

13 December 2020

Isaiah 61:1-4, 8-11  
1 Thessalonians 5:16-24  
John 1:6-8, 19-28

During the course of this year we've had to learn new rules. During March it was "Stay home, Stay safe, Be kind." By the end of May there were new rules as we moved down the alert levels, and we had posters saying such things as "Wash your hands. Stay home if unwell. Keep 2 metres apart. Keep track of where you've been. Be kind."

In other spheres of life too we learn rules which are encapsulated in pithy little sayings, often taught to us when we're still young: "Say please"; "Do unto others as you would have them do unto you"; "If you don't have anything nice to say, say nothing at all"; "I before E, except after C".

Often these short sayings are not adequate on their own – they require interpretation and application within the particular context or situation. We know, for example, that "I before E, except after C" does not always work. But nevertheless, it proves to be a useful general guide, and being short and rhyming aids our memorising of the rule.

It is giving Christine and me great delight to see our grandchildren Ava and Ethan, now just over two years of age, learning more and more words. They don't have sentences yet, but it is amazing how quickly and naturally they come to know words and their meanings and we can be sure sentences will flow soon. We all learn our mother tongues without realising that there is such a thing as grammar. Later in life we may be taught that there is a correct way to put sentences together and that there are rules setting this out, but as children we just pick up the essentials by osmosis.

However, when we come to learn another language we find that we have to actively learn at least some grammar.<sup>1</sup> And early on this can be aided by clever little ways of expressing these rules so that they can be readily remembered – a little slogan or

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<sup>1</sup> This idea, and much of what follows, comes from Wright, *Paul*, pp.130-133

rhyme or mnemonic or ditty perhaps. Even if we haven't yet got the language into our hearts so that it comes naturally, we can think of the memory device and we can find out how to appropriately express ourselves.

Early Christian writings contained many little rules. And we may wonder why that is. It is helpful to think of behaviour as a type of language with its own particular grammar, and to recognise that our native "language" – the behaviour we pick up by osmosis from the family, friendships, and society of our upbringing – is not always the Christian "language". This was the challenge facing Paul, for example. How was he to help the people of the young church in Thessalonica learn the new grammar of Christian behaviour?

Of course, the Christian ideal is that we should get to the stage, as with learning a language, where we don't need to think about it at all; we need to become fluent in the new language of Christian behaviour, so that the rules become 'second nature'.

This doesn't happen overnight. In part it happens through the work of the Holy Spirit quietly within us. But it requires that we take action to join in with this work, because for most of us our environment is not immersing us in the language of Christ. Just as with learning grammar, we need three things: we need teachers; we need the influence of a community; and we need simple rules and memory aides. In chapter 5 of this letter, Paul talks of all three.

Paul talks of the importance of careful Christian teaching and leadership, and of giving it attention and respect. (see vv.12-13)

Paul talks of the mutual influence of the whole Christian community. Each Christian, and each Christian group, household or family, has the responsibility to look out for the needs of others, to give comfort, to give warning, to strengthen, to provide a good example to imitate. The message for the Christian community is that they need to be devoted to pursuing the good of their fellow Christians. (see vv. 14-15)

Finally, Paul provides the equivalents of the little rules of grammar, the rhymes and memory aides that nudge the mind in the right direction despite the new behavioural language not yet being learnt by heart. Verses 16-22 can be thought of in this way. They are short and pithy; relatively easy to memorise:

Rejoice always, pray without ceasing, give thanks in all circumstances; for this is the will of God in Christ Jesus for you.

It is unfortunate that at least one translation of the Bible has rendered the first part as “Be joyful always”. It has caused no end of confusion, because it suggests that Paul is telling us to always *feel* what we often don’t feel. There are many reasons and circumstances in life which may mean we feel anything but joyful; and in fact the Christian community of the early Church in Thessalonica would have as much reason as any to not feel joyful as they suffered under persecution.

Rather than “be joyful always” Paul’s injunction is “Rejoice always”. In other words, Paul is telling the community of the Thessalonian Church that they (and we) should always be celebrating. So the first point to make is that this isn’t about being told how we should *feel*; rather, it is telling us that we should always have the *behaviour* of celebrating.

But doesn’t this amount to the same thing and present the same problem?

The thing is that the Christian always has reason to be celebrating. Right in the midst of suffering, we still celebrate the good news, the fact that Christ is king over the world; we celebrate his victory over the Evil One and his works; we celebrate our adoption into the family of God. Our celebration is proclamation of this new reality, which is yet to be made public and generally recognised.

In celebrating we help keep our orientation right, in the midst of all that the world and life throws at us, in the midst of a culture that tells us either that there is no hope or that our hope lies simply in self-fulfilment; in the midst of the activity of the Evil One who seeks to undermine our confidence in Christ.

In celebrating we honour God and Christ.

In celebrating we bear witness. Others may catch a glimpse of our rejoicing and wonder at the reason for it. Like John the Baptist, we point away from ourselves to the One who truly is the source of our life, salvation, and hope.

In celebrating we are engaged in spiritual warfare; we dishearten God’s opponents as we declare the news of God’s victory.

For the same kinds of reasons we are to give thanks to God in all circumstances. I remember being told also that this is not the same thing as giving thanks to God *for* all circumstances. The Christian needs to learn to give thanks to God, regardless of what is going on, because our very life, whatever we have, our salvation, and all we can look forward to is due to his gracious and generous grace. It is not due to our own effort or merit.

And, Paul says, we are to pray continually.

In prayer we align ourselves with the will of God, and we engage in the priestly work humankind was given at the beginning – bringing the concerns of creation before our merciful and gracious God, and constantly bringing creation's worship before the throne of God. In this too, we anticipate what life in the coming kingdom will entail.

We may not always feel like praising, praying or giving God thanks. Our circumstances may not be conducive to these things. Yet we are to do so all the same. Why? Because, as Paul says, *this is God's will for you in Christ Jesus (18b)*. It is God's will, as expressed and seen in Jesus Christ, whenever his people meet together for worship, and whatever their feelings and circumstances may be, that there should be rejoicing in him, praying to him, and giving him thanks for his mercies.<sup>2</sup>

I said at the beginning that one of the difficulties with rules being put into slogans is that we still have to do important work of interpretation and application into the particular context. The same is true in the Church. So Paul goes on to present two rules that we should be open to the fresh winds of the Spirit. The situation faced by the Church in New Zealand is quite different to how it was in our youth, so we should expect God to be doing new things among us. We need to be alert to this, and not extinguish this new work of the Spirit among us and not despising God's speaking new truth through those who are attuned to his voice.

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<sup>22</sup> Stott, p.126

Finally, Paul presents three simple rules about making correct judgements about these things: test everything, cling tight to what is good, and keep away from everything that even looks evil.

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Paul presents these simply stated rules because few of us grow up with Christian behaviour as our native language. The rules will help us; but we know too that this is a lifelong journey of getting the grammar of Christian behaviour coming naturally. The old word for this lifelong journey is “sanctification” – it is a journey to holiness. And it is something to which God is committed on our behalf: Paul concludes with these encouraging words:

May the God of peace himself sanctify you entirely; and may your spirit and soul and body be kept sound and blameless at the coming of our Lord Jesus Christ. The one who calls you is faithful, and he will do this.

This, the third Sunday of Advent, is also known as *Gaudate Sunday*, taking its name from the Latin word for “Rejoice!”. Advent can be seen as quite a penitential season, as we appropriately prepare ourselves for the coming of the Lord – we repent so that we may indeed be found sound and blameless at the coming of our Lord Jesus Christ. *Gaudate Sunday* was thought of as providing a bit of a respite from the solemn tone – we “lighten up”, lighting a pink candle instead of a purple one, perhaps displaying rose-coloured vestments and so on.

But now, having seen what Paul has to say, to me this distinction of *Gaudate Sunday* may not be as important as it might have appeared. It is not that we rejoice so that we can take a bit of a break from the heavy work of preparing for the Lord. Rather, in fact, we rejoice because the Lord is coming; and we rejoice, we celebrate, we give thanks, precisely because this is how we prepare for the coming of the Lord.

**Sources:**

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