

# Be a Countercultural Community

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[ 0 : 0 0 ] Well, thank you, everyone who's participated. If you keep that passage open, it will be helpful as we're going to be looking at a few verses as we go along. But before we do that, should we just pray together? Let's pray.

Heavenly Father, as we turn to your word this evening to hear what it would teach us, how it applies to our lives, we ask that the speaker would decrease and that your word would increase.

We ask that your will would be done in everything that is said. And Lord, we pray that we would leave this building changed people for your glory. In Jesus' name. Amen.

As people who live in Scotland, we're not that used to summer, are we? And so we love to go abroad. Now, many of you have probably already been on holiday this summer. And I wonder if as you're on holiday, you felt a little bit visible.

So I know when I go on holiday, I stand out quite a bit because I have this kind of pale glow amongst the sea of bronze people as I'm away.

[ 1 : 0 7 ] So like many other British people, I stand out on holiday. I'm completely different, very distinguishable from those who live in a sunny country. So on holiday, I generally have two colors.

I have sun-starved white and lobster red. Those are the two colors that I have. So you can, as with many other British, you can spot me a mile away. I stand out.

Well, in our first, as Graham began our series on 1 Thessalonians, he started us off by thinking about the things that make Christians stand out. So what is it that makes a Christian stand out?

What makes us different? In chapter one, we thought about the Christian individual. But in chapter five, this evening, we're going to be thinking about the whole of the church community. And Paul tells the church to be a countercultural community.

This evening, Paul is saying, be countercultural. So in chapter one, you see the marks of a Christian. Chapters two and three, Paul outlines his own ministry to the Thessalonians and a report that Timothy brought back to him of how they're getting on.

[ 2 : 1 4 ] Paul was so happy to receive this news because he'd been praying for them, almost having those nail-biting moments, figuring out how they're doing. And then Timothy comes back and says they're doing well.

And he rejoices. And then chapters four and five, Paul is addressing things that Timothy may have reported as being slightly off or things that the Thessalonians were doing, but they should continue to grow in.

And all of this is to be done in anticipation of the return of Jesus Christ. So we started about thinking of the Christian individual. And now we think about the marks of a church, what it means to be a countercultural community.

And everything in this letter shows that a Christian is fundamentally different from those around us. I'd like to do something slightly different this evening by starting off by putting this whole passage in the context of Paul's wish and prayer for these Christians.

So if you look at verses 23 and 24 with me, Paul reminds his original readers and us that the only way we can be countercultural, the only way we can be different in this society is because of God's power living within us.

- [ 3 : 31 ] So there are three aspects to Paul's short prayer. Sanctification, the second coming of Jesus Christ and God's calling. Working out all of these things that Paul has been teaching in this letter is only possible because the Spirit of God dwelling within believers. And Paul is praying for their sanctification, meaning that they would grow in their holiness. Living a moral life and simply being a good person will not help you on that day when Jesus Christ returns.

However, being in Jesus Christ's will. Being chosen and being called by God into his family, being transformed by the Holy Spirit is all working out God's will for your life.

And because of Jesus' death on the cross, you will be blameless at his return if you are a Christian. So this is Paul's prayer and encouragement for the Thessalonians to live this countercultural lifestyle.

Because they have been called by God, they are being sanctified by the Holy Spirit and because they are awaiting the return of Christ and they will be found blameless. Therefore, Paul says, let your relationships mirror these truths.

- [ 4 : 47 ] Let these truths permeate every area of your life and become different from the world around you. Be a countercultural community that is prepared for Jesus as he returns and be preparing others for that day.

And to be a countercultural community, Paul focuses on three relationships within the church. Relationship with leaders, with each other and with God.

So the first relationship that Paul speaks about is their relationship with leaders in verses 12 to 13 and 25 to 27. Relationship with leaders.

Now think for a second how our world treats leaders today. All you have to do is turn on shows like Question Time, where it's open season on the politician sitting on the stage.

The media seem to be going beyond all personal boundaries to get the newest scoop on the moral or political failure of the leaders of this country. Phrases like dump Trump roll easily off our lips.

- [ 5 : 50 ] Our society today, generally speaking, has no regard for authority. People mock those in places of authority. Comedians get a good laugh out of us by ridiculing and pulling politicians down.

But Paul says that Christians are to have good relationships with their leaders. And here he has elders in mind. So men who have devoted themselves to the teaching and training of a local church.

Men who have given sacrificially of themselves that the church may know God more. Men who are dedicated to the teaching of God's word. And for the caring of a church by applying God's word.

So in verse 12, Paul is encouraging the Thessalonians to have a right relationship with their leaders because of their work in the church. Now Paul isn't asking them politely to do these things.

He is urging them, pushing them on, encouraging them to have this relationship with their leaders. And he draws out three categories for leaders and three attitudes that the whole church should have towards them.

- [ 6 : 58 ] So the three categories of work for elders are those who work hard or labour, those who are over, and those who admonish.

So this is a short job description of what we should expect from our elders here at Bronzefield Evangelical Church. The labouring or working hard in verse 12 is a general principle, not just for elders.

So we can't sit back and relax. This is for everybody, every member in the church. However, elders do bear a bigger responsibility in the work of the church. Elders work hard.

And secondly, they are over, meaning that they rule, they're in a position of authority. The NIV, the new NIV translates it as care for you in the Lord, but it's better translated as those who are over you.

Elders are not just those who sit in a meeting and discuss church life once a month. That is what they do, but their job is far more than that. They have a responsibility for each and every person under their care.

[ 8 : 04 ] It is their responsibility to give advice, to lead, to guide, to counsel people and to teach people. And all of this is to be done based on the Bible, on the Word of God.

Now at Brunsfield, we have six elders, each of them with very busy lives, each of them working hard in jobs, in other ministries across the city, and each of them also have families that they're responsible for.

Now I have the privilege of seeing some of these men in action day in, day out in the office. And I have the privilege of sitting in their elders meetings and seeing all of the works that they do. And let me tell you that it is a lot.

But despite their busyness, despite the time constraints on their lives, they work tirelessly for us here at Brunsfield.

These men are responsible for how they teach us as a congregation. They are leaders. And therefore, when we are making big decisions, when we're looking for help, when we want to learn about what the Bible teaches about something, these are the men that we should be going to.

[ 9 : 10 ] These are the men who one day will have to give an account before God on how they led this church. They are in a position of authority. They are over us.

And lastly, an elder is someone who admonishes the church, meaning church discipline. Now church discipline isn't something we really like to think about today. Because society tells us that no one can correct us or rebuke us.

Every person does what is right in their own eyes. Today, parents are afraid that saying no to their children might damage their relationship. People feel that it is judgmental to tell someone that they're not living according to God's will for humanity.

People have bought into this idea that there is no such thing as objective truth. But each person can pick and choose what they want. Everyone does what is right in their own eyes.

And all of this is factored into a global lack of church discipline. But elders are to practice church discipline based on the Bible. And in the New Testament, there are three areas that discipline is necessary.

[ 10 : 20 ] In doctrine, in holy living, and in church unity. So elders have a responsibility to discipline church members on their doctrine. To make sure that we are being faithful to the Bible's teaching.

On holy living. To make sure that we are killing sin before it is killing us, as John Owen famously said. And on church unity. Looking at these responsibilities.

Doesn't that help us see the need to pray for these men that God has put over us? Pray for Graham. For Ian.

For Peter. For Paul. For Fraser. And for David. And Paul encourages the church to respect them. To esteem the elders.

And to be at peace with each other for the elders. So how we treat our elders is important. If we're going to be a counter-cultural community, we need to respect and esteem them.

[ 11 : 21 ] That means we go along with their decisions, as long as they're based on the Bible. That we listen to the counsel that they give. We accept their discipline and we acknowledge their leadership.

We help them in their work and we back them up in every way we can. As long as they are acting and making decisions on the Bible. And God's will for his church and his people. And we pray for them.

Living this way in relation to our spiritual leaders. Will lead to a life of peace. Both among church members and their leaders. And among the church in general. Is this the relationship that we have with our elders?

When was the last time that we prayed for them? When was the last time that we consciously thanked them on a Sunday for all of the work they do? Or last time we sent them an email of encouragement?

Our elders are such a blessing to us and we should have their backs. We should stand by them, respect them and we should submit to and learn from them.

[ 12 : 28 ] The result of us as one church family having this relationship that Paul describes. Will be one church that is united around one common goal and vision.

And that is the Brunsfield Evangelical Church exists to glorify God through lives being transformed by the grace of Jesus Christ. To be able to do this.

To be this community that stands out for Jesus. To be a community that reaches out to those around us. We must be united and that starts first and foremost with the relationship with our leaders.

And in verses 25 and 27. Paul gives very specific tasks for the Thessalonian church to do for him because he is their leader. They are to pray for him.

Greet people on his behalf with a holy kiss. And read this letter before the whole church. So that's the first relationship. And the second relationship that Paul talks about is their relationship with each other.

[ 13 : 34 ] Versus 14 and 15. Their relationship with each other. Now because of our individualistic society. Because of the strive for complete autonomy.

Because of our desire to have this perfect appearance that everything is okay. Our world lacks community. Currently in the UK the group that feels loneliest are those between 16 and 24.

It's estimated that 10% of this age group always or often feels lonely. And that's compared to the 3% of those over 65.

Our world is becoming lonelier and lonelier. People are starting to feel more isolated. So maybe you saw on the news this week that there is basically a church without God down in Stockbridge.

People gather on a Sunday morning to sing songs. Listen to stories and poems. And to have some form of community which is disconnected from our creator.

[ 14 : 41 ] We live in a lonely world. But Paul says that we're to be different. We are to create this kind of community. Just glance over verses 14 and 15.

And see some of the words that Paul says should characterize our church. And the relationships in the church. Warn the lazy and disruptive. Encourage the disheartened.

Help the weak. Be patient with everybody. Don't repay wrong for wrong. Strive to do good for each other in the church. And then he broadens it out at the end of verse 15. And says do good to everyone.

That's referring to those outside the church. This list is all encompassing. It has stuff that we maybe find slightly easier. Like encouraging and helping people practically.

But there's also some pretty difficult stuff in there too. Comforting, confronting lazy people over their lack of drive by using the Bible is not easy.

[ 15 : 41 ] It actually leads to some pretty uncomfortable conversation. But God has weaved work into the fabric of humanity. We were created to work.

Whether that's working in a nine to five office job. Whether that's caring for someone. Whether that's serving in the church. Whether that's volunteering. Or whether that's working, doing the work you do around the house every single day.

Whatever shape or form that work takes. Do it all for the glory of God. Paul says don't be lazy and warn those who are. Now people can be out of work for many reasons.

That could be ill health or a lack of jobs and so on. Paul is not saying that being unemployed means you're lazy. But he is saying that people shouldn't be sitting on their hands or twiddling their thumbs until Jesus returns.

Likewise, I don't think it's easy to warn those who are disruptive, is it? But this warning shouldn't come from our own opinion or our own preferences and the way things should be done.

[ 16 : 46 ] It should be based on the instructions that God has given in his word. This book is not just a rule book. It is not just a self-help book.

But it is a revelation of God. Of his will. For his people. Love the Bible. Live the Bible. Eat, breathe and sleep the Bible.

This is what we live by. And warn people according to what the Bible says. Do you know how we can have these kind of relationships in church?

By not wearing a mask on a Sunday. It's so easy and I'm guilty of this myself. Walking through the doors on a Sunday morning and when you get asked, how are you doing?

Without even thinking. You just say, oh, I'm fine. How are you? Do you know what fine stands for? Feelings inside not expressed. So often we walk into church wearing a mask, pretending that everything is okay.

[ 17 : 51 ] And then people feel this strange kind of pressure because everybody else seems to be okay. And so it turns out we have a room on a Sunday morning of 150 people all pretending to be happy and perfectly all right.

Because that's the socially acceptable thing to do. Do you want me to tell you a secret? That's probably at least 130 people wearing a mask. How different would our relationships be in church if we were honest?

Imagine someone walking through the door and responding to the how are you question with, well, actually I'm struggling. This and this happened to me this week and I have no idea how to deal with it. That gives us the opportunity to share life, to share the ups and downs with people, to care for each other well and to pray with each other.

Imagine the difference it would make if when that person comes in and you say, I have no idea how to deal with this. Can we just pray about it together? That is the most practical application of encourage the disheartened.

Praying with somebody, listening to somebody and practically helping people where possible. That is the life that Paul is calling us to. But it requires each and every one of us to be open.

[ 19 : 17 ] To be prepared, to be vulnerable. Now don't get me wrong, use your God-given discernment. It isn't always right to tell everybody absolutely everything that's going on in your life.

And there are very legitimate reasons you might want to keep something to yourself. But so often in church we like to serve practically and help out on rotas and things.

One thing churches don't do well is work in the pew. To see how each other are getting on. Are your relationships with each other like this?

As we finish this service this evening. As we come to church next Sunday morning and evening. As we meet people through the week. Why not be honest? See what a difference it makes.

Why don't we be open and share the truth of how we're really doing. If every single person in this room tonight. Asked one person every week over the next month.

[ 20 : 18 ] How they can be praying for them. How they can be helping them. And actually doing it. We will have a church that is more honest and open. We will have deeper relationships.

Stronger relationships. And we will be a community. We will be a community that is characterized by care for and love for each other. And all of this is to be done in light of God's desire for our sanctification.

For our being made more holy. More into the likeness of Jesus. And in anticipation of his second coming. Living like this will be completely counter-cultural.

It will change the way we view each other. And it will change the way those outside the church view us. It will create opportunities for us to tell people about Jesus.

Why? Well because on a Sunday morning this room is full of people from different ages. Different stages. Different jobs. Different countries. Different backgrounds. But we all have one thing in common.

[ 21 : 23 ] We are part of one family under the lordship of Jesus Christ. Jesus' death on the cross made forgiveness of sins possible. It gave us the privilege of being in a right relationship with God.

But it also gave us a global family. The size of which we will never be able to comprehend. A practical example of this is two weeks ago.

A visitor came to church on a Sunday morning from Egypt. I'm from Scotland. He was a university lecturer. I'm a university student. He loved science and academia.

I have no idea about science. And me and academia don't really get on that well. We had basically nothing in common. But for 15 minutes before the church service we were able to speak together about Jesus.

We spoke about how we both became Christians. How it's a privilege to be in church on a Sunday. How it is a privilege to have God's word in our own language.

[ 22 : 24 ] Worldly speaking we had nothing in common. But we shared the most important thing in the world. Jesus Christ. That's the joy and blessing of Christian community.

Be different Paul says. Be counter cultural and have good relationships with each other. And then the third and final relationship that Paul speaks about is their relationship with God.

In verses 16 to 22. Relationship with God. So verses 16 to 18 are calling for us to have a very God orientated focus on our lives.

Rejoice. Rejoice always. Pray continually. And give thanks in all circumstances. Paul.

Have you lost your mind? Do you know how difficult this is? Especially when this joy is probably in relation to suffering.

- [ 23 : 27 ] By living in a world that hates Jesus. And hated these Christians. But Paul knows more than most what it means to suffer for the gospel. Paul has been stoned for his preaching. He's been whipped. He's been shipwrecked. He's gone hungry. And even in Thessalonica in Acts chapter 17. We're told that he had to flee just weeks after he arrived.
- Because a mob wanted him dead. Because of what he was preaching. And yet he still says to these people. Rejoice. Paul knows that everything is given from God.
- And Paul also knows that no persecution or trial is ever severe enough that it can pull him away from his Savior Jesus Christ. And his relationship with God.
- The glorious truth that Jesus died and rose again and that he reigns in heaven cannot be taken away by suffering. Christian.
- [ 24 : 29 ] Rejoice. Because you have been forgiven by Jesus. He took your punishment on the cross so that you can be freed from the destructive master of sin.
- And be freed to serve a glorious king who is characterized by love and kindness for his people. God has declared you free from your sins and rebellion against him.
- We have all the cause to rejoice in the world. And if you're not a Christian this evening, that is the message of the gospel. That Jesus Christ, the Son of God, died on a cross taking the punishment for sin.
- That he rose again, defeating sin and death. And that he is now in heaven. And will return one day to gather his people to himself. Do you know Jesus?
- In him alone can true joy and true satisfaction be found. Now this joy doesn't mean that Christians will always be happy.
- [ 25 : 32 ] The Bible tells us to expect pain and suffering on account of what we believe. But in the midst of that sorrow, in the midst of that suffering. Our relationship with God through Jesus Christ will pull us through.
- It can never be severed. And our suffering is only temporary. Jesus will return. Therefore, Paul says, always be praying and always be thanking God.
- Just a few weeks ago, I heard a story of a woman who was in a hospital. And she was being visited by the new assistant pastor. Just arrived in his post. And he went for his first hospital visit.
- And he was taken aback because this woman was always smiling. She couldn't walk. She'd lost the use of her legs. But she was always smiling. She was thankful for the fact, she said, that she could sit up and read her Bible.
- So a few weeks go past and the man goes and visits again. And then she'd lost the use of her arms. And still that smile took him aback every single time.
- [ 26 : 41 ] She said that she was thankful for her sight. And then this went on for months and months. And her health deteriorated. Got worse and worse. And the young man just couldn't grasp how thankful she always was.
- And then on the last visit. When she couldn't move. She was blind. Had no use of her body. In the eyes of the world. She had every single reason to be miserable to her core.
- The young man asked, what are you thankful for? And she said, I'm so thankful that I will be meeting Jesus Christ. And that I will have a perfectly new glorified body.
- Rejoice always. Pray continually and give thanks in all circumstances. The only way that this is possible as Christians is because we have the Holy Spirit.
- God living within us. Now that is a marvelous truth that I've been a Christian for a number of years. And I still can't get my head around how amazing that is. We have God living within us.

[ 27 : 53 ] In the New Testament, the Holy Spirit is described as a fire. He is God living within believers. And in verse 19, Paul says, do not quench the work of the Holy Spirit.

Now looking at that verse in this context, I think it's referring to two things. Firstly, it's referring to the work of sanctification. The work of us being made more holy.

The Holy Spirit enables us to live out this counter-cultural life as a church community. The Holy Spirit is conforming us to the image of Jesus.

Paul says, do not quench that work. Do not resist or do not try to hinder the work of the Holy Spirit in your life or in the life of others. But instead, be supportive.

Be encouraging people to grow in their holiness by the power of the Spirit. And then secondly, the work of the Holy Spirit has to do with prophecy.

[ 28 : 52 ] And Paul says, do not treat such prophecies with content. In the original context of the Thessalonian church, we do not know what this prophecy looked like. But in a sense, we don't really need to know what it was like exactly because the teaching remains the same.

Paul says, test everything. If it stands true according to the Bible, according to the word of God, let it be heard by the congregation. But if it does not stand up, then do not give it airtime.

The Thessalonian church didn't have the New Testament as we have it today. They only had the Old Testament, but even that wasn't available for them to pick up and read at any time.

And so God used prophecy to bring his word to his people. They would give instructions to the church, declarations about God and what he has done.

Prophecies were to strengthen believers in their faith. Encourage believers as they face a world which hates them and their king, Jesus. And to comfort the discouraged and downtrodden.

[ 30 : 03 ] But it appears that there might have been those who despised these words and who didn't listen. And Paul is telling the whole church, listen to what people say, but test everything.

God's word is one good, cohesive word and revelation of himself. It does not contradict itself. God's word is not changing just like God is not changing.

Therefore, any word from God should be tested. Be like the Bereans who in Acts 17, when they hear the message of Jesus, accept it with great eagerness and examined the scriptures every single day to see if what Paul was saying was true.

Do we have this relationship with God? God's word is truth. God's word is.

God's word is truth.

[ 31 : 56 ] Do not just take it. Go home, pick up your Bible and check if what has been said is correct. Go and search the Bible for yourself and see if the preacher has been faithful to the word of God.

God's word is truth. God's word is truth. As Christians who have been set apart by God and for God through Jesus' death on the cross and who are being made more into the image of his son through the work of the Holy Spirit, we are being called to live countercultural lives.

God's word is truth. But this doesn't come naturally to us. And it isn't easy. It isn't easy. It isn't a walk in the park. It's difficult to live with all of these relationships being perfect just as Paul describes they should be.

But that is where the glorious truth of verse 24 comes in. God wants us to live this way. And the one who calls us is faithful and he will do it.

And that means that this life of countercultural holiness that God calls us to will be made possible because of who God is. He is faithful.



[ 33 : 04 ] Do not look to your own strength as you try to grow in holiness, but look to and rely on the work of the Holy Spirit and rely on God. Let's pray together.

Heavenly Father, we come before you this evening as an unholy people. As people who at our core are sinful, we rebel against you every single day, every single minute of every single day.

And yet you are faithful. You call us to yourself and you make us holy. You make us more into the image of your son through the work of your Holy Spirit.

Father, we thank you that you have not left us in this world by ourselves, but you have revealed yourself through your word and you have given us your Holy Spirit that he may guide us, train us in holiness and be preparing us for the return of Jesus.

Lord, we eagerly await for that day. Give us strength to live in this world to glorify you.

[ 34 : 22 ] In your son's name we ask. Amen.