

DO YOU GET ALONG WITH OTHERS?

1 Thessalonians 5:12-28

Objective: Learn to relate to fellow Christians in ways that strengthen the church.

In our society we spend a lot of time and resources on team sports. Football and basketball are big deals. A lot of our conversation is about various teams and players. Many times we identify with specific teams and we know a lot about the games that are played and the rules involved. What would you say is one of the most important aspects in having a successful team?

Individual skills, each person knows his or her assignment, apply effort to do the job, know and follow the rules, know the objective for each play, be cooperative, coordinated overall effort.

Everything in this list except individual skills is related to “teamwork.” Let me say, parenthetically, that individual skills will not replace teamwork and teamwork is not a substitute for skills. If we use an example of a choir and orchestra, if all the people have no music aptitude and cannot play or sing, then all the teamwork in the world is not going to sound good. On the other hand, you may have the most talented individuals and if they fail on the teamwork requirements, then you will have a grand mess.

You would think that, of all places, there should never be a problem with lack of teamwork in the church. WRONG! Looking at Paul’s letters to several of the churches, there were a lot of instructions regarding unity and teamwork issues for the early churches. He addressed some of the considerations that we need to be aware of and manage in a church setting in the letter to the church at Thessalonica in the last part of chapter five. There are five areas addressed

1. Respecting Leaders (5:12-13)
2. Reaching Out to Others (5:14-15)
3. Responding Personally to God (5:16-18)
4. Responding Corporately to God (5:19-22)
5. Referring to Prayer (5:23-28)

A lot of the discussion Paul had in his letter to this church was about the return of Christ. That is all well and good. 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.

Respecting Leaders

¹²But 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, ¹³and that you esteem them very highly in love because of their work. Live in peace with one another. 1 Thessalonians 5:12-13 (NASB95)

RECOGNIZE The first step is to recognize who the leaders are. Not all of those in leadership have positions that are recognized with titles and ministry positions. Paul does not refer to these who are to be recognized or acknowledged by a title such as elder, deacon, bishop, etc. I think this is good in that we should not be influenced by such words in defining the expectations and actions for people in the church. Let’s look at how Paul described these and see if we can discover some practical applications for our church as to those who are to be recognized as leaders.

Laboring diligently: The literal meaning of this is to work until you are tired. The idea is that the persons are dedicated and apply themselves to the task as long as they have the energy to do so. As

Matthew Henry puts it: they 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 this time in the history of the church, the leaders were likely to be people who had secular jobs in addition to their responsibilities in the local body of believers.

Among You: To have real and effective leadership requires being with and interacting with those being led. The shepherd of the flock needs to be able to observe the flock and be on the lookout for problems that may develop. He cannot be successful as a shepherd if he just shows 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.

How can this happen when a church has a thousand members? It can’t be done with the traditional mind set that most of us have about the church. Some churches have tried to bridge the gap with an active deacon ministry that has a person who “shepherds” 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).

Leading in the Lord: Most translations render this idea with words such as “those who are over you.” The literal meaning of the Greek word (proistemi) used here is to “stand before” and that is what leaders are to do. It can also mean “to care for” and we expect that of those in leadership also.

Give You Instructions: Giving instructions, warnings, or admonishments is a part of “caring for” others and is an essential part of leadership. In order for this to happen 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 mistake made and it can no longer be hidden. Typically, leaders are relegated to giving general warnings and instructions and then those in the church are left to pick and choose which admonishments are applicable to their situation.

ESTEEM Once you have “identified” those who labor diligently by being among the people so that can provide leadership with instructions, then we should treat them as a leader. (That is literally by 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 you show respect for another person what motivates you 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.

Reaching Out to Others

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

¹⁵See 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 leader (that we “get

along” with those in leadership) or it could be an introduction to verses 14 and 15. 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 verses 14 and 15.

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 themselves. 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.” You 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. I would 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 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 Rome in chapter 15, verse 1: “We then that are strong ought to bear the infirmities of the weak, and not to please ourselves.” The idea in the letter to the Romans was related to avoid doing things that might cause someone else to stumble. In all churches there is a range of maturities within the body of believers. Whether it is a problem of lack of trust in the Lord or just ignorance, we need to help each other. We need to be careful that in helping each other that we don’t just wind up reinforcing doubt and becoming complacent in our ignorance. 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 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 way 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 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.”

Responding Personally to God

¹⁶Rejoice always; ¹⁷pray without ceasing; ¹⁸in 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 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. 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.

Knowing that God is able and full of grace and 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 did say “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.

Responding Corporately to God

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

The brief succinct statements Paul gives 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 is 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 the 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.

Referring to Prayer

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. ²⁵ Brethren, pray for us. ²⁶ Greet all the brethren with a holy kiss. ²⁷ I adjure you by the Lord to have this letter read to all the brethren. ²⁸ The grace of our Lord Jesus Christ be with you. 1 Thessalonians 5:23-28 (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 recognizes 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 to be 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 others. Finally, we should be willing and eager to share a good word from the Lord with others we know.