

LIVING

1 Thessalonians 5:12-24

A lot of the discussion Paul had in his first letter to this church was about the return of Christ. We do need to know about this and be ready for it when it comes. It is equally important to know what to do between now and when it actually happens. I remember a former pastor commenting that he was not nearly as concerned about Jesus coming back tomorrow as he was about His delaying it for 15 years.

What are some of the basic principles, attitudes, and actions that instruct us (in the church) about what we are to do in the meantime?

Respecting – 5:12-13

¹² But we request of you, brethren, that you appreciate (know or acknowledge) those who diligently labor among you, and have charge over you in the Lord and give you instruction, ¹³ and that you esteem them very highly in love because of their work. Live in peace with one another. 1 Thessalonians 5:12-13 (NASB95)

Follow the Leader is a children's game in which everyone follows and does what the child who is chosen to be the leader does. The game is supposed to teach children to follow directions, to pay attention (which builds their concentration span), to develop motor skills, plus it creates a sense of being part of the group. In a very real way these benefits are helpful since most of us carry out our lives in groups, organizations, teams, or families where working together and making contributions are important.

All of us realize that a critical first step in functioning well in any kind of group is to recognize who the leaders are. Not all leaders have positions that are recognized with titles or (in the situation of a church) ministry positions. Paul did not refer to these who are to be recognized or acknowledged by a title such as elder, deacon, or bishop, but did acknowledge that these leaders had responsibilities to carry out so that all members could work together to accomplish the objectives of the church. Let's look at how Paul described these and see if we can discover some practical applications for churches today regarding those who are to be recognized as leaders.

The literal meaning of "labor diligently" is to work until you are tired. The idea is that persons are dedicated and apply themselves to the task as long as they have the energy to do so. As Matthew Henry stated: we are to be laborers and not loiterers. A person who labors diligently will not be concerned about the number of hours they need to work and they will not be concerned about their "day off." At that time in the history of the church, the leaders were likely people who had secular jobs in addition to their responsibilities in the local body of believers.

Real and effective leadership requires that the leaders are among and interacting with those being led. The shepherds of the flock need to be able to observe the flock and be on the lookout for problems that may develop. They cannot be successful as shepherds if they just show up to dump out a load of hay once a week. Much of the work of being a pastor is being out and about with the flock.

A legitimate question is "How can this happen when a church has a thousand members?" It can't be done with the traditional mindset that most of us have about the church. Some churches have tried to bridge the gap with an active deacon ministry that have several persons who "shepherd" a number of families. Unless the "deacons" have a "shepherd's heart" and are willing to "labor diligently," then such an approach just does not work. The other model to bridge the gap is to do it through small groups or the Sunday School organization. The idea here is that each class is (in effect) a mini-church and leaders are recognized and take on the

responsibility of caring for the flock (the class or small group).

As with the Follow the Leader game, the leader is standing or going before the group being led. Most popular translations of the New Testament include the idea that leaders are “those who are over you” which has a somewhat negative connotation in our present-day culture. The literal meaning of the Greek word (proistemi) used here is to “stand before” and that is what leaders are generally expected to do. It can also mean “to care for” and we expect that of those in leadership, also.

Giving instructions, warnings, and admonishments are parts of “caring for” others and are essential parts of leadership. For this to happen effectively, it requires a lot of open communication if the instructions are to be specific to the person’s immediate situation. Usually, in the church today, we do not share a lot about what we are going through and the struggles we have until there is a crisis situation or a mistake made and it can no longer be hidden. This is why small group settings are important if the church is to function as a caring entity. Larger group meetings, as many churches have on Sunday mornings, are not conducive to “getting to know each other.” Consequently, leaders give general warnings and instructions and then those in the church are left to pick and choose which admonishments are applicable to their situation.

Once we have “identified” those who labor diligently by being among the people so that they can provide leadership with instructions, then we should treat them with respect due to a real leader. (That is literally what the word translated “esteem” means.)

So, how do we treat a person like a leader? There are a number of things that are accepted practices that we do in our current culture: Give leaders a title, we speak well of them to others, we show respect when addressing them, we reward or pay them for what they do. All these are good; however, the most important thing that we can do is to simply follow their leadership!

Our motivation for showing respect for others can vary greatly. If we show respect for another person what motivates us to do so? Possible answers:

Fear, because we are supposed to, because of the position the person holds, because we appreciate the contribution the person makes, because we appreciate the person, because of love.

Notice that the above list progresses from the least noble to the most noble reason for showing respect.

Accountable (Mutual) – 5:14-15

¹⁴ We urge you, brethren, admonish the unruly, encourage the fainthearted, help the weak, be patient with everyone.

¹⁵ See that no one repays another with evil for evil, but always seek after that which is good for one another and for all people. 1 Thessalonians 5:14-15 (NASB95)

The last sentence in verse 13 could be related to the relationship with leaders (that we “get along” with those in leadership) or it could be an introduction to verses 14 and 15 which related to interactions among members of a church family. The admonition from Paul is to cultivate an atmosphere of peace rather than contention in the church. Some of the ways to do this are given in these two verses.

Admonish the Unruly: The word “admonish” is the same word that was translated “instruct” in verse 12. It could also be rendered “warn.” We might be more comfortable in “instructing” rather than “warning” another person. The word “unruly” carries with it the idea of being out of step or being out of line as in a military marching formation. Paul may have had in mind those people who would not work to support themselves. Some people really do need help in being part of the team and working in such a way as to be helpful rather than being a hindrance. Others are so focused on themselves that everything that happens has to be all about

them. Whatever they are doing, they are constantly crying out “look at me.” These need to be admonished, also.

Encourage the Fainthearted: The KJV translates this as feeble-minded. In our vernacular this word has a completely different connotation than what Paul intended. The Greek word “oligopsuchos” is a combination of two ideas. The first part means “small” and the second part means “interpretation.” All of us have encountered people who will see something happening they conclude, “Well, that won’t amount to much.” They just don’t see the bigger possibilities of what God can do with situations, events, and/or people. We might call these folks “pessimists.” Some translations use the word “timid” which carries with it the idea of fearfulness. Perhaps all these apply to some portion of those of us in our churches today. The remedy is the same – encourage those who are feeble-minded, fainthearted, pessimistic, or fearful.

Help the Weak: Most commentators apply this advice from Paul to those who are spiritually weak and perhaps uninformed in the faith. This is somewhat similar to what Paul wrote to those in Romans chapter 15, verse 1: “We then who are strong ought to bear the infirmities of the weak, and not to please ourselves.” The idea in the letter to the Romans was to avoid doing things that might cause someone else to stumble. In all churches there are ranges of maturities within the body of believers. Whether it is a problem of lack of trust in the Lord or just being uninformed, we need to help each other. We need to be careful that in helping each other that we don’t just wind-up reinforcing doubts and becoming complacent in “not knowing.” If the blind shall lead the blind, will they not both fall into the ditch?

Be Patient with All: The previous three action items were things that are directed toward others. The admonition for patience (or endurance) is to be applied to ourselves as we go about instructing the unruly, encouraging the fainthearted, and helping or upholding the weak which will have an outcome of helping all of us live in peace with each other. If you have ever attempted any of these things, you know that it is not just “one and done.” You have to go back and do it again, and again, and again. Those who are “out of step” did not get that way overnight and they will not get over it overnight either. The same idea is applicable for those who are pessimistic or timid. It takes a LOT of encouragement and a lot of repeating the encouragement.

Do Not Allow Retaliation: If there is a Christian “action” distinctive that sets us apart from Islam and Judaism it is “not repaying evil for evil.” Usually when I read this passage, I think of how I should respond if I am wronged and I can talk my way through the natural tendencies that all of us have that relate to doing the “eye for eye” routine. However, Paul is saying that is **not** enough. In the church we are not to allow retaliation by anyone! Notice that this is not saying that the pastors or the elders are to prevent retaliation, but it is incumbent on each of us to intervene in such situations. That is really getting out of our comfort zone. The problem is that we don’t believe we know each other well enough to do that. That is probably a correct assessment of the condition in today’s churches. This is a serious indictment against the church and the kind of fellowship we have as members of the household of God and the Body of Christ. When it comes to relationships within the body, we are bordering on being dysfunctional. (Maybe “bordering” is being too kind.)

Seek Good for All: Paul just won’t leave us alone. It is not enough to just avoid doing evil and preventing others from doing evil, we need to get with the program and do some good! We need to get over the thinking that “If I can just stay out of trouble, then everything is going to be OK.” That is nothing more than just “keeping the letter of the law” and this is what the scribes and Pharisees were all about. Jesus said that unless your righteousness exceeds that of

the scribes and Pharisees you will not enter the kingdom of heaven. Going beyond the letter of the law and operating out of the spirit of the law by doing things motivated by self-sacrificing love as we saw modeled for us by Jesus is the way to effectively “seek good for everyone.”

Accountable (Divine) – 5:16-18

¹⁶ Rejoice always; ¹⁷ pray without ceasing; ¹⁸ in everything give thanks; for this is God’s will for you in Christ Jesus. 1 Thessalonians 5:16-18 (NASB95)

Our outlook on life and how we interpret things around us should be impacted or influenced by our relationship with God. If we realize that God is in control and that He loves us supremely and He is totally able to do what He wants to accomplish, then we should have joy that God’s grace is sufficient regardless of what situation in which we may find ourselves. The Christians at Thessalonica were experiencing persecution and this provided an opportunity to demonstrate grace in the midst of such problems. Not only were they to rejoice, they were to rejoice always – not just when they were in situations where others could see them and they needed to “put on a good face” but this joy was to be genuine and they would be convinced of God’s gracious provision and respond appropriately even when no one else was around.

The ability to do this is enabled by being constantly in prayer. This second item in Paul’s list is the central pillar which enables the first and the third items. Sometimes we equate petitions and praise with prayer and may not grasp the more basic concept that prayer is simply communicating with God. An ongoing dialogue with God regarding what we are doing and going through helps to keep a right perspective on life. It is what some have called “practicing the presence of God” which is a consciousness of being in contact with the Father and sensing that by the Holy Spirit that He is all around us and in us. (Parenthetically, we might note that the Greek word for “presence” is *parousia* which often translated as returning, coming, or arrival. Maybe Paul was telling us that since we do not know when Jesus will arrive, then we should live our lives as if He is already here.)

Knowing that God is able and full of grace and knowing that He is aware of our situation, then we can be thankful in all things knowing that He really is in control. Some commentators will make a point that they are glad that Paul did not say “for” all things but “in” all things. However, in Ephesians 5:20, Paul wrote “always giving thanks to God the Father **for** everything.”

In our personal lives, we can know that God’s wants us to be filled with joy of His salvation, always in communication with Him since we are in His presence, and that we have an attitude of genuine gratitude for everything in our lives knowing that He is able to use everything in such a way as to conform us to the image of His Son Jesus.

Notice also the extent of each of these three practices. The rejoicing is to be always, our praying is to be without ceasing, and our giving of thanks is for or in everything. This could be described as unbroken continuity. It is a constant attitude of heart and mind which is why both these need to be protected by Godlike armor – the breastplate of righteousness and the helmet of salvation.

Accountable (Corporate) – 5:19-22

¹⁹ Do not quench the Spirit; ²⁰ do not despise prophetic utterances. ²¹ But examine everything *carefully*; hold fast to that which is good; ²² abstain from every form of evil. 1 Thessalonians 5:19-22 (NASB95)

The brief, succinct statements Paul gave here are a concise summary of much of what he covered in his first letter to the church at Corinth in chapter 14. When he cautioned the Christians in Thessalonica to not quench the Spirit, the reference was not to the Person of the

Holy Spirit, but of the gifts and zeal of the Spirit that are to characterize the operation of the church. We can find a list of Spiritual gifts in places such as the 12th chapter of first Corinthians. Just as Paul had elevated the gift of prophecy above many of the others in the Corinthian passage, he specifically mentions it here also. We can get a better idea of what he means by prophetic utterances by looking at several verses in 1 Corinthians 14:26, 29, and 31.

(26) What then shall we say, brothers? When you come together, everyone has a hymn, or a word of instruction, a revelation, a tongue or an interpretation. All of these must be done for the strengthening of the church. (29) Two or three prophets should speak, and the others should weigh carefully what is said. (31) For you can all prophesy in turn so that everyone may be instructed and encouraged.

If a church is to operate in this way, then there must be an openness to the moving of the Holy Spirit. If things are done to quench this atmosphere, then we will be motivated to plan and organize and rehearse what is to be done when we come together. If we were to have someone spontaneously share what the Lord had done in their life or would want to share a message with the congregation in our churches today, then such actions would be frowned upon by most people. I'm not sure I would go so far as to say that it would be "despised" but there are not many people who would feel that they had the freedom to participate in such a manner because they would know that it would not be appreciated. Is this what is meant by quenching the spirit?

There are times when we do have an occasion to hear others share information with us. There are guest speakers and perhaps people who might share their testimony. When that happens, then we have a responsibility to carefully consider what they say and evaluate what they say in light of the word of God. We should not just buy into everything that someone says just because they have a degree in ministry or is a friend of a church member or is someone that is a motivational speaker in the secular world.

Sanctified – 5:23-24

²³ Now may the God of peace Himself sanctify you entirely; and may your spirit and soul and body be preserved complete, without blame at the coming of our Lord Jesus Christ. ²⁴ Faithful is He who calls you, and He also will bring it to pass. 1 Thessalonians 5:23-24 (NASB95)

Paul ended this letter with a prayer for the church. The general objective for all Christians is that the sanctification that God is working into our lives is successful in that it impacts all aspects of who we are. Notice that Paul recognized that the salvation we have is to impact not just our spirits, but our souls and bodies also. If it were just our spirits, then our salvation would be complete at the point we are born from above. However, the sanctification process is to "work out our salvation" into our minds, emotions, and our wills. It also involves disciplining our physical lives so that we benefit in all areas of who we are.

We should be encouraged when we are reminded that God is at work in us to bring about His purposes – He is faithful and He is persistent.

The remainder of the closing of this letter involves some of the same admonitions that normally appeared in letters of that day. As we pray for others, we would also like others to pray for us. We should not be hesitant to show affection for each other. Finally, we should be willing and eager to share a good word from the Lord with others we know.