4-25-21

1 Thessalonians 5:14-15

In this section of his letter to the church in Thessalonica, Paul is teaching about the general conduct of a Christian in the church. This conduct is important because as the church, we are the body of Christ here on earth. This means that if people are looking at us, they should be seeing how Jesus acts. We the church are also the bride of Christ. A big part of the church’s job on earth is to be purified for our husband, Jesus. This purification, or sanctification, is the work of Jesus through the Holy Spirit; but we are given these instructions in the Bible so that we can cooperate with Him as He works in our lives.

The three areas of conduct that Paul covers are respect for elders or church leaders, working with each other in the congregation, and proper worship. Last week we looked at verses 12 and 13. These verses encouraged the congregation to show respect and loyalty to the elders of the church. This was due them because of the hard work they did in their positions. Although these verses were directed to the congregation, they were also instructions the leadership needed to pay attention to regarding their positions.

In our passages today, Paul is speaking to the congregation with instruction on how to treat each other. Again, these are words for the elders also. One of the main things Paul is driving at here is that each member of the congregation has responsibility for their brothers and sisters in Christ. Responsibility is not left simply to the elders. There is an idea here that we all need to keep in mind: God is no respecter of persons; the pastor is no more important to God than the newest Christian in the church. Each has their own ministry and gifts, and each is responsible for caring for their fellow Christians.

In Ephesians 4:15-16 we read:

*[B]ut speaking the truth in love, we are to grow up in all aspects into Him who is the head, that is, Christ, from whom the whole body, being fitted and held together by what every joint supplies, according to the proper working of each individual part, causes the growth of the body for the building up of itself in love.*

Notice that the term “*in love*” is used twice in these verses. That is the best description of how we are to interact with each other in Christian fellowship. I think we all know that’s not always easy; Some personalities clash; some Christians still operate in the ways of the world and can be hard to deal with. As we’ve talked about before, love here is not a feeling, it is a decision. And it is a decision that Jesus calls us to make.

These verses in Ephesians speak of what it means to be part of the body of Christ. Most importantly, Jesus is the head; that means that He gets to be in charge, He gets to call the shots. It is for us to listen to what He says and do our best to do as He tells us. The things He tells us are what we find written in God’s word, the Bible. The best part is that if we are truly members of the body of Christ, it will be our pleasure to do as He wishes. Because we are sinful people, while it will be a pleasure, it may not always be easy; especially when dealing with other sinful people.

These verses also show how each person in the church is important. Each has their own part to play in the health of the congregation. The body is held together by what each person supplies to the whole body. And each person is growing as a child of God; becoming more like His only begotten Son, Jesus.

Paul begins verse 14 here in 1 Thessalonians by saying, “*We urge you, brethren …*”. This is very similar to the beginning of verse 12, except he used the word “*request*” instead of “*urge*”. We still see the high regard Paul holds for the Thessalonian Christians. He is not commanding them or treating them as if they are hard to get along with. In order to correct them he asks and encourages them; at the same time calling them brothers and sisters. He is treating them as equals, even though he is an apostle. We see that Paul recognizes that God is not a respecter of persons; each one is beloved in His eyes.

Having said that, we know from other parts of the Bible that Paul can and will use his apostolic authority when he needs to. He will harshly admonish those who need it. But it is still in love; wanting the people to whom he is writing to come closer to Christ or even not to miss salvation.

Paul calls the congregation to action in three areas: admonish the unruly, encourage the fainthearted, and help the weak. He wants all these things done with patience. Let’s look at each of these.

Paul begins with “*admonish the unruly*”; your translation might say something like “*warn those who are idle*”. In the context of 1 Thessalonians, these are probably the ones mentioned earlier who refused to work. This was in chapter 4, verses 11 and 12. Some in the church didn’t earn their own way, not because they couldn’t, but because they chose not to. They were to be admonished to earn their own way so they wouldn’t be a burden on others and would have something to give to those who were truly in need.

Those who weren’t working had time on their hands, they were idle; this is a dangerous thing. With nothing else to do they were likely to get into mischief or at least be a bother to those who were working. They would have time to get into other people’s business. This would become unruliness.

In today’s world, these are people who simply cause trouble in a church group. These are also different from those who need to be dealt with for living in sin. Some may be new Christians who haven’t yet left behind the attitudes of the world and they need guidance. Sometimes it may just be the personality of the person and they are trying to help.

Paul is not asking for some to set themselves up as enforcers of the church, admonishing anyone who appears to step out of line. You can see how these would become the unruly. No, he is asking us to keep an eye on each other. This is where people in the church who have special close relationships can help each other; husbands and wives, or those who have a close friendship. You might say to your close friend, ‘You might not want to do this or that, because …’. A wife might say to her husband, ‘I think you might be making so and so angry by what you are doing.’ Just gentle warnings, in love, for the good of the church.

Next Paul said to “*encourage the fainthearted*”. This could also be something like “*encourage the timid*”. There would have been some in the church who were just less able to handle some of the things life threw at them. The Christians in Thessalonica suffered persecution and some of them probably had it worse than others. With this kind of constant pressure, it would be easy to turn from the Christian faith. These needed encouragement.

There may have been those who had lost loved ones; these may have been the ones wondering what happened to them since they died before Jesus came back. Remember how Paul explained what would happen to the dead in Christ when Jesus returned and then told them, “*comfort one another with these words*”.

In our own day, there are many who are fainthearted just because of the way life has treated them. It is easy for them to question whether or not God really loves them or if they are even saved. People like this need reassurance. There is nothing wrong with them, they are not to be put down as those who can’t handle difficulty. They are just fellow Christians who struggle in certain areas. Encouragement can be needed for those who are naturally fainthearted or for those who are going through a particularly difficult time or even just a bad day.

Be quick to encourage. And here is where it is good to know what the Bible says. The Bible is the source of great encouragement. The promises of God’s word are uplifting and true; far better than platitudes. God’s word has substance and strength; and with these words comes the power of the Holy Spirit.

The third instruction given to the congregation is “*help the weak*”. The word translated ‘help’ gives the idea of holding on to someone or clinging to them. It indicates putting your arm around the one who is weak. It is active and truly doing something for someone. In the context of Thessalonica, this may have referred to those who had difficulty with sexual self-control. Remember in chapter 4, how Paul had to exhort them to refrain from sexual immorality. This was the normal lifestyle of Thessalonica and it may have been hard for some of the new Christians to come out of this.

Notice what Paul says, he says to help them, not throw them out. This is a possibility in any church; a member could be struggling with some kind of sin. That sin may have been their way of life before they became a Christian. Now, they want to end that sinful lifestyle, but are having great difficulty. This is where fellow Christians need to help with encouragement, not condemn for lack of strength.

There can certainly be other weaknesses such as ill-health. But again, fellow Christians need to remember that the weak brother or sister is no less a Christian; just one we are called to help. Every church body has all these people in one degree or another. An important thing to keep in mind is that on any given day, each of us could look in a mirror and see someone who is unruly, timid, or weak. This should remind us of what Jesus asked us: “*Why do you look at the speck that is in your brother’s eye, but do not notice the log that is in your own eye*?”

Paul ends these three individualized instructions with a general one: *be patient with everyone*. This means to be patient with the unruly person who is sometimes rude and hard-headed. This means to be patient with the fainthearted person who constantly questions their own salvation. This means to be patient with the weak person who keeps making progress and then falls back into alcohol or drugs or porn.

It means to be patient with everyone else in the church who happens to do something you aren’t happy with or irritates you. We are called to do something that is impossible for us. But being impossible does not excuse us from working hard to attain it. It shows us our own need for the Holy Spirit. It shows us how dependent we are on almighty God.

In verse 15, Paul goes on to say, “*See that no-one repays another with evil for evil*”. This might also say “*wrong for wrong*”. Of course, what we are looking at here is vengeance. Seeking revenge was the normal course of action in the Greco-Roman world. Actually, it is the normal course of action anywhere. For fallen mankind, the natural reaction for being wronged is to wrong the other person; to get even. Paul says here not to do that, and he is simply teaching what is in the rest of the Bible and from the words of Jesus Himself.

Along these lines, we often think of the Old Testament law that said “*An eye for an eye*.” But we have to understand this law. This was not a law of retaliation, but a law of making the punishment fit the crime. If one man struck another, causing him to lose an eye, the punishment for the offender was to take his eye. Revenge would not have been satisfied with this and may result in the offender being killed.

In His sermon on the mount, Jesus said, “*But I say to you, love your enemies and pray for those who persecute you*.” And why should we do this? Jesus tells us in the next verse: “*so that you may prove yourselves to be sons of your Father who is in heaven*.” We do not retaliate because we are Christians; we are disciples of Jesus Christ and because He is our Saviour, we are children of the living God. And there is one more thing we know our Father said, “*Vengeance is Mine, I will repay*.”

Our job is to try to win souls for Christ and because we don’t know hearts, we are just to spread the Gospel in words and action. God knows the hearts and He will judge rightly. He will repay those who wrong His children. Focus on Jesus, not on who has done you wrong. Take the challenge of trying to win your enemy to Christ.

If we aren’t to repay with evil, then we must repay with good; which is what Paul tells us to do. This is to especially take place in a Christian congregation; but Paul tacks on the words “*and for all people*”. We are to do good to those outside the church, even if they do us wrong.

The focus of these verses has been in the Thessalonian church and for all Christian churches; primarily dealing with Christian people who may have different issues and problems. We must be patient and loving. But these verses must also be considered in light of the entire Bible. What we have discussed here does not mean anything goes.

Heresy must not be tolerated in any church body. A Christian who is struggling with a particular sin, must be truly struggling; not just giving lip service while engaging in the sin. While everyone sins at times, no-one in leadership should be living in sin. If a Christian cannot leave some sin behind, they ought not to be in leadership in the church. Although we are not to seek revenge, we are not to let someone get by with breaking civil law. It is not a Christian calling to let an illegal act go, it needs to be reported.

Following Christ can be difficult. Jesus Himself tells us that. But He also promised us the Holy Spirit to give us council, wisdom, and strength. He will help us to apply God’s word to the situations we face in this life. We are also promised, that all the difficulties, all the trials, all the hard decisions, all the frustrating failures, will one day seem as nothing compared to the joy of eternity with Christ our Lord.

Prayer

Lord Jesus, You know how difficult the Christian life is. You know how hard it is for us to get along with each other let alone love each other. You know how hard it is for us to avoid seeking vengeance. You know because You became one of us and have experienced each of these things. You are our High Priest, and You have lived as we do, yet You are without sin.

We have not been sinless; we have separated ourselves from God and become objects of His wrath. Yet You offer us a chance; so that we can see how God admonishes we who are unruly, encourages we who are timid, helps we who are weak, is longsuffering with us, in hopes that we will turn to Christ. By Your sinless life and by Your sacrifice on the cross, You have won for us salvation.

Now help us, we pray, to act toward our fellow Christians as the Father does toward us. It would give us joy to see this bride of Christ, prepared and holy, ready for the Bridegroom.

It is in the name of Jesus Christ we pray these things

Amen