

Message #9

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1 Thessalonians

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RELATIONSHIPS IN A HEALTHY CHURCH

1 THESSALONIANS 5:12-15

I.

Prior to moving here, I was pastor of this church. (PROJECTOR ON--- FIRST BAPTIST CHURCH) It is First Baptist Church of Fairfield, Connecticut. The congregation was begun in 1751. This building was constructed in 1813. An earlier pastor wrote up a history of the congregation--- in 1873. I have read through that history a couple of times.

Apparently the year 1837 was a tough year for the Fairfield Baptist Church. Pastor Linsley convinced the congregation to plant a church in nearby Bridgeport, which already was becoming a larger community. That was a good thing. But the pastor-historian notes, "**Mr. Linsley had, it is said, at one time advised the abandonment of the Church here [in Fairfield], and all go to the City [merge with the Bridgeport church]. And among other things said [was] that the Meeting House here could be removed to the streams of water near by, and used as a Factory of some kind. This, with other things, roused a spirit of resistance, and some unkind things were said of Mr. Linsley. But Time and Circumstances have united to remove all those feelings, and Mr. Linsley is now remembered with very great respect and kindness.**"

Perhaps that spirit of resistance prompted Pastor Linsley to move on. For Enoch Chase became pastor of the Fairfield church in 1837, thus succeeding Pastor Linsley. The church historian has this notation: "**The commencement of his Pastorate was one of great embarrassment, giving to a Serious trouble between Certain members. But from the wise counsels of the pastor a final issue was reached which proved not to inflict serious harm or loss upon the Church.**" What the issue was is not explained.

In the short space of one year the church historian indicates that there was a significant conflict among church members and a conflict between a pastor and a number of church members. There were conflicts in that church later on. But the church is still around today. (PROJECTOR OFF) Similar conflicts have happened in other churches. They have happened in our church. They also happened way back in the time of the writing of the New Testament. The inspired author of the passage before us this morning describes how such conflicts should be addressed or avoided in a healthy church. We will see what lessons he has to offer us.

We have been looking in recent weeks at Paul's First Epistle to the Thessalonians. (PROJECTOR ON--- THESSALONICA CORINTH MAP) We have seen that Paul and Silas and Timothy were involved in starting this church in Thessalonica in the first century. After only a couple of months they were forced out of the city by people who did not like their message. Some months later Paul was in Corinth when he got a report from Timothy that this young church was doing just fine. So Paul responded by sending the Christians there the letter which we are studying.

Paul writes that although this is a young church with new Christians, it is a healthy church. It is not perfect. It is not mature, but it is strong on the basics. The Christians there demonstrate faith, love and hope. Nevertheless, in our passage the apostle suggests that there may be a few conflicts in the church, or at least situations that could produce conflict. So after talking earlier in the chapter about the Second Coming of Christ, which relates to the subject of hope, he now shifts gears to speak about the application of love in regard to healthy church relationships.

II.

First, in vv. 12 & 13, Paul says that A HEALTHY CHURCH WILL BE MARKED BY RESPECT FOR CHURCH LEADERS. (II. A HEALTHY CHURCH WILL BE...) He writes, "**We ask you, brothers, to respect those who labor among you and are over you in the Lord and admonish you, and to esteem them very highly in love because of their work. Be at peace among yourselves.**"

Notice that Paul again uses the term "brothers." It was his favorite term for fellow Christians. It appears at least 60 times in his writings, 27 times alone in this epistle and in 2 Thessalonians. The apostle saw the church as a family. The imagery of the family is the most common metaphor that he uses to describe Christians as a group. The coming of the gospel to these various places in the Roman Empire often created division in families. Some Christians were cut off from their families. The church served to provide the family support that some of these new Christians had lost.

For some of us, our church is also our family. Some of us come from broken family backgrounds. Some of us are separated by distance from our extended families. Some of us have been touched by divorce. Some of us are single. Some of us are widows or widowers. Perhaps we are not much different from the Christians in Thessalonica in the first century in our need for family support. Even in a family, though, we need leadership.

There is no specific mention in this letter of elders or deacons or pastors in the church at Thessalonica. The church was perhaps only six months old. So it may well be that no official leaders had yet been appointed or chosen. It is clear, however, that leaders had emerged in the congregation. It should also be noticed that the leaders of the church are spoken about in terms of a plurality. In fact, the Apostle

Paul never refers to a local church as having only one elder or pastor. He always assumes that a local church is led by a plurality of elders, once that office was established.

Verse 12 uses three characteristics to describe the leaders of the church at Thessalonica. **First**, it says that they diligently labor among them. They work hard. Probably all of them had regular jobs, and their church ministry was done on the side.

Paul set an example for them in terms of his ministry among them. If you turn back a page or two, you will notice in # 2 vv. 8 & 9 he says, "**So, being affectionately desirous of you, we were ready to share with you not only the gospel of God but also our own selves, because you had become very dear to us. For you remember, brothers, our labor and toil: we worked night and day, that we might not be a burden to any of you, while we proclaimed to you the gospel of God.**" Paul was a leather worker. He made tents and other objects from leather. While he was at Thessalonica, he was a bivocational pastor. He did not depend upon income from the new Christians there, and he apparently did not receive missionary funding from other sources while he was Thessalonica. The leaders of the church in that city carried on that tradition of commitment to hard work.

The **second** thing that characterizes these leaders is that they "are over you." The original verb literally means "to stand before, or over, someone." Our English Standard Version translates the word as "manage" in 1 Timothy #3 v. 4 where the qualifications for an elder are being described and it is said that such a leader must give evidence of "managing" his family well. The Greek word is also used of benefactors. For example, in one source outside of the Bible it was used to describe a guardian who was appointed to watch over and care for a child.

In the first century a significant part of the population were slaves. Slaves becoming Christians at Thessalonica probably did not have much extra time to lead a VBS program or to plan evangelism outreaches or to organize church dinners. A lot of people could not read. Probably it was the better educated who were also better situated economically who were equipped to be teachers. The early church also needed places to meet. Paul frequently makes reference in his letters to people who had meetings of the local church in their homes. It was only wealthier Christians who would have had large homes to be able to offer for this kind of use. So my suspicion is that the emerging leadership of this early church may have been better off economically than average. For it is only this segment of the population who would have had the time and money and education to meet the leadership needs of this young church.

In a similar way today some among us are faced with work situations and family situations and health situations that limit our ability to give time and energy and finances to our local church. But others of us who are retired or single or better situated financially may have more opportunity to contribute to our congregation and to provide leadership.

These emerging leaders in Thessalonica were doing it "**in the Lord.**" Paul had taught them that Jesus was the real head of the church, and the leaders recognized their responsibility to lead according to His direction and with His power and authority.

Then, **third**, these leaders were characterized as "admonishing" fellow believers. The original word has to do with changing the minds of people, but in such a way as to change their behavior. Here it has to do with bringing behavior into line with God's standards. In 1 Corinthians #4 Paul is addressing a problem of pride that has produced divisions in the church at Corinth. He tells the Corinthian Christians that they need to seek humility. He writes in v. 14 of #4, "**I do not write these things to make you ashamed, but to admonish you as my beloved children.**"

What reasons did the Christians at Thessalonica have to be admonished? We know that they were experiencing some kind of persecution. Perhaps some needed admonition to hang in there and not to compromise their faith. Paul earlier wrote about the need for sexual purity. We know that the culture there was morally loose. Perhaps the Christians needed admonition not to give in to the loose standards of the culture. Then also we have seen Paul speak about the need for people to work with their own hands, not to be lazy and not to submit to unhealthy patron-client relationships.

Keep in mind that the church at Thessalonica was less than a year old. Even the leaders among them were new Christians. So they may not have been real smooth in dealing with issues requiring admonition. They may have lacked tact. Those on the receiving end may have been a little upset by this. But many of us don't like to receive admonition even when it is deserved and delivered in a tactful way. As Americans we are so often focused upon claiming what we perceive to be our rights.

In our Connecticut church there was a single woman in our congregation who got involved sexually with a man who was living with the mother of his children. The father and mother were not married. I talked privately to the Christian woman in our church and told her that she needed to break off this relationship. She was involved in our music ministry, and I told her that she could not continue in that until she stopped this relationship. She refused to break it off.

So in accordance with the principles of Matthew 18 I brought along another elder and gave her the same message. Still she was resistant. We then told the entire elder board about what was going on, and they sent her a letter saying that there was going to be a business meeting where we planned to suspend her church membership if she did not break off the relationship. She did finally stop it. But she was angry with me after this. She said that I was unloving and unsupportive. While she stopped her wrong behavior, she did not seem to have a repentant heart. She left the church shortly after this.

The situation at Thessalonica requiring admonition prompted Paul to describe the responsibility of the church members to their leaders. He says in v. 12 that they were to "respect" them. Literally the verb means "to know" them. I suspect that the idea is that the Thessalonian Christians were to recognize and acknowledge these leaders. They may not have had any official position yet in this new church. But it was clear that there were certain people who were leading.

In Paul's first letter to the Corinthians he makes mention of a man named Stephanas who was among the first converts to Christ in that city. He showed up to visit Paul in Ephesus and gave him a report about the church in Corinth. There is no specific mention that he had an official church position. But at the end of the letter in #16 v. 18 (PROJECTOR ON--- 1 CORINTHIANS 16:18) he writes, "**...for they [Stephanas and some others] refreshed my spirit as well as yours. Give recognition--- same word--- to such people.**" So Paul was calling upon the Christians at Thessalonica to acknowledge who the leaders of the emerging church were. In most churches there are leaders who may not have an official title. Yet they are leaders. The responsibility of the rest of us is to recognize and acknowledge church leaders, whether they have an official title or not. (PROJECTOR OFF)

Furthermore, v. 13 in our passage says that we are to esteem church leaders very highly in love because of their work. How is this esteem to be demonstrated? Perhaps we can ask the leaders among us about demonstrations of esteem that have been helpful to them. If you have been a teacher or a committee chairperson or a committee member or an elder or a deacon or a deaconess or a project organizer, share with the rest of us practical things that others have done for you to show you esteem. As you think about some leadership role that you have had in this church or any church, what practical things have others done toward you that have been helpful?

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I had a challenging week this week. Joann has been out of the office as a result of her cancer treatments. Our computer system was down for a couple of days. We had problems with our fire alarm system. The church van had a tire problem. I received a couple of requests for help involving our deacons' fund. Then there were the other things that normally go on in a church office.

So here are some of the things that people did this week that I felt were demonstrations of esteem. Two different people came and looked at our computer system. Someone else from the church ordered the necessary part. A couple of different people offered to check out the problem with the church van. When another guy learned that a technician was going to show up sometime in the evening to try to fix our fire alarm system, he volunteered to show up and deal with the problem. Another guy offered to come to the office Friday and help out with whatever was needed. In the end I asked him to visit someone in my behalf in a rehab hospital on the west side of Las Vegas. So one thing that I appreciate as a leader is people who jump in and help out in practical ways, especially in a week like this last one was.

I suspect that other leaders in our midst have also appreciated this kind of practical demonstration of esteem.

Another aspect of esteem for church leaders that the New Testament specifically identifies is obedience. This assumes a proper and Biblical use of authority. In Hebrews #13 v. 17 (HEBREWS 13:17) the Bible says, "**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.**" Effective leadership requires effective followership.

In a church in which I was involved early in my pastoral career there was a man who was a consistent pain at business meetings of the church. If the elders proposed a certain policy or change, he was the first in line to question it or disagree with it. (PROJECTOR OFF) I came to recognize that it did not make any difference what position the elders of the church took. If the proposal before the church involved some kind of significant change or expenditure, he was bound to question it and disagree with it.

It is legitimate to ask questions in regard to any policy or proposal, but he did it in a disrespectful way. He did it in a way that implied that the church leaders were never doing their jobs. His implication was always that the elders had not thought things through and done proper research. Fortunately we don't have anyone like that in our congregation, but we always need to guard against developing that kind of attitude.

Paul concludes v. 13 with the admonition, "**Be at peace among yourselves.**" Church leaders and church members need to get along with each other. For the most part they must have been doing that at Thessalonica. For Paul regarded the congregation as a healthy church. But perhaps there were hints that he received of some people being discontent with the emerging leaders.

The apostle recognized that unity was essential for a local church. He probably knew about the statement of Jesus in John's gospel. (PROJECTOR ON--- JOHN 13:35) In #13 v. 35 Jesus declared, "**By this all men will know that you are My disciples, if you have love for one another.**" An essential part of this love in the local church is proper respect for church leaders.

III.

In vv. 14 & 15 of #5 Paul also indicates that A HEALTHY CHURCH WILL BE MARKED BY CARE FOR ONE ANOTHER. (III. A HEALTHY CHURCH WILL BE...) In v. 14 he writes, "**And we urge you, brothers, admonish the idle, encourage the fainthearted, help the weak, be patient with them all.**"

The verb "urge" here is stronger than the verb "ask" that was used in v. 12. Paul is also now using imperative verbs, verbs of command. He addresses these commands to the "brothers." He is including women as well as men. This is the same word that he used of church members in v. 12 when he was encouraging them to respect their leaders. So it is unlikely that the command here applies only to the leaders of the church. The responsibility to perform these actions extends beyond them to the congregation as a whole.

The **first** responsibility that all church members have is to "admonish the idle." The term for "idle" was originally used to describe a soldier who was out of step or out of rank. It was also used of an army as a whole that was marching in a disorderly fashion. It came to be used of those who were generally out of line.

In 2 Thessalonians #3 v. 6 (2 THESSALONIANS 3:6) Paul uses the term when he writes, "**Now we command you, brothers, in the name of our Lord Jesus Christ, that you keep away from any brother who is walking in idleness and not in accord with the tradition that you received from us.**" He goes on to say that if someone is unwilling to work, he should not eat. In v. 11 (2 THESSALONIANS 3:11) he adds, "**For we hear that some among you walk in idleness, not busy at work, but busybodies.**" So clearly the Bible is teaching that to the extent we are physically able, we Christians should be working. If it is not work for which we get paid, it should be work in service to the family, the community, the church and/or the Lord. (PROJECTOR OFF) Christians who are not working at something are to be admonished by fellow believers.

The **second** responsibility of Christians is to encourage the fainthearted. "Fainthearted" means literally "little of soul." The term could include those who are worried, discouraged or fearful. Paul might have in mind those whose loved ones have died. He could be thinking of those who had lost their jobs as a result of persecution. He could have in mind those in every congregation who tend toward depression.

How are church people to deal with the fainthearted? Tell them to snap out of it? Just get over it? Get on with life? No. These people need to be encouraged. Love in the family of God means not just giving objective answers to problems. It means providing what is really needed. What is needed with the fainthearted is encouragement, support, a listening ear, understanding. The fainthearted need to be reassured and pointed toward continued faith in Christ. The idle may need admonition. A kick in the pants may be appropriate for them. But not for the fainthearted.

The **third** group that Paul describes is "the weak." The original Greek word has a wide range of meanings. Its use in the gospels tends to refer to physical weakness or sickness. Sometimes it is used to refer to economic neediness. In the epistles it often refers to vulnerability to sin. So it is a broad term that could include various kinds of neediness. Christians are to provide whatever kind of help that is needed in these various situations. It might include economic help or physical help or prayer. It might

mean providing rides to the doctor or simply setting aside some time to listen to a Christian who needs encouragement. Our responsibility is to help the weak.

In dealing with these three groups of people, Paul says that a Christian's responsibility is to **"be patient with them all."** The term means "long-tempered." We need to be slow to get angry. It is easy to lose patience with loafers, with the fainthearted and with the weak. But Christian love means exercising patience. We have to put up with each other with our uniquenesses and our foibles and our problems. God is patient toward us. We need to be patient toward others.

Sometimes the trouble makers among us turn out to have the greatest impact upon the world. Phil Vischer (PROJECTOR ON--- PHIL VISCHER) came from a broken home. His mom brought him to a small church in rural Iowa. Phil had some issues as a kid, but he experienced the love of God in his small church and in his youth group. He went to college at St. Paul Bible College, but he was kicked out for missing too many chapels. Still Phil had a desire to serve God. He also had a creative spirit. He formed a company called Big Idea Productions. He set out to make children's videos that would promote Christian values.

Phil eventually became successful. In fact his videos became the nation's best selling children's videos. Many of you remember them as--- the *Veggie Tales*. (PHIL VISCHER VEGGIE TALES) Jim Hill, a columnist for the online publication *Digital Media FX*, said this about Big Idea's productions, **"So what is it that makes the programs that Big Idea puts out so entertaining to right-minded religious folks as well as heathens like myself? It's simple, really. Not since the late Charles Schulz was working at the top of his game while drawing his acclaimed 'Peanuts' comic strip has there been something that was this silly but profound."** Phil is also an elder now in that same small Iowa church in which he grew up. Fortunately there were Christians who were patient with him. You never know when somebody might turn out to be a talking cucumber or tomato. (PROJECTOR OFF)

Verse 15 concludes, **"See that no one repays anyone evil for evil, but always seek to do good to one another and to everyone."** Jesus Himself spoke in the Sermon on the Mount about the need to turn the other cheek. The natural human reaction to wrongdoing and evil is to retaliate, to get revenge. To restrain from that, and to go a step further to do good to the person who has done evil to us is a sign of Christian maturity. But it is not natural, and it is not the way of the world around us. The heroes on TV and in the movies are John Wayne and Sylvester Stallone who often go about seeking revenge for wrongs that were done to them.

Paul elaborated upon the theme of patience and restraint at the end of #12 in Romans. (PROJECTOR ON-- ROMANS 12:17-18) He said, **"Repay no one evil for evil, but give thought to do what is honorable in the sight of all. If possible, so far as it depends on you, live peaceably with all. Beloved, never avenge yourselves, but leave it to the wrath of God, for it is written, 'Vengeance is mine, I will repay, says the**

Lord.' 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.' Do not be overcome by evil, but overcome evil with good."

Paul in our passage says that we are to display this way of being toward fellow Christians and to all people. Paul was even including those who were persecuting the Christians in Thessalonica.

(JERZY POPIELUSZKO) Father Jerzy Popieluszko was a Catholic priest in Poland who taught this principle to his parishioners. In the 1980s he told his people to defend the truth with their lives. At the same time they had to overcome evil with good. People flocked to his church. The Communists did not like his popularity or his Christian message. Secret police followed him everywhere. One night after celebrating mass and preaching, he disappeared.

About ten days later, as 50,000 people came to mass and to listen to a recording of his last sermon, word came that his body had been found floating in the nearby Vistula River. It was badly mutilated. The secret police braced for an uprising. But on the day of the priest's funeral (JERZY POPILUSZKO FUNERAL) the huge crowd that walked past their headquarters bore a banner and shouted what it said, "We forgive." It was that way of being, that Christian tenacity mixed with love, that led to the relatively peaceful overthrow of Communism in Poland. (PROJECTOR OFF)

A healthy church will be marked by respect for its leaders and care for one another. Its members will seek that which is good for each other and for the broader community and for even those who have done us wrong. May we be that kind of healthy church.