

# 1 Thessalonians 5:12-28

## Trivial Christianity

Notes from a Sermon preached at Christ Church Liverpool

**Big idea:** Wearing gospel armour has everyday consequences for our love of others, faith in God and hope for Christ's coming.

**Big application:** Live godly in life's details knowing that God will finish what he starts.

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Being a Christian in twenty first century Britain is difficult. If you are a Christian here this morning you will almost certainly share your workplace with 95% or more of people who do not believe what you do.

If you are a Christian here this morning your moral stance on subjects as immigration, abortion, helping the 'undeserving' poor, divorce, sexual activity outside marriage and euthanasia is almost certainly a minority view.

If you are a Christian here this morning sharing Jesus' view that belief in him is the only way to know God will be offensive to the vast majority of your colleagues and neighbours even though most of them couldn't articulate any rational reason for finding that offensive.

Being a Christian in twenty first century Britain is difficult. Being a Christian in twenty first century China is difficult to; although Christianity is officially a state protected religion the reality is much messier and many Christians are still persecuted.

The truth is that being a Christian has almost always been difficult in every place in the world. So difficult, in fact, that God inspired the writers of the New Testament to use images of a battle to describe what it's like to live as a Christian in this messed up world. Living as a Christian in a world where people who are opposed to Christ and the devil himself as well as our own sinful nature fight against those who are, as Paul described them in our passage last week, children of light.

For all that much Christian culture in our day likes to present the Christian life as like a place of healing or a wonderful journey of discovery it is also a battle.

And in a battle you need armour. This morning we are going to learn about the items we can wear that provide total protection from any weapon that a fallen world, or its ruler, the evil one himself, can aim at us.

Paul starts talking about this armour in v8 of our passage – faith and love, he says, are like a breastplate and the hope of salvation like a helmet. If you've been a Christian any length of time you've probably heard teaching on the armour of God – perhaps from passage like Ephesians 6 or Isaiah 59.

But I've sometimes found that teaching rather vague. After all it's all very well to exhort people to "put on faith." But

what does that actually mean? How do I put on faith? And how do I know when I've done that?

Imagine that you are visiting one of Britain's many ancient castles. You turn up, pay the extortionate admission fee to look at some really old stones and then enter the castle. There's a medieval fair going on with all sorts of stall and shows.

Someone comes up to you. "We've got a problem and you look the right size to solve it." You're like, "what?"

"There's a jousting competition and one of the competitors has just had to pull out. You just have to ride a horse and have a big spear thing stuck in you. But you get armour so you'll be fine. Come on. There's not a minute to lose."

This stranger drags you over to a pile of metal and leather and says "right, there you go. That's all the armour you need. Breastplate there, helmet there, jerkin there, leg pieces, there, arm pieces there, neck protector there, very important that. See you at the stables in 10 minutes."

You've got the armour. You know which piece is which. But it all just looks like straps and plates and stuff to you. How on each do you actually put it on? What do you do to make sure a breastplate stays in place?

Well in the passage we're looking at this morning Paul doesn't just tell us what spiritual armour is – faith and love are a breastplate and hope is a helmet. He also tells us what Christians have to do to put the armour on – the clip the clips and buckle the buckles.

That does mean that we'll be focussing in on lots of different little bits and pieces. You have to do the straps up one at a time. But as we go along I'll try and help us make sure that, in the details, we don't lose sight of the fact that all Paul's instructions to the Christians in Thessalonica, and to us, are part of a big picture. They are all telling us how to put on the armour of God. And Paul helps us to remember the big picture by arranging his instructions into three groups. Verses 12-15 tell us how to put on love. Verses 16-22 tell us how to put on faith and verses 23 and 24 tell us how to put on hope.

Not only that but, as we'll see, Paul carefully structures almost everything else in this passage into groups of three to remind us that we are dealing with this wonderful trinity of virtues that God delights to bring about in his people.

God is speaking to us this morning, calling us to put on his armour in the areas of faith, hope and love.

### 1 Love – for leaders, each other and the world (v12-15)

The very first thing Paul says about what it practically

means to put on God's armour, what part Christians can play in defending ourselves from the attacks of the world, the flesh and the devil, shows just how far Paul's thinking is from the kind of secret spiritual solution that most of the time is the thing that, in my sinfulness, I want from the Bible.

How can Christians put on the breastplate of love? By respecting church leaders. Paul talks about those who work hard in among you, those who are over you in the Lord and those who admonish you. This is not three groups of people - it's one group of people. Who is a church leader? It's someone who works hard, has spiritual authority and who uses it. In our church that means the elders of the church who the church members recognise in a regular, formal process at our members' meetings.

Now this is one of those times when I'm glad that, as a church, we don't just pick random bits of Scripture each week and preach on them; because then it would look as if I had specially chosen this passage because I want people to respect me because I'm a church leader. But that's not how we do things here. I'm preaching these verses today because we're working through 1 Thessalonians and they are here!

So why should highest regard in love for church leaders be the top of the list for Paul when it comes to putting on the armour of love?

Well this kind of love is distinctively Christian because it's a love in submission. That is particularly challenging to our culture. There are millions of people out there in the western world who think that the only way they and their children can really love each other is if the parental boundaries are dissolved to that our kids become our "best friends." Millions of people who think that if someone has authority over us they can't really love us. Millions of people who think that if someone has the right to tell me what to do that is incompatible with them loving me or me loving them.

Paul wants us to know that's not true. In fact just the opposite is true. Because the greatest love any of us will ever receive and the first love any of us ought to give is to someone who is over us - the Lord himself. Authority and love are not incompatible.

What will it mean to respect and hold in high regard the elders of your church? Well I don't think I can give you a list. I don't think it means you have to buy us expensive Christmas presents (not that we'd complain) or that you have to tell us that we're wonderful all the time (because we know we're not). And I don't think it's about paying those of us who work full-time as church leaders lots of money (though there are plenty of churches, fortunately not like this one, where the money they pay definitely shows people don't honour their leaders!).

Actually if you really love the church leaders you will value what we value. You will value the work of the church for the gospel. Any of the elders would swap 20 people saying "you're amazing" for 20 people deciding to become church members. Any of the staff would swap a pay rise for more of you deciding that coming to pray once a month on Sunday evenings actually matters.

As a church you have acknowledged God's gifting of each of the elders as your spiritual leaders. So when Chris or Dave or Tom or Pete or Maurice admonishes you, loving them means listening to them.

The collective wisdom of the church is that we are the people who can best help you grow spiritually. So Paul says you will be protecting yourself from evil by taking notice of the words of God we bring to you. But it's not just church leaders; the armour of love requires love for all Christians.

Paul introduces another of his little triplets here: warn the idle, encourage the timid, help the weak.

There were some people in the church in Thessalonica, as there are some people here, who were idle. A better word to translate there would actually be "disorderly." Their problem wasn't that they were on the dole - anybody can find themselves unemployed. Their problem was that they weren't doing anything about it.

They were like the student who doesn't seem to get that when you agree to be a full-time student at a university your responsibility is to give your full-time to studying, even if you only have four hours of lectures a week. The library is always open people...

They were like the person whose method for keeping their job is relying on the fact that it's very difficult to sack people in most big organizations rather than actually trying to do a good job.

They were like the person who never has time for church on a Sunday night but who you find when you get home has had plenty of time in those couple of hours to post their life on Facebook.

How do you love people without order in their lives? Well you don't ignore them (that's the default option for most of us with people we find frustrating isn't it?) And you don't do everything for them. You warn them. If that's you this morning then let me warn you: a disorderly life is spiritual poison, it speaks ill of the Lord Jesus and it will lead you to waste your life.

Others in Thessalonica, and here, were timid. They struggled to be out there in telling people about Jesus or in living the Christian life.

What should we do for those in our church who struggle in that way? Not tell them it doesn't matter. Not feed them the line about not everybody being an evangelist to it's not important if the people in your office don't know you're a Christian. No we should encourage the timid.

If you are timid let me tell you this morning that we are with you. I can't promise that if you invite people to the carol services, or talk on Monday about what you did at church this weekend that it will be fine. They might say no. They might not want to listen. But I can tell you that it's the right thing to do. I can tell you that if you ask people here they will pray for you. I can assure you that Christ is with you as you do into the world.

And then there are the weak. Almost always in Paul's letters that phrase refers to people who have a problem of conscience in relation to something Christians ought to be able to do freely. It's the word used of the Christian who thinks Christians shouldn't eat certain foods or drink certain drinks or that they should keep special days when in fact Christians can eat and drink what we like and treat every day as equally dedicated to serving God.

If you are weak this morning the job of the church is to help you. To help you understand the wonderful freedom of the Christian gospel.

We should warn, encourage and help one another. But putting on the armour of love for other Christians takes patience. Because the other people don't always heed the warning. They don't always respond to the encouragement. They often don't want to be helped.

When that happens our tendency is mostly to sack people off. To say we've done our bit and leave it at that. That's not an option Paul gives us. When people don't respond in the way you believe they need to what should you do? Be patient. Wait for the right moment. Take your time. Much good advice and help is ignored simply because the person giving it has chosen the wrong moment.

If you're a LifeGroup leader you should be doing a lot of this kind of stuff. If someone ignores you don't nag about it or ignore it forevermore. Wait a bit, pray and try and pick a better moment in a few weeks time or in a couple of months to try and engage that idle, timid or weak brother or sister.

Putting on the armour of God means living your leaders, loving the church and, thirdly, loving everyone.

It's almost a throw away line, but what a massive statement this is when you think about it: always try to be kind to each other and to everyone else.

It's sometimes said that the New Testament only really discusses how Christians should love one another. And it's true that most of the passages about loving other people do focus on those within the church. But there are plenty of snippets throughout the New Testament which show that its authors were deeply concerned about how Christians treated everyone. The book of Galatians urges us to do good for all people. And here we are called to be kind to everyone.

Remember the point of all this: the armour of God, protection for your heart and soul from evil, comes when you are kind to people.

That means, v15, being willing to forgo justice. Kindness isn't so much helping an old lady across the road (though that might be a good idea). It's helping your colleague finish a report when last week he slagged off your idea in a department meeting. It's helping the office bully fix his computer problem. It's speaking gently to the surly, miserable shop assistant.

How does love protect you like a breastplate? When you choose to show love, in everyday intensely practical situations to church leaders, to other Christians and to

everyone.

Secondly Paul tells us how to put on the armour of faith:

## **2 Faith – which doesn't quit when times are hard (v16-22)**

We start this section with another one of Paul's triplets in v16-18; he's constantly wanting to remind us that this is not some random selection of rules; it's all about putting on the armour of faith, hope and love.

V16 is one of those "smack you in the face verses." I don't mean that the impact of what it says smacks you in the face, though I'm sure it should. I mean it's the kind of verse that, when someone says it to you when you've just dropped a heavy object on your foot or your computer has just crashed makes you want to smack them in the face!

What does it mean to be joyful always? Does it mean that Christians never cry?

What about praying continually? Does that mean, as some say, that Christians should live in a constant 'attitude of prayer' (whatever that means!) even if not actually praying all their waking moments?

And what does giving thanks in all circumstances involve? Does it mean thanking God for bad things that happen?

In fact the best way to understand each of these commands is to try and understand them together. That's so often true in the Bible – if you just take a single verse or a single command you're much more likely to misunderstand it. It's much easier to understand the Bible when you read it in context.

You probably noticed that in each of these verses there is a time reference: always, v16, continually, v17 and in all circumstances, v18.

The third one explains what the first two mean. Always doesn't mean 24/7. It means whether life feels good or bad. Continually doesn't mean without a second's pause. It means not just when you're in the mood.

God's will for Christians isn't that we mumble under our breath all the time and all it prayer. It's that whether we are given a pay rise or a P45, whether we get cash or cancer, whether we pass or fail our attitude to him remains the same; one of trust and confidence in his goodness and his plan.

It's important to notice that Paul doesn't say Christians are to give thanks FOR all circumstances. This isn't a call to masochism, where we pretend that being sick or losing your job or being disappointed in love is a good thing. It's not a call to masochism; it's a call to understand that, as terrible as they are, none of those things can take away from us what really matters.

The Bible never advocates dumb acceptance of whatever providence brings to us. The Psalms are full of people who question God, who express anger and sadness at this messed up world with all its injustices. The Lord of glory is quite capable of handling our fears and frustrations. But

we will be only be protected from that frustration becoming cynicism by the armour of faith. We can only be Christians who struggle rather than godless unbelievers when we put on the breastplate of faith; and that comes with thanksgiving, prayer and joy.

So the next time some bad circumstance happens and you are angry, hurt or confused bring it to the Lord. But bring to him too a sense of thankfulness for his character, for all the good things he has done in the world, for all the blessings you have in your life. That is the armour of faith that will protect you from becoming cold and hard towards the God who loves you.

V19-22 are the most difficult section of this passage, perhaps of the whole letter, to understand. So if you're falling asleep time to wake up and concentrate – not long to go now!

In some translations v19 says “do not quench the Spirit.” If you've been a Christian any length of time you've probably heard the phrase. But what does it mean?

What it doesn't mean is the thing I've heard this verse misused to teach: that we all have to do everything the most enthusiastic person in the church wants to do.

When I worked with the Christian Unions in Liverpool there was a student at a CU, not in Liverpool, who had a vision to put on a carol service in a lecture theatre that seated over 1,000 people. He said his picture showed him the lecture theatre full and overflowing. Given that the CU at the time consisted of just 20 people, and that none of them, including the person with the “vision” had shown any interest at all in doing evangelism until now my colleague suggested to him that perhaps a more modest venue, seating maybe 200 people would be wiser? That's terrible he was told. How faithless. What a quenching of the Spirit's vision.

The day rolls round. How many people turn up to the carol service? 16. Not even the whole of the CU can be bothered. Was the arrogant young man with the ‘vision’ repentant? No – he blamed the non-Christians for not responding to the Spirit's call to come, which there must have been because his vision as from the Lord.

Sadly that young man is not alone. There are plenty of people, many of them church leaders, who manipulate people into doing what they want with a kind of spiritual blackmail that anything else will be putting out the Spirit's fire.

Now it is true that there are some wet blankets in church life who want to put out every light of hope and squash every enthusiasm which a dose of what you call realism but which is really a kind of jaded, bitter cynicism. If that's you then repent!

But it's important to see that the opposite of quenching the Spirit in these verses isn't accepting every “prophecy” but testing it.

So what is a prophecy? And how does one “test” it?

We don't have time for a detailed breakdown of what prophecy is in the New Testament this morning. But it's very obvious as you read through Paul's letters what the purpose of prophecy is. Prophecy is words from God that encourage and build up other Christians and the church.

How should we treat words that build us up? How should we deal with it when someone comes to us and says something to encourage us as a Christian?

We should not treat encouragement with contempt. We should not be Christians who respond to people's encouragements – whether they are rebukes, admonishments, praises or words of comfort – dismissively. In our church we are unlikely to be downright rude to people and ignore what they say to us for our encouragement. But there are plenty of us who never really listen to the prophetic advice of our friends as they point out areas where we are weak and need to grow in godliness.

Don't be like that. Don't quench the work of the Spirit refining you through the words of others.

Instead, v21, test everything. Listen to the things people say to you; the words of the sermon you find challenging, the advice of your 1:1 partner, the rebuke of your LifeGroup leaders. Listen to them and then compare them with the Scriptures. And if what they say to you chimes with what the Scripture says then hold on to it. Take a firm grip on anything in your life that will help you to grow in faith.

If you find that you are being given bad words, bad advice, ungodly counsel, then, Paul says in v22, you should avoid such a person – it's best translated “avoid every evil one,” that is every false prophet, the person who says unhelpful or untrue things whilst pretending to be very spiritual. Yes you can ignore that person. But I don't think you'll meet many of them in our church. So if you want to put on the armour of God you need to listen and heed the encouragements of the Christians around you.

How does faith protect you like a breastplate? It protects you when in the everyday, ordinary, sometimes unpleasant situations of life you choose to give thanks to God and to listen to those around you who are encouraging you as a Christian.

Thirdly Paul tells us how to put on the armour of hope...

### **3 Hope – which looks for future blamelessness (v23-24)**

If 1 Thessalonians finished at v22 it would, I think, be quite depressing.

Because Paul would have finished with a list of things that we need to do. A list that, if you're anything like me, will seem to you a bit overwhelming.

But that's not where Paul finishes. He comes to the end of his letter with three things about the future, all of which teach us that in the end it is God who dresses us in the armour we need to live the Christian life until the day Christ returns.

How do you grow as a Christian? How do you fight the daily battles to go God's way not another way?

Not by sitting round on your bottom and waiting for God to do stuff in your life; the massively practical commands Paul has set out for us make that clear.

But equally nobody grows as a Christian by their own efforts. As you look at the things that have changed in your life and the ones that will change in the future it is God who has brought about that blamelessness, that sanctification, as Paul calls it in v23.

And one of the most powerful weapons you can bring to bear against the cynicism of a world that rejects God and the whisperings of the devil who hates God is the conviction that God will finish what he has started.

It seems to me that one of the things that most often leads people to give up on the Christian life, or to retreat into a shell that maintains church attendance but no real heartfelt conviction, is that we stop believing that God will carry on working in us till the end.

People start to think that God has done as much as he can with us. That after a few years of being a Christian the things in my life that are still a bit of a mess can never change. But that is not how the Bible ever thinks. For Paul the power of the gospel is such that God's work by his Spirit can sanctify his people through and through. Not that anybody in this life will ever attain a state of sinless perfection. But that for all those parts of our lives where we are still sinful there is hope for progress.

To believe that God will cure us completely of our sin in any aspect of life is to bring too much of eternity into this world and will lead you to disappointment.

But to believe that God does not intend to sanctify through and through, to make you blameless, to bring you to a place where every aspect of your life is visibly and clearly affected by the work of God, is to ignore the power of the gospel of Jesus Christ and will lead you to despair.

The Christian hope is not simply that Christ will return and make everything alright. He will! But our hope is more than that. Our hope is that until that day his grace will be with us.

But I'd like to finish this talk, and this series, with a couple of words to anyone here this morning who isn't a Christian.

Because it would be easy to come to a sermon like this one, to hear the list of things that the Bible calls Christians to think and to do, and imagine that moral conformity is at the heart of the Christian faith. It would be easy to imagine that being a Christian is a list of rules.

It isn't. Not one of the things Paul commands in this passage are what makes someone a Christian. Yes they are signs that the God of the Bible is at work in someone's life. Yes they are marks that distinguish Christian churches from other groups and communities.

But they are not things that bring you salvation. The thing that rescues people, the thing that brings men and women into this place where love, faith and hope are the highest virtues, is the belief of v9 and 10: the Lord Jesus died for us.

Please, please do not leave here this morning imagining that your life will be made better simply by trying harder to love other people or to have a cheerful and optimistic spirit.

That will not make your life better. It will just lead you to despair at your failure to love others as you know, deep down, you should and to misery as you realise that without the hope of eternal life in Christ there isn't really that much to be cheerful about in this world.

If you have not yet started the Christian life the first step is not to try and change yourself. The first step is to admit that you cannot change yourself, that you cannot make yourself good, that you cannot pay for your own sin. The first step is to throw yourself on the grace of the Lord Jesus who died for us.

If you have not done that, do it this morning. If you have done that then go into this week with confidence that God has given you all the armour you need to come blameless to eternity.

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