

Life in the Body
1 Thessalonians 5:12-15
March 30, 2025

“Christ loved the church and gave himself up for her” (Eph 5:25) Paul tells us. Jesus is passionately devoted to His bride, the church. He gave His life for her. He is now committed to each person that comprises His church. He is determined that His bride will be radiant in holiness and splendor. He is determined for His glory to shine through His church.

If we love the Lord Jesus Christ our Savior, we will love His church. If we love Jesus, then we *must* love His church.

There is no other organization on earth about which Jesus said these words: **“I will build my church, and the gates of hell shall not prevail against it” (Matthew 16:18).**

When God He saves an individual, He places them in a body of believers. Together, we are to grow in the likeness of Christ. Together, we are to follow the Lord.

In the church, the word is preached, we celebrate the ordinances of baptism and the Lord’s supper, we fellowship with one another, and through all this, we worship the Lord.

We are greatly blessed when we join a church family. Our spiritual growth is damaged and stunted when we separate ourselves from a church family.

I don’t have to tell you that being a part of a church family is hard work. Especially difficult, perhaps most difficult, is navigating the relationships within the body.

Paul is rounding the last turn in his letter to the Thessalonians, and in this last turn, he turns his attention to such a critical component of our Christian lives, and that is how we might enjoy our relationships within the church to the glory of God.

Paul begins with:

I. A Church and Its Leaders (vv. 12-13)

“We ask you, brothers, to respect those who labor among you and are over you in the Lord and admonish you” (12).

Paul speaks to what a church’s relationship should be to its leaders. God calls the leaders to labor hard for the good of the people, and God calls the people to love and respect their leaders.

Whom has God called to lead the church? God has determined that qualified men are to serve as elders.

They are called elders in Titus 1:5, speaking of their spiritual maturity. They are called overseers in 1 Timothy 3:1, speaking of their responsibility to lead the church and watch over its people and its functioning. They are also to be shepherds of the flock (1 Peter 5:2), speaking of their nurturing care of the people.

Our word pastor comes from the Latin word *pastor*, which literally means shepherd. There is a mistaken notion that the paid elders are the only pastors, while the unpaid, lay elders are just elders. This is an unbiblical distinction.

Now it's so important to note here that we have every indication that the leaders at Thessalonica were being and doing as God called them. So Paul calls on the people of the church to respect their leaders. This word means to acknowledge and recognize them, an interesting request by the apostle Paul.

Notice how Paul describes the leaders of the church.

He says that there are multiple leaders. Respect *those* who labor. The Bible never envisions one pastor as having the sole authority in the church. Our Lord's plan was for there to be a plurality of leaders.

Paul told Titus: **"This is why I left you in Crete, so that you might put what remained into order, and appoint elders in every town as I directed you" (Titus 1:5).** There were to be multiple elders in each church.

Paul then describes their work. First, he says that these leaders labor. This word for labor means to work and toil to the point of exhaustion and weariness.

It's critical that work leads the list. In Paul's opening verse on the qualification for an overseer, he says this: **"It is a trustworthy statement: if any man aspires to the office of overseer, it is a fine work he desires to do" (1 Tim 3:1, NASB).**

This work involves teaching, studying to teach, praying, counseling, shepherding, meeting with people, getting involved in people's lives. This is hard work.

'Let the elders who rule well be considered worthy of double honor, especially those who labor in preaching and teaching. For the Scripture says, "You shall not muzzle an ox when it treads out the grain," and, "The laborer deserves his wages" (1 Timothy 5:17-18).

I love what Calvin says here: **"In the first place, he says that they labour. From this it follows, that all idle bellies are excluded from the number of pastors" (Calvin, note on v. 12).**

What is the goal of the work of the elders? **“Him we proclaim, warning everyone and teaching everyone with all wisdom, that we may present everyone mature in Christ. 29 For this I toil (labor), struggling with all his energy that he powerfully works within me” (Colossians 1:28-29).**

The elders labor, and toil, and struggle to present everyone mature in Christ.

Notice the realm of the elders’ work. They **“labor among you”**, meaning that their toil is visible to the people.

First, the elders labor. Second, they lead.

Paul says they **“are over you in the Lord” (12)**. This phrase “are over you” comes from the Greek word: *“proistemi”*. It literally means to stand at the head of, standing in front of. It means to lead.

God has called the elders to lead the body and to exercise oversight. They are to set the direction of the church in obedience to Scripture. They are to make decisions according to Scripture. They are to discern where the Lord is leading our church family. This leadership is to be “in the Lord”, meaning that the elders are called to lead with Christlike humility and servanthood.

This is how the Lord has ordered His church. In a culture that despises authority, we must make sure that the attitude of the world does not infect the church. Jesus gets to determine how His church functions.

The elders labor, they lead, and third, they admonish.

This word admonish has the idea of warning and instructing someone about avoiding and ceasing conduct that is wrong. This is one of the more unpleasant tasks of the elder. God calls the elders to have difficult conversations that can be confrontational. This means that the elders desire the sanctification of the people in the church.

So Paul tells the Thessalonians to respect their leaders who labor, lead, and admonish.

He tells them **“to esteem them very highly in love because of their work” (13)**.

Paul wants the people to think very highly of the elders, and to do so in love. And again, notice his emphasis on their work.

The relationship that he desires between the elders and the people is that the elders are laboring for the good of the people, trying to help them grow. And the people in turn follow their leaders and esteem them in love.

Admittedly, this is a bit of an uncomfortable passage to preach on. But it's here. Why is this here? Why are exhortations like this necessary? Here are several reasons that come to mind.

First, we all have an inherent dislike for authority baked into us. We don't like being told what to do, we don't like having people over us. This attitude could very well creep into the church.

Think about dynamics in the workplace. Someone is your buddy who works alongside you, is one of your peers. But then they get promoted into management, and very quickly, your attitude to them can change. They're out to get you, you have to fight for your rights, you've got to stick up for yourself. Or you might obey begrudgingly, but your heart is not in it.

There can be suspicion, distance, a fighting spirit, guardedness, or an attitude of "I need to keep the leaders in check".

This is not to be in the church. The people are to esteem the elders very highly in love.

"He wants them to be loved, and not thought of simply as the cold voice of authority. Love is the characteristic Christian attitude to man, and this should be shown within the church. Especially is this so in relationships like those between the rulers and the ruled, which in other groups of men are apt to be formal and distant" (Morris, note on v. 13).

I am grateful for this body of believers because, by the grace of God, the elders are trying to carry out what God has called us to do. We are not perfect, but we are trying to be obedient to Scripture and the Lord. And the church family loves and follows its leaders. In God's wisdom, this is how He has ordered the church. As a wife is called to submit to and follow an imperfect husband, so the church is called to follow its leaders who are not yet perfected in glory. This is how the Lord would have us be.

Won't you pray for your elders? Pray that God would give us wisdom to know His will and faith to obey Him.

Notice the result of this. **"Be at peace among yourselves" (13).**

When the leaders are who God has called them to be, and the people are following their leadership, then there is peace in the church. The exact opposite is also true!

"If pastors carry out their Divinely appointed roles with diligence in the church and if the congregation responds as commanded by Scripture, then there will be peace, stability, and tranquility" (Mayhue, note on v. 12).

We are to pursue peace, true peace, in the body. Critical to this is a proper relationship between the church and its leaders.

Second, we come to:

II. A Church and Its People (v. 14)

Paul gives instruction on how people in the church are to treat one another, and in particular certain kinds of people.

“And we urge you, brothers, admonish the idle, encourage the fainthearted, help the weak, be patient with them all” (14).

We come again to Paul’s multi-dimensional approach to people. Like a father, he exhorted and charged others with his words (2:11-12), like a nursing mother he was nurturing and tender (2:7).

One thing you realize about the apostle Paul is that was very attuned to the spiritual condition of the people, and he adapted his approach accordingly.

He wants the Thessalonians to do likewise. He urges them to several actions.

First, they are to admonish the idle.

This word for admonish is the same word used for the elders who also admonish. The congregation is also to admonish those who are idle!

This word for idle speaks to those who are unruly and disorderly, they were rebellious to God’s commands for living. But this word also became associated with laziness, idleness. Disorderly conduct is directly connected with a terrible work ethic.

Paul uses the same word in 2 Thessalonians, where he says, **“when we were with you, we would give you this command: If anyone is not willing to work, let him not eat. 11 For we hear that some among you walk in idleness, not busy at work, but busybodies. 12 Now such persons we command and encourage in the Lord Jesus Christ to do their work quietly and to earn their own living” (2 Thess 3:10-12).**

Paul says admonish them, correct them, warn them. Don’t avoid the issue, but speak to it head on. Paul has already commanded them to hard work (4:11).

“There may be fully employable fathers who refuse to work hard to provide for their families, mothers who neglect the needs of the home and of children, or

students who are too busy socializing to put in the study needed for decent grades” (Philips, p. 240).

There may also be adolescents who are just coasting in life who need a kick in the pants to get moving with life and get working.

Second, they are to encourage the fainthearted.

“**encourage the fainthearted**” (14) Paul tells them.

The fainthearted are literally the “little souled” ones, *oligopsuchos*. *Oligo* - little. *Psuchos* - Soul.

This speaks to the people who barely have the motivation to do what God calls them to do. They are fearful, timid, anxious, doubting, and spiritually paralyzed.

Paul tells us to comfort them, to encourage them, to cheer them up.

The temptation is there to avoid these kinds of people because we think they may be a drain on us, or that their fearfulness or sadness will bring us down. But we are to come alongside them and cheer them up, and speak the comforting words of the gospel to them.

Third, we are to help the weak.

“**Help the weak**” Paul says. The weak here refer to those who are spiritually weak and susceptible to temptation. They are not strong in the Lord.

This word for help literally means to hold fast to someone.

“Literally, ‘hold on to and don’t let go’ of those who do not have the spiritual strength to obey or function spiritually on their own” (Mayhue, note on v. 14).

Just like someone with a sprained ankle or a broken leg will need someone to uphold them, so the spiritually weak will need the church to come alongside them and hold them up

Paul finishes by saying “**be patient with them all**” (14).

We must be long-suffering with one another, knowing that sanctification often happens slowly and imperceptibly.

With them all means that we have to bear with one another in the body.

So we’ve seen a church and its leaders, and church and its people, and finally:

III. A Church and Its Commitment (v. 15)

“See that no one repays anyone evil for evil, but always seek to do good to one another and to everyone” (15).

Paul finishes this section on how a church is to treat one another by saying that we must be relentlessly committed to doing good to one another, even when we are provoked or when someone commits evil against us.

This is when it is the hardest. Our fallen nature wants to retaliate, to speak a harsh word back. If someone will do evil to us, then we want to do in kind.

Theoretically, this is very easy to understand. But in the moment, when someone has wronged you, when there has been injustice, then this is when it is the hardest to turn the other cheek and not retaliate.

But we are to do good to one another in the body of Christ, and we are to do good to everyone, even outside the church.

Notice that Paul says, **“See that no one repays anyone evil for evil” (15).**

This means that we are to be watching out for one another.

‘When tempers run short, the whole group has the responsibility for seeing that no member “pays back wrong for wrong” (Thomas, note on v. 15).

So this is how peace will prevail in the church - when the leaders work hard and lead the body, and when the people esteem the leaders highly in love because of their work.

When the people treat one another with careful consideration to the spiritual state of the other person.

When we are relentlessly committed to one another’s good, even in the face of provocation and evil.

Then we will be the church God wants us to be, a church where Jesus is.

Discussion Questions - These are a guide and conversation starter, not a script.

1. Read 1 Peter 5:1-4; Hebrews 13:17; 1 Timothy 4:11-16; Titus 1:9; Colossians 1:28-29 - From these passages, as well as 1 Thessalonians 5:12, what is the work that elders are called to do?

2. What attitude is the church body to have to the elders of the church (v. 12-13)? Why is this so important? What dangers / consequences come as a result of not having this attitude? How does peace come into the church when elders do what God calls them to do, and people treat the elders as God calls them to?

3. What is the church's responsibility to the three kinds of people that Paul mentions in v. 14? Why do you think Paul included these three kinds of people and not others (hint: see the end of v. 13)? What does it look like to be patient with each of these three kinds of people?

4. What is the antidote to seeking personal vengeance for evils done to you (v. 15)? What role does the church play in making sure that no one returns evil for evil?