...There’s two thousand people here. Okay, what if we try this
and we can move this over here...Oh, there’s four thousand people here...” So we were kind of going, “How are we going
to do this? How are we going to manage this? Let’s just put them together and hope.” And that’s pretty much been the
process of sanctification here for the last couple of years. So we went back to the drawing board to figure out how to do
this. And of all things, probably because how I’m wired, I want to teach. So how do we teach the covenant that we’re in?
How do we teach what Christianity is and what it’s not? Because there’s a lot of confusion about that. How do we teach
what our distinctives are as a church? How do we teach what God commands are the leaders of a church, and how do
they go about that leadership? And then how do we go about what God has asked of us in relation to one another and
Him? So that was the question. Plan A was to do a class. And then we were like, “Where would we have it? When could
people come? Okay, so that’s not going to work. Wait a minute, we have a pretty much worthless scrap of paper that
we call our covenant. It’s got four lines on it that are so ambiguous that you can’t teach really anybody anything out of
it. ‘I will support my church.’ Okay, so what if we scrapped the covenant, put that in one document and then have at our
people’s fingertips at any given moment what God has asked the church to be, what God has asked His leaders to be and
what God has asked us to be in relation to Him and to one another? What if we put it in a covenant and rolled it out as a
constant teaching document, so anytime anyone wanted they could yank it and read again what God has asked of us as
His people?” So we thought it was a brilliant plan. So we said we’ve got to go about this carefully because what we know
historically is that God’s people are temperamental. And we got to this point.

That’s why we did the covenant, now let me address one major theme that keeps coming up. Is listing what God has
asked of His people in a document legalistic? We’ve got to ask ourselves two questions. Question 1: Is anything in the
list extra biblical? Have we gone outside of Scripture and lifted up a moral code external to Scripture that you demand
that we submit to to be a part of the Village Church.? No, we haven’t. So, we pass that one. Here’s the more problematic
one. Question 2: Will people use the covenant, particularly what God has asked of us, to exalt themselves and to lord
over people their discipline and morality? Probably. That’s where the document can become legalistic, not as the
commands of God but as a perverted heart that grabs hold of them and makes the commands of God as an avenue to boast in themselves rather than to worship the living God. Even what is good, right and pure gets perverted in the hands of sinners. “Well then we shouldn’t do it, Chandler.” Okay, how about this? How about no more sex for you, no more food for you, no more drink for you, no more money for you? Because all of those are very dangerous things, so stay away from them. Because sex can become a perversion, wine can become alcoholism, food can become gluttony and money can become greed. So don’t touch any of them. So who’s in? Anybody? Let’s sign it. “No sex, no food, no drinking, no money;” Let’s do it. Let’s build a compound and stock up weapons. I am the prophet out of Revelation calling upon you. Come on, that’s ridiculous. We don’t live life like that. Sex is a beautiful gift given to us by God, for the glory of God, for enjoyment within a covenant relationship between man and woman. Money has been given to us to fund the kingdom and to live in such a way that we show the world it doesn’t control us. Food has been given to us so that we might enjoy Him. Wine has been given to us so that we might worship Him. On and on we could go. Everything is broken in a fallen world. Give me a break.

So what do you do when people take what’s good and right and abuse it? I think we read just a minute ago that what we do is warn those who are idle, encourage the timid, help the weak and be patient with everyone. I think we engage our brother who makes much of himself through the commands of God and we confront him over his lack of worship and self-exaltation. Why? Because we love him and that’s going to destroy him.

And then we thought to ourselves, “Seriously, are people ever going to read this thing again? Some people aren’t even going to read it the first time.” So here’s what we thought we could do. What if we not only built it out as a teaching document, but we created it as a way to use it as a self-evaluation tool, not as a pastoral evaluation tool. Which means let’s not build it out so I sit down with someone and go, “Alright, we’ve been watching you, bro, and I want to be straight with you. ‘08 was a tough year for you. I’m going to grade you out at a D-, so here’s how this works. If you want to stay in community, you’re going to have to tithe 15%. If you want to stay in home group 20%. And then we’ll talk next year.” No. How would that even work? Do you know how many pastors we have vs. members? It would take us a year to run through that. And come on, I don’t even know most of you. As long as I’ve walked with humanity, here’s the one thing I’m sure of. Almost everyone I’ve met can walk in a level of deceit so that they could fool their own mother. So what good would it be for me to sit down with a stranger and go, “How are you doing? Is the Bible the final arbiter in all issues in your life. Yes? Good.” Come on, give me a break. Here’s what happens to some of us.

Most of us that got banged up at a place got banged up at a really small place. Now that’s not true of all of us, but most of us who have this real fear of legalism and the church police came from a small place. And how would that work across ten services on two campuses? The truth is most of us come in here every week and rarely see the same people. There are these little communities inside our big community. They govern each other, they love each other, they walk with one another, they engage one another. How would that even work. So what if we created the covenant in such a way that it could be a self-evaluation tool?

And then how are we going to figure out who’s here and who’s not here? Because the Bible says that I’m responsible for some of you, but I’m not responsible for all of you. Those of you who have joined this family, according to the Scriptures, I’ve got to stand with you in front of God and give an account for how I taught you, how I lead you. That’s a pretty constant weight on us. But not all of you. So how do I know whom I’ve got responsibility for? Especially because we live in a transient society, don’t we? How many of you have lived in more than one city in the last six years? Yeah, we’re always moving. What if we renew it every year? What if we renew it every year to find out who’s here and who’s not? One of the cool things that has happened is already we’ve had well over half of our covenant members sign the new covenant, but we’ve gotten in dozens and dozens of letters and e-mails that go, “I’m in Arizona...I’m in Austin...I’m in California...God help me, I’m in Wisconsin.” That way we find out who’s here and who’s not.
Now, what if we did this? Here’s the ambitious piece. There is software out there that was created to tell you who’s there and where they are. So there’s been software created that goes, “This is the group that people go to. This is the home group that they’re in. This is the ministry they’re tagged in.” But there isn’t any software exists to gauge where you are spiritually and give you a path you might ought to try to go to grow. So we thought, what if we created an self-evaluation tool that went along with the covenant? So that every year when it comes time for us to renew as a covenant body, you could sit down with the evaluation tool, with the covenant, read through it, answer questions honestly, submit it with your name or without your name into the software, have the software kick it back to you with something like, “Hey, it looks like you’re struggling with some heart issues. In the next year, here’s when step studies are, here’s when Hopeful Hearts meets, here are counseling options at the Village.” It’s not a “Richard, I see that we recommended for you that you go through Recovery, and then we noticed that you haven’t. You should tithe 15%.” No, this isn’t us trying to track you down. This is us trying to do everything we can to play our part well so that God might sanctify you completely. What if it came back and just showed, “Hey, one of the issues you have is you don’t know the Scriptures well?” And what if it could ping back an e-mail that just said, “Here’s when the Bible studies are next year. Here are books you ought to try to read. Here are conferences that are to be in Dallas that you ought to try to go to.” Now I don’t know if this is doable, but we’ve got men right now trying to design the software. So the covenant is about sanctification; it’s not about control.

I’m hoping to God you’ve heard me preach enough to know that it would be far more awful for you to try to be the church police here than it would be for you to struggle here. And if you’re a guest with us here today, this is such a family meeting. I’m sorry. I’m normally well composed and steady. Maybe you’re just going, “I don’t know, Chandler. I’ve just had bad experiences and I’ve seen things just go bad. And let me be honest, I struggle. I am still struggling. I have sins that own me, I struggle with some of these things.” Okay, here’s the great news in this whole text. Look back in 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. He who calls you is faithful; he will surely do it” So let’s just do theology here. I’m telling you, theology is unbelievably practical. If He called you and if your salvation was meritless, if your salvation was God’s idea, if He called you, then that’s the confidence that we have in Him completing what He began. So what do we do? We’re faithful. When? Today.

It’s all over the place; let me just read for you. 1 Thessalonians, “For God has not called us for impurity, but in holiness.” 2 Timothy 1:8-9, “Therefore do not be ashamed of the testimony about our Lord, nor of me his prisoner, but share in suffering for the gospel by the power of God, who saved us and called us to a holy calling.” Ephesians 1:3-4, “Blessed be the God and Father of our Lord Jesus Christ, who has blessed us in Christ with every spiritual blessing in the heavenly places, even as he chose us in him before the foundation of the world.” Romans 8:29, “For those whom he foreknew he also predestined to be conformed to the image of his Son.” So why were you saved? Why did He save you? Why are you elect? Why did He call you to Himself? Because His plan is to, over the period of your life, conform you into the image of His Son. That’s great news. Everybody gets nervous when they hear the word “predestination.” If you look up the word “predestination” in the Greek, it means “predestination.” Ephesians 5, “Husbands, love your wives, as Christ loved the church and gave himself up for her, that he might sanctify her, having cleansed her by the washing of water with the word.” So good. 2 Thessalonians 2:13, “But we ought always to give thanks to God for you, brothers beloved by the Lord, because God chose you as the firstfruits to be saved, through sanctification by the Spirit and belief in the truth.” This is why God called you. He’s going to perfect you. But we’re not there yet, right? All the dead people say, “Yeah, I’m there” Everyone else is in process.

So what do we do in the meantime? Turn to Romans 6:19. “I am speaking in human terms, because of your natural limitations.” Thank you, Paul. He’s just like, “Look, you’re dumb.” You’ve got to love him. The whole chapter 6 is basically about how you’re dead to sin now and alive to Christ, which means you’ve been set free to approach God with confidence despite the fact that you’re still wicked. So look at what he says. “For just as you once presented your members as slaves
to impurity and to lawlessness leading to more lawlessness, so now present your members as slaves to righteousness leading to sanctification." So how does this work? Before Christ saved us, we used the members of our body, our hands, our eyes, our minds, our gifts, to walk in unrighteousness. Now, because of the death and resurrection of Jesus Christ, let us use those members to now pursue righteousness. One of the things that I’ve just tried to work on and work on and work on for six years here is most of us, as we come to know the Lord, very quickly shift into sin management mode where we just try to control our sin. “Oh, pastor said don’t do that, so I don’t want to do that anymore. Let me try to figure out how to not do that anymore. Oh, don’t do that anymore...don’t do that.” And then we just start to manage it. The problem is the Scriptures are pretty clear that that’s not how sin gets put to death. Sin gets put to death as you behold Christ more and more and more. You’re transformed from one degree of glory to the next by beholding Christ. Although I do think there are times where it’s smart for you to get away from things that haunt you. So he’s saying here, “Instead of using the members of your body to manage sin, in the same way that you chased what was wicked, now you chase God almighty.” Like when you walked in sin, you were good at what you did. You could figure out where this person was going and how to get that in private and how to do this and how to hide this and how to get this. You could plan it out meticulously. You were brilliant at sin. Now take that same brilliance and chase after the Lord.

That’s what we do. “Well I don’t even know where to begin.” We’ve created this document. And it’s not the Bible, but we got every sentence in it from the Bible. And maybe you could simply start by reading the covenant Christ saved you into, what being a Christian is all about and what God’s asked of you. And where you’re failing (and all of us will have areas where we’re failing), we’re honest, we don’t pretend and we do all we can to put that thing to death with the help of brothers and sisters.

So I wonder if we can do this, what do we look like 20 years from now? What do we look like 30 years from now? Besides being older and dead for some of you. What does it look like if we pursue Him? What does it look like if we chase after Him? What does it look like if we, for the sake of sanctification, warn those who are idle, encourage the timid, help the weak while being patient with everyone for the glory of God and for the growth of our souls into the fullness of Him. A pipe dream, huh? Sure, but we can fight for it. God help us, we can fight for it. That’s where we go from here.

Let’s pray. “Holy Spirit, we just ask for help. The truth is some of us are idle right now, some of us are fainthearted right now and some of us, if we could muster a word, the word would be weak. And so my prayer is that You would supernaturally begin to grow us into maturity, into holiness. I thank You for the men and women You’ve brought into this place who are mature in their faith, and I thank You for the men and women You’ve brought into this place that are not mature. My prayer is that none of us would be stagnant. That’s my prayer, that we would be maturing or that we would be using the maturity that we have to love and engage others. So where we’ve grown idle, forgive us. Where we’ve grown lazy, forgive us. Where we’re weak, help us. Where we’re fainthearted, encourage us. And as impossible as it seems, may You build a deep, thriving community of faith that will do life together until the end. You’ll have to do it. Culture is not built for it. It’s way to large, way to complicated. I believe that You can do it. Help us. It’s for Your beautiful name. Amen.”

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