

REFLECTION 17 DECEMBER 2023 ADVENT 3

“The downside of piety”

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1 Thessalonians 5:16–24 (ESV): 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.

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.

Our Epistle reading from Thessalonians is a very pious injunction or authoritative order or warning from Paul the writer. Rejoicing, prayer and thanksgiving are not designated here as Sunday activities. They each emphasise “always,” “without ceasing,” “in all circumstances.”

The authenticity of 1 Thessalonians 2:13–16 is disputed by some because its content appears at odds with the surrounding passages and Paul's theology in other epistles.[5][15] However, the authenticity of the passage has continued to find defenders over the last two centuries, and in the last thirty years the common opinion has swung decisively in favor of authenticity.[16] It is also sometimes suggested that 1 Thessalonians 5:1–11 is a post-Pauline insertion that has many features of Lukan language and theology that serves as an apologetic correction to Paul's imminent expectation of the Second Coming in 1 Thessalonians 4:13–18.[17]

Rejoice always, 17 pray without ceasing, 18 give thanks in all circumstances; for this is the will of God in Christ Jesus for you. That's the sort of theology I grew up with, when someone cuts you down pray without ceasing, in all circumstances both good and bad. Forgive them even when you think you are

right and you know they are wrong. These verses are encouragement to recognise in every moment of our lives, in every decision we face, that as Christians we are challenged to do the reality of what God requires of us.

When I was on holiday from my ministry training in Dunedin my parents were hosting a village meeting of Samoan chief from my father's village in Samoa. They had come to fundraise for a village projects our house became their pseudo Turangawaewae their Samoan village malae and so hierarchy and protocol back in Samoa took precedence.

The marital roles of my parents in this context changed under these circumstances, mum became a nofo tane which means she is the in-law living with her husband's family. If dad lived with mums' family he would be a faiava the in-law living with his wife's family. In laws in village family situations had no voice and basically relegated to the kitchen. So because our Auckland home became the pseudo village of dad's family mum being a faiava did not have a voice particularly as an in-law but also because she was not a matai. It was hard for me to hear the women from the village in Samoa talk down to her and tell her she should know her place and that her place was to just sit and watch in silence and then to go into the kitchen and prepare a meal for everyone. In theory in our home dad was the head of our household, but in reality, mum was the real boss. I was in the next room listening to what was going on inside the meeting and I heard everything. It was so difficult for me at the time. My dad was a strict follower of the words "judge not lest ye be judged." He always was extremely humble and was the peace maker and mediator in all church disputes.

Dad had been the session clerk for over 30 years and during that time all the chiefs within our Pacific islander's church decided to form a church matai council and make dad the tu'ua or sa'o the high chief of our church's Samoan village. This is because we had some of the most violent fights break out between families within the church and these fights needed to be mediated the Samoan way not the NZ way involving police unless of course there were casualties. This was the solution that the matai council thought appropriate. If I had a choice, I would have them all thrown into jail. This intervention is similar to the marae and council of kaumatua and elders being involved in disputes that happen within Maori communities. A cultural type of restorative justice. Sometimes it's better to put a cultural lens on issues rather than a palagi lens which often resulted in palagi justice which was both positive and negative. I grew up in this context and our particular church was renowned for having the most physical fights compared with other churches.

One time I invited the moderator of the Council for World Mission who was visiting NZ to my church the Rev Dr Maitland Evans from the Uniting church of Jamaica and Grand Cayman Islands, we were having a special celebration on a Saturday. Downstairs in the Hall women were in the kitchen preparing the feast and the band was warming up and tuning their instruments. I was showing Maitland around our church complex, next minute a pot comes flying through the servery window and there was lots of screaming and swearing and physical punching. I was so embarrassed, I apologised to Maitland because we were caught right in the thick of it, in the wrong place at the wrong time. Maitland gently said to me in his strong Patawa Jamaican accent "no worries man, this is much the same as to what happens in our churches back home in Jamaica." I didn't feel so bad after that. I honestly believe many of the young

people and children in our church suffered and perhaps still suffer from undiagnosed PTSD.

Much of both church and society in Samoan society both in Samoa and within its diaspora communities is structured around the assumption that each individual knows the boundaries. One is expected to keep to the area in which he or she is experienced. When one oversteps the boundaries in any situation—whether child, parent, *matai*, or minister—one is reprimanded and told to keep to his or her side of the boundary. In Samoa, this is known as *aua le to'ia le va*, “Do not step over the gap.” Everyone is presumed to know his or her position within the family, and thus within the community. “If all keep to their place, then there is peace;” *la e iloa lou tulaga*. This complex network of authority, boundaries, and obedience is one of the basic values of the *fa'asamoa*, which is founded on the motto “*ia e iloa ava ma fa'aalalo*,” that you give respect and do so with humility.

Pie in the sky Christian evangelical conservative theology and piety means that true feelings stay hidden and simmering under the service dampened down by Christian values of turning the other cheek and blessing those that curse you, that eventually you will either implode or explode. And this is because you are forced to conform to the culture of your church, your village, your family and your real personal psyche remains stifled and repressed because that is what we are told to do in the church based on the literal application of biblical scripture.

Richard Baxter's 'The Reformed Pastor' provides an apt description of the role of the pastor as it was introduced and as it continues to be practised within

Samoan society. And the message that the pastor preaches is not necessarily practical. Baxter says “The Pastors, as leaders of the church, all eyes are on them, they are examples of Christ and of the Gospel. Therefore, their example should not contradict their doctrine. You have many eyes upon you, and there will be many to observe you fall” (Baxter, 1963, p.5). He continues to describe the role of the Pastor as one which is involved with visiting the sick to careful oversight of families. That the manner of their oversight to the flock must be with a deep sense of their own insufficiency and of their dependence on Christ. He concludes with the use of humiliation on account of their not seriously, unreservedly, and laboriously laying out themselves in their work by (i) negligent studies and (ii) by dull, drowsy preaching” (Baxter, 1963). It is possible that Richard Baxter’s book ‘The Reformed Pastor’ may have been significant for the Samoan ministry training school of Malua because it was a challenge for the ministry candidates to remain focused on the priorities of the call to ministry. The essence of Baxter’s writing lay in one’s oversight of the individual, that one is able to look and reflect on their own personal practice to avoid the pitfalls of bad practice in ministry. Baxter is primarily concerned about the students and ministers living out what they preached and not expecting from their congregation that which they don't do themselves.

So much gets swept under the mat because our Christian values and expectation is to always forgive and reconcile and so when we are wronged, we grin and bear it for the sake of Christian forgiveness and peace. Our parents always mediated when members of our extended family or our foster sibling’s marriages got into trouble. I think it was considered a failure when a marriage or a relationship couldn’t be reconciled or repaired and as a result so many

people continued to stay married because it was the right Christian thing to do even though they no longer loved or respected one another.

However, suffice to say, do not throw the baby out with the bath water. There are some sound biblical teachings that we can adapt particularly when it comes to living life to the fullest and in abundance. For me, this literally means to be free and live life to your full capacity in love and peace and loving your neighbour as you love yourself. Jesus was a revolutionary and the breaker of cultural and gender barriers. Micah 3:6-8 says “what does God require of us, just 3 things, to do justice, to love mercy and to walk humbly with your God. I think those are the tenets we are called to live by.

White hats and cardboard suits displayed our wonderful concern for purity on the outside. Our prayers of confession and condemnation of our sins ensured that our insides got washed as white as snow as well. Here's the poem I referred to in my E News this week called “So busy” this is my note that I wrote to God, called:

“So Busy?”

So busy trying to please God...playing church...

Serving on committees...

Walking with cardboard white suits and hats

Lips painted on faces in the position of a smile

Hearts hidden away to break another day.

So busy listening to God that one doesn't hear what God is really saying...or what the people have to say.

So busy playing church that I've forgotten why I came here in the first place.

Back in the solitude of my room off comes the cardboard suit

And the painted smile...

Out comes the Broken Heart.

Split in two, with no one to mend it except me and you!

Amen.