

In the first half of this chapter Paul concluded his message to the Thessalonians on the day of the Lord. He closed that topic with the exhortation to encourage one another and build one another up (5:11<sup>i</sup>). That verse acts as a segue into today's passage on behavior in the church, how we are to act toward our leaders and one another.

<sup>12</sup> *We ask you, brothers, to respect those who labor among you and are over you in the Lord and admonish you,* 1 Thessalonians 5:12 I think it would be helpful for us to step back and look at the forest before we start examining the trees. MacArthur writes, *The church is the most blessed institution on earth, the only one built by the Lord Jesus Christ Himself (Matthew 16:18<sup>ii</sup>; cf. Acts 4:11, 12<sup>iii</sup>; 20:28<sup>iv</sup>; 1 Corinthians 3:9<sup>v</sup>; Hebrews 3:6<sup>vi</sup>; 1 Peter 2:5–7<sup>vii</sup>), the only institution He promised to eternally bless (cf. Ephesians 5:25–27<sup>viii</sup>), and the one about which He declared “the gates of Hades will not overpower it” (Matthew 16:18<sup>ix</sup>). The apostle Paul was so convinced of the overarching significance of the church that he described it to Timothy as “the pillar and support of the truth” (1 Timothy 3:15<sup>x</sup>).<sup>xi</sup> But the church faces many challenges in this world. It is made up of people. That means there will be disputes, power struggles, personality clashes, and the like because we are not yet perfected. Add to that the attacks from the world and from Satan and we can see that it is a battle. And yet, the Holy Spirit is at work in our hearts helping us to overcome, while the Word of God is renewing our minds (Romans 12:2<sup>xii</sup>). We have a mighty power in prayer. And we have divine protection from above.*

This young church was already an example to churches in the region (1:7<sup>xiii</sup>). But its leaders were young in the Lord. The relationship of the church with its leaders may have been in question, so Paul is writing to help gently encourage them to find the right balance. Paul begins by addressing the flock's attitude toward their overseers. Certain men were appointed by the apostles to be elders to shepherd the flock. Every church had a group of elders that were to lead the congregation (Titus 1:5<sup>xiv</sup>). In other passages they are referred to as shepherds and in other cases as overseers. Elder, pastor, overseer are all words used to describe the same role (See Acts 20, 1 Peter 5, and the term “leader” in Hebrews 13:17<sup>xv</sup>). They were chosen because of their ability to teach and because of the example of their lives. Every church had more than one elder. They were to pray together and seek God's direction for the congregation (Acts 13:1–3<sup>xvi</sup>). But in Thessalonica the elders were all new believers. Paul may have chosen Jewish converts who had some knowledge of the Old Testament and its predictions of Jesus, moral guidelines, and the nature of God. Yet, the flock may have had difficulty trusting the leading of others who were converted at the same time they were.

Paul uses three expressions to describe their role. They labor among them, are over them in the Lord, and admonish them. The word used for labor in this verse is the word that was used to describe a farmer's hard work. To admonish is to warn, instruct, and gently correct. 1 Peter 5:3<sup>xvii</sup> tell us they are to do so without domineering but by being examples to the flock. Jesus' example was to be a servant leader (Luke 22:26, 27<sup>xviii</sup>).

<sup>13</sup> *and to esteem them very highly in love because of their work. Be at peace among yourselves.* 1 Thessalonians 5:13 Because this work is so important and so few are

called, fit, and willing to do it, we are to esteem them highly in love because the work is a demanding labor. It carries with it much concern and often heartache. At the same time, we must avoid the extreme of thinking too highly of them. They are humans and have the same weaknesses we all have. They will sometimes make mistakes.

Some leaders within the church of today, usually those who have the final say over a large ministry, are making a name for themselves. They are like the owner or CEO of a business and are not accountable to anyone. This usually leads to moral failure. The importance of multiple elders in each location is that they hold one another accountable. Esteeming each other as equals is a safeguard against pride or abuse of power. Dictators and cult leaders can get a lot done quickly and build big empires with their power and control, but they can also easily give in to temptation and become corrupt. That is why the founders of the USA created checks and balances of a three-part government. Even then it is difficult to keep corruption from creeping in.

The other extreme is not honoring them enough. An elder led church can face the disapproval of a person or group that tries to sway the congregation to reject the elders' leadership. This usually comes from a prideful individual who is not getting his or her way. It is especially prevalent in small churches where the big fish in the little pond is not getting what he or she wants. Churches can become ineffective because an unspiritual church boss who, in many cases is the largest giver and held an important position in the world, decides to ignore the leading of the elders. I have talked to many pastors who were forced from their church and left brokenhearted because a church boss turned enough people against them. It could probably have been avoided if there were equal and accountable biblical elders<sup>xix</sup> who exercised church discipline (Matthew 18:17<sup>xx</sup>).

If your elders are servant leaders, always willing to hear you, always there for you, expressing the love of Christ, are faithful and consistent then they should be esteemed highly in love for the sake of the work. This leads to the last sentence in the verse. *Be at peace among yourselves*. Allow the leaders to resolve differences. You may not like their decision, but in most cases they are trying to do what is best for the whole congregation and honor the Lord whom they serve. Ask yourself if the issue is really worth disturbing the peace of the church. The sentence is a command, not a request. The alternative is disunity, which is disruptive and a bad example to the outside community.

<sup>14</sup> *And we urge you, brothers, admonish the idle, encourage the fainthearted, help the weak, be patient with them all.* 1 Thessalonians 5:14 Paul addressed the congregation's proper attitude toward their leadership, and now he turns to how the flock is to work together for the good of the whole church. His first instruction must have been regarding a problem that stood out in this church as he will mention it again in his second letter. *Admonish the idle*. Translators have suggested a number of other translations for the word idle, such as lazy, disorderly, disruptive, or unruly. In Paul's second letter he will call them "busy-bodies" (2 Thessalonians 3:11<sup>xxi</sup>). He tells them to get a job! Work quietly. Pay their own way!

Rome had a welfare system which may have been the case in Thessalonica. To keep people pacified, grain was imported from northern Africa to feed the hungry. These idle people may have been living off that welfare and the generosity of those in the

church. Sound familiar? Or they may have had a patron that they promoted. From the translations of the word, we can imagine that with their idle time they were also sticking their nose into the affairs of others. Some people are prideful about their jobless lifestyle while always taking from others and rarely if ever giving. Some of them think that a job is beneath them. Some feel entitled to receive from others because of their great insights that they usually get from someone on the internet. There is an increasing problem of mental illness often caused by drug use. What Paul is telling them is that if you really want to find your place in a local church body, get a job and support yourself. In Ephesians he tells them to work with their hands so that they can give to those who have need (Ephesians 4:28<sup>xxii</sup>). In other words, be a giver and not a taker.

This does not mean we should not help the needy. If they do not see the love of Jesus in our generosity, why would they consider what the Apostle says. Some come from tragic backgrounds and are so scarred that they need a lot of love, patience, and prayer. Remember Jesus expression, *“In as much as you have done to one of the least of these, you have done it to me”* (Matthew 25:40<sup>xxiii</sup>). At the same time, we should pray that they become mentally able to work and do what Paul is instructing in this passage. We should encourage them in that direction while helping as led by the Holy Spirit.

*Encourage the faint hearted.* The word literally means “the small of soul” or “the discouraged.” Some personalities are timid. It can be a natural tendency or develop because of past abuse. They need to know who they are in Christ and His presence and power at work in their lives. They need to know they are a new creation in Christ (2 Corinthians 5:17<sup>xxiv</sup>). Maybe there are some of you this morning, who because of circumstances and defeats in your life feel discouraged and useless. I have good and bad news for you. We are all useless without Jesus! But we can do all things through Christ who gives us the insight and strength to do His will (Philippians 4:13<sup>xxv</sup>). In fact, He has good works prepared in advance for us to walk into (Ephesians 2:10<sup>xxvi</sup>). Watch for the opportunities He sets before you and go forward in faith trusting in Him to give you the right idea or words to make a difference in someone’s life. God has a plan for each of us. He delights in working with us to accomplish His will. He wants us to lay up treasure in heaven and sets up circumstances that give us the opportunity to do so. He does it all and simply asks for us to yield to His life in us (Romans 8:11<sup>xxvii</sup>).

Fainthearted soul, please hear this. If you have given your life to Jesus, you are a child of the Creator, a brother or sister of Jesus, a member of the family of God, seated with Him in the heavenly realm (Ephesians 2:6<sup>xxviii</sup>), unconditionally loved by the God who is all-powerful and knows every detail of your life better than you know yourself. He is making you into His bride. And you can be assured that He will finish the work He started in you (Philippians 1:6<sup>xxix</sup>). So lift up your head and walk confidently knowing to whom you belong. You have been empowered to walk in victory. Your destiny is heaven. Your life has meaning and purpose. He has promised to never leave or forsake you (Hebrews 13:5<sup>xxx</sup>).

In the church in Thessalonica, those who were discouraged may have become so because of persecution. They may have lost their job or been beaten. Some of them had even died. Yet, what we gain in Christ is so much more than whatever we lose. We will

all die unless Jesus returns first. How much better to know that a homecoming awaits us! If they were to be encouraged in their suffering and loss, surely we can be encouraged when dealing with things not nearly as severe. And let us show compassion and comfort to those who are grieving the loss of a loved one while reminding them of the glorious hope we have (1 Thessalonians 4:13<sup>xxxix</sup>).

*Help the weak.* James Grant Jr. suggests that we can get an idea of Paul's meaning by looking back at the last two instructions. *"Admonish the idle/disorderly" concerns those who are not living the way they should as Christians, the spiritually disobedient. "Encourage the fainthearted" concerns those who are struggling spiritually with discouragement. "Help the weak" then is the category of those Christians who have physical needs.*<sup>xxxii</sup> Weakness may be physical disabilities, sickness, or financial need. This is where deacons or deaconess in the church step in to give assistance. Some of our folks need a ride to church. Some need help with things around the house they can no longer do on their own. Others cannot meet the cost of an emergency need. If we are a family in God, we should certainly help one another where we can, not the lazy who are responsible, but those who through no fault of their own cannot face the challenges before them on their own.

And finally, Paul tells us to *"be patient with them all."* In all the above cases we have need of patience. Just because you find it easy does not mean it is the same for others. Breaking life patterns or overcoming mindsets is much harder for some people. We have people in our congregation who are striving with all they have got to overcome an area of their life that they have always struggled with. They know Jesus is the answer and they are looking to Him. They need our prayers, but they also need our patience and encouragement. Just because God has blessed you with overcoming weaknesses does not give you the right to pridefully expect others to be as blessed as you have been. How patient has Jesus been with us? That is the kind of patience we need to show one another.

There are some people who have come through the church and used others, ignored the gentle correction of leadership, and then slandered the church in the community. They were wolves, but even they can become lambs. We do not have to tolerate their behavior, but we do have to forgive, love, and pray for them. *Admonish the idle, encourage the fainthearted, help the weak, be patient with them all.* That will help to keep peace in the church and strengthen our unity. The next verse adds one more maxim.

<sup>15</sup> *See that no one repays anyone evil for evil, but always seek to do good to one another and to everyone.* 1 Thessalonians 5:15 You have most likely heard the expression "turnabout is fair play." That means, "You did it to me so I can do it to you." Most of us know the Old Testament saying, *"An eye for an eye, and a tooth for a tooth"* (Leviticus 24:20<sup>xxxiii</sup>). This meant the punishment must fit the crime and not be excessive. You poke out my eye, so I can poke out yours. And as someone has said, "This will end up with a world of blind people." The principle was given to keep judges from dealing out overly harsh sentences. But now that we as believers have the Holy Spirit, we are to be gracious for God has been gracious to us. Seek to do the offender good, which is a step beyond not repaying evil for evil. You do not need to enable their bad behavior, but you can bless

them in some way. When we do so, the conviction of the Holy Spirit has a chance to work in their lives (Romans 13:20,21<sup>xxxiv</sup>).

Paul words this in a way that emphasizes our relationship in the church by using the term “one another,” but then adds “everyone,” meaning unbelievers as well. It is not in human nature to be kind and seek the good of those who harm or offend you. But it is the nature of Christ who while we were still sinners died for us (Romans 5:8<sup>xxxv</sup>). Believers are growing in Christlikeness, but the work is not finished yet. There was a bumper sticker that said, “Be patient with me, God is not done with me yet!” Each of us needs the patience and goodness of others and to remember that we reap what we sow (Galatians 6:7<sup>xxxvi</sup>). If you need it, give it and it will come back to you. Imagine a society in which everyone refused to render evil for evil but sought the good of everyone else. Would that not be wonderful? Then start it by being the person who lives that way. We should always be asking ourselves, “Who does God want to bless through me today?”

When I worked in retail I sometimes had to face the abuse of disgruntled customers. I had one man call me a peabrain and threw the product at me. The next customer was a black brother who owned a car dealership in another state. He gave me a word of wisdom. “Always remember that anger people express is rarely about you.” In other words, it was not personal. The man was having a bad day, maybe a bad year, or a tough life and he just had to vent on someone, and I happened to be the one. Should I curse him? Should I remain angry with him? Or as a believer in our gracious Savior who forgave me of things a thousand times worse, pray for him? Peter asked the Lord how many times we should forgive? The Lord told him seventy-seven times (Matthew 18:22<sup>xxxvii</sup>). Maybe if he returns I can show him a gesture of kindness and earn a chance to share what would bring him true joy.

Paul told the Ephesians, <sup>32</sup> *Be kind to one another, tenderhearted, forgiving one another, as God in Christ forgave you.* Ephesians 4:32 Be the kind of people you want others to be toward you. Rabbe of Jesus’ day said if you would not want it done to you do not do it to others. Jesus flipped that expression and took it much further by declaring, “Do unto others what you would have them do to you” (Matthew 7:12<sup>xxxviii</sup>). That brings a little heaven to earth, a little light to the darkness, a little hope to the hurting, and that is to bring the life of Christ into the situations we face.

#### Questions:

- 1 Review the description of the church.
- 2 What is the problem with the church?
- 3 How are we to treat the elders of a church?
- 4 What is their role?
- 5 How can we help them? (Hint: end of vs 13)
- 6 Discuss the five commands of verse 14.
- 7 How does the second part of verse 15 go beyond the first part?
- 8 How is that possible?
- 9 What did Jesus and Paul say in that regard?
- 10 How did Jesus flip the saying of his day?

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<sup>i</sup> **1 Thessalonians 5:11 (ESV)**

<sup>11</sup> Therefore encourage one another and build one another up, just as you are doing.

<sup>ii</sup> **Matthew 16:18 (ESV)**

<sup>18</sup> And I tell you, you are Peter, and on this rock I will build my church, and the gates of hell shall not prevail against it.

<sup>iii</sup> **Acts 4:11-12 (ESV)**

<sup>11</sup> This Jesus is the stone that was rejected by you, the builders, which has become the cornerstone.

<sup>12</sup> And there is salvation in no one else, for there is no other name under heaven given among men by which we must be saved."

<sup>iv</sup> **Acts 20:28 (ESV)**

<sup>28</sup> Pay careful attention to yourselves and to all the flock, in which the Holy Spirit has made you overseers, to care for the church of God, which he obtained with his own blood.

<sup>v</sup> **1 Corinthians 3:9 (ESV)**

<sup>9</sup> For we are God's fellow workers. You are God's field, God's building.

<sup>vi</sup> **Hebrews 3:6 (ESV)**

<sup>6</sup> but Christ is faithful over God's house as a son. And we are his house if indeed we hold fast our confidence and our boasting in our hope.

<sup>vii</sup> **1 Peter 2:5-7 (ESV)**

<sup>5</sup> you yourselves like living stones are being built up as a spiritual house, to be a holy priesthood, to offer spiritual sacrifices acceptable to God through Jesus Christ.

<sup>6</sup> For it stands in Scripture: "Behold, I am laying in Zion a stone, a cornerstone chosen and precious, and whoever believes in him will not be put to shame."

<sup>7</sup> So the honor is for you who believe, but for those who do not believe, "The stone that the builders rejected has become the cornerstone,"

<sup>viii</sup> **Ephesians 5:25-27 (ESV)**

<sup>25</sup> Husbands, love your wives, as Christ loved the church and gave himself up for her,

<sup>26</sup> that he might sanctify her, having cleansed her by the washing of water with the word,

<sup>27</sup> so that he might present the church to himself in splendor, without spot or wrinkle or any such thing, that she might be holy and without blemish.

<sup>ix</sup> **Matthew 16:18 (ESV)**

<sup>18</sup> And I tell you, you are Peter, and on this rock I will build my church, and the gates of hell shall not prevail against it.

<sup>x</sup> **1 Timothy 3:15 (ESV)**

<sup>15</sup> if I delay, you may know how one ought to behave in the household of God, which is the church of the living God, a pillar and buttress of the truth.

<sup>xi</sup> John F. MacArthur Jr., *1 & 2 Thessalonians*, MacArthur New Testament Commentary (Chicago: Moody Press, 2002), 165

<sup>xii</sup> **Romans 12:2 (ESV)**

<sup>2</sup> Do not be conformed to this world, but be transformed by the renewal of your mind, that by testing you may discern what is the will of God, what is good and acceptable and perfect.

<sup>xiii</sup> **1 Thessalonians 1:7 (ESV)**

<sup>7</sup> so that you became an example to all the believers in Macedonia and in Achaia.

<sup>xiv</sup> **Titus 1:5 (ESV)**

<sup>5</sup> 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—

<sup>xv</sup> **Hebrews 13:17 (ESV)**

<sup>17</sup> Obey your leaders and submit to them, for they are keeping watch over your souls, as those who will have to give an account. Let them do this with joy and not with groaning, for that would be of no advantage to you.

<sup>xvi</sup> **Acts 13:1-3 (ESV)**

<sup>1</sup> Now there were in the church at Antioch prophets and teachers, Barnabas, Simeon who was called Niger, Lucius of Cyrene, Manaen a lifelong friend of Herod the tetrarch, and Saul.



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<sup>2</sup> While they were worshiping the Lord and fasting, the Holy Spirit said, “Set apart for me Barnabas and Saul for the work to which I have called them.”

<sup>3</sup> Then after fasting and praying they laid their hands on them and sent them off.

<sup>xvii</sup> **1 Peter 5:3 (ESV)**

<sup>3</sup> not domineering over those in your charge, but being examples to the flock.

<sup>xviii</sup> **Luke 22:26-27 (ESV)**

<sup>26</sup> But not so with you. Rather, let the greatest among you become as the youngest, and the leader as one who serves.

<sup>27</sup> For who is the greater, one who reclines at table or one who serves? Is it not the one who reclines at table? But I am among you as the one who serves.

<sup>xix</sup> This is referred to as “the plurality of elders.”

<sup>xx</sup> **Matthew 18:17 (ESV)**

<sup>17</sup> If he refuses to listen to them, tell it to the church. And if he refuses to listen even to the church, let him be to you as a Gentile and a tax collector.

<sup>xxi</sup> **2 Thessalonians 3:11 (ESV)**

<sup>11</sup> For we hear that some among you walk in idleness, not busy at work, but busybodies.

<sup>xxii</sup> **Ephesians 4:28 (ESV)**

<sup>28</sup> Let the thief no longer steal, but rather let him labor, doing honest work with his own hands, so that he may have something to share with anyone in need.

<sup>xxiii</sup> **Matthew 25:40 (ESV)**

<sup>40</sup> And the King will answer them, ‘Truly, I say to you, as you did it to one of the least of these my brothers, you did it to me.’

<sup>xxiv</sup> **2 Corinthians 5:17 (ESV)**

<sup>17</sup> Therefore, if anyone is in Christ, he is a new creation. The old has passed away; behold, the new has come.

<sup>xxv</sup> **Philippians 4:13 (ESV)**

<sup>13</sup> I can do all things through him who strengthens me.

<sup>xxvi</sup> **Ephesians 2:10 (ESV)**

<sup>10</sup> For we are his workmanship, created in Christ Jesus for good works, which God prepared beforehand, that we should walk in them.

<sup>xxvii</sup> **Romans 8:11 (ESV)**

<sup>11</sup> If the Spirit of him who raised Jesus from the dead dwells in you, he who raised Christ Jesus from the dead will also give life to your mortal bodies through his Spirit who dwells in you.

<sup>xxviii</sup> **Ephesians 2:6 (ESV)**

<sup>6</sup> and raised us up with him and seated us with him in the heavenly places in Christ Jesus,

<sup>xxix</sup> **Philippians 1:6 (ESV)**

<sup>6</sup> And I am sure of this, that he who began a good work in you will bring it to completion at the day of Jesus Christ.

<sup>xxx</sup> **Hebrews 13:5 (ESV)**

<sup>5</sup> Keep your life free from love of money, and be content with what you have, for he has said, “I will never leave you nor forsake you.”

<sup>xxxi</sup> **1 Thessalonians 4:13 (ESV)**

<sup>13</sup> But we do not want you to be uninformed, brothers, about those who are asleep, that you may not grieve as others do who have no hope.

<sup>xxxii</sup> James H. Grant Jr., *1 & 2 Thessalonians: The Hope of Salvation*, ed. R. Kent Hughes, Preaching the Word (Wheaton, IL: Crossway, 2011), 148.

<sup>xxxiii</sup> **Leviticus 24:20 (ESV)**

<sup>20</sup> fracture for fracture, eye for eye, tooth for tooth; whatever injury he has given a person shall be given to him.

<sup>xxxiv</sup> **Romans 12:20-21 (ESV)**

<sup>20</sup> To the contrary, “if your enemy is hungry, feed him; if he is thirsty, give him something to drink; for by so doing you will heap burning coals on his head.”

<sup>21</sup> Do not be overcome by evil, but overcome evil with good.

<sup>xxxv</sup> **Romans 5:8 (ESV)**

<sup>8</sup> but God shows his love for us in that while we were still sinners, Christ died for us.

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<sup>xxxvi</sup> **Galatians 6:7 (ESV)**

<sup>7</sup> Do not be deceived: God is not mocked, for whatever one sows, that will he also reap.

<sup>xxxvii</sup> **Matthew 18:22 (ESV)**

<sup>22</sup> Jesus said to him, "I do not say to you seven times, but seventy-seven times.

<sup>xxxviii</sup> **Matthew 7:12 (ESV)**

<sup>12</sup> "So whatever you wish that others would do to you, do also to them, for this is the Law and the Prophets.