

Faith Under Fire: Thriving in a Hostile World

Relationships of Peace 1 Thessalonians 5:12-15

Introduction

The gospel of Jesus Christ transforms our relationships. It restores a loving relationship with God through Christ, and it produces loving relationships with one another. If it does not do so, we aren't holding on to the gospel. We've seen that the apostle John makes that abundantly clear in his letters. If you're not living in love, you don't even know God.

Jesus' certain return is part of that gospel. It increases our active commitment to the mission the Savior-King has given us. We who are children of the day and of the light anticipating the Lord's return are called to exercise vigilance. So our eager expectation of that day is not passive waiting. It does not produce neglect of one another. Rather it drives faithful, beneficial service to those around us here and now (Luke 12:41-46).

Paul says as much in the last verse of what Joel preached to us last week.

1 Thessalonians 5:11

Therefore encourage one another and build one another up, just as you are doing.

Our certain destiny of living forever in the presence of the Lord Jesus motivates healthy one anothering consistent with the Holy Spirit's transforming work in us.

In verses 12-15 Paul describes what that should look like in a church family.

¹² We ask you, brothers, to respect those who labor among you and are over you in the Lord and admonish you, ¹³ and to esteem them very highly in love because of their work. **Be at peace among yourselves.** ¹⁴ And we urge you, brothers, admonish the idle, encourage the fainthearted, help the weak, be patient with them all. ¹⁵ See that no one repays anyone evil for evil, but always seek to do good to one another and to everyone.

Right in the middle of our passage is this directive: 1 Thessalonians 5:13b
Be at peace among yourselves.

This command relates to both what precedes it and what follows. All the relationships within the body of Christ at Thessalonica were to be characterized by "peace." That is as it should be, for the gospel itself is sometimes called "the gospel of peace."

So I've called our study this morning
"Relationships of Peace."

1. With Those who Lead (12-13)
2. With Those who Struggle (14)
3. With Those who Wrong You (15)

1. With Those who Lead (12-13)

¹² We ask you, brothers, to respect those who labor among you and are over you in the Lord and admonish you, ¹³ and to esteem them very highly in love because of their work. Be at peace among yourselves.

Paul's emphasis is less on position than on the work these members of the body do. The NT is consistent on this score. The apostles consistently describe pastor-elder-overseers in terms of their character and their necessary labors for the sake of the flock of God.

Even the terms for this role convey caring activity: pastor—shepherd to feed and care for the flock; elder—spiritually mature example for the flock; overseer—a supervisor to know well the state of the flock and take appropriate action.

When their authority as teachers of God's Word is underscored (Hebrews 13), the NT couches that reality in the accountability they have before God to care for the flock. The

flock therefore benefits from following their lead.

Labor among you—usually used of manual labor; working to the point of exhaustion

Serving as a spiritual leader in the flock of God is labor intensive; and it is among the members of the body, not isolated from them.

Paul describes the nature of this toil in Colossians 1:28-29

²⁸ Him we proclaim, warning everyone and teaching everyone with all wisdom, that we may present everyone mature in Christ. ²⁹ For this I toil, struggling with all his energy that he powerfully works within me.

Sometimes men go into a ministry occupation thinking it will be an easy way to make a living. But nobody who takes seriously what the Scriptures say these men are to do can go at it in a lazy way.

Calvin: “All idle bellies are excluded from the number of pastors” (Hiebert, 232).

Are over you—literally, to stand before someone, hence to preside, to take the lead, to direct; the term combines both leading and caring for because that’s what effective godly leaders do.

In the Lord—as distinguished from mere political or civil leaders; these are leaders in the church as undershepherds of the Great Shepherd, Jesus Christ, head of the church.

Admonish you—to put one in mind, advise, warn

Some of the most difficult work spiritual leaders must do is to confront those who are doing wrong. Wayward sheep bite.

So how is the church family to respond to those who have this function in the body? Because of their work, respect them and esteem them very highly in love

Respect—literally, to know them
We know that the pastor-elder-overseers should know the members of their flock. Here, the flock is called to know them. Understand their true character and their God-given work. Appreciating who they really are and what they really do causes your relationship with them to flourish. Our irritations and frustrations with people often come from our not knowing who these people actually are and what they actually do. That includes those who serve as spiritual leaders.

It's easy to assign poor motives and poor performance to leaders we don't really know. So many leaders have proved disappointing in

their personal lives and in their public service that it's easy to become jaded.

The prevailing cynicism in our own culture about secular leaders can taint our attitudes even toward faithful, godly leaders in the church. But trust requires some measure of knowledge. It's nearly impossible to trust and respect those we don't really know.

Esteem them very highly in love because of their work

We highly value what they do because it is vital work assigned to them by God Himself, and to God they will answer (Hebrews 13). The Holy Spirit assigns to whom He will those who are to oversee and care for the church of God purchased with the blood of Christ (Acts 20). He does so because of Christ's love for His people. According to Ephesians 4, they are to equip the saints for the work of ministry so that the whole body grows to Christlike maturity in gospel truth and love.

And we grow to love those who give themselves the way true spiritual leaders do. Love for people shapes how we interact with them, how we work through misunderstandings. Love is not cynical and suspicious. It is not rude and slanderous.

Paul and his fellow missionaries considered spiritual leaders a critical necessity for each local church they planted (Titus 1).

Acts 14:21-23

²¹ When they had preached the gospel to that city and had made many disciples, they returned to Lystra and to Iconium and to Antioch, ²² strengthening the souls of the disciples, encouraging them to continue in the faith, and saying that through many tribulations we must enter the kingdom of God. ²³ And when they had appointed elders for them in every church, with prayer and fasting they committed them to the Lord in whom they had believed.

Applications

- What are ways you can get to know the spiritual leaders who labor to shepherd you?
- How could you grow your love for those who serve this way despite their flaws?
- When you intercede for them, what petitions would tend toward growing their capacity to care for God's flock?
- What is your normal response when a spiritual leader warns you in some way?

2. With Those who Struggle (14)

And we urge you, brothers, admonish the idle, encourage the fainthearted, help the weak, be patient with them all.

Brothers—reminder of our family relationship
What follows is not what just leaders are supposed to do, but what all members of the body of Christ are to do. Everyone of us must be looking out for our brothers and sisters who are struggling.

Leaders are not "to monopolize ministries, but rather to multiply them." (Stott)
They are to equip the saints for the work of ministry to one another (Ephesians 4).

Admonish the idle— put in mind, warn the disorderly, like a soldier out of rank or an army in disarray; confronting individuals who are out of line is hard for us. It's easy to avoid the possible conflict. But true love for others will not let us ignore them when they're in trouble.

Encourage the fainthearted—come alongside the worried, discouraged, fearful to comfort, exhort, urge them on

We all have different personalities. Some are more resilient than others. We all have different circumstances. At times some of our number are going through multiple trials all at once. None of us can know everything a person is facing, but all of us can show compassion to one another by encouraging

those who are beat down, worried, and fearful.

Help the weak— hold on firmly to those without strength. Cling to them. Put your arm around them. Help them along, like a thoughtful teenager would take hold of a grandmother to help her walk down steps or cross a street. Seems to be referring not so much to those who are physically weak as to those who are spiritually weak. Could be new believers, backslidden brothers and sisters, or those who have fallen prey to some sin.

We don't ignore brothers and sisters who are struggling. We don't beat up on them or berate them. We do all we can to help them. We dare not be dismissive of the believer who is down, who is drifting, who is faltering. They are vitally important to the body. We need them and they need us.

1 Corinthians 12:21-26

²¹ The eye cannot say to the hand, "I have no need of you," nor again the head to the feet, "I have no need of you." ²² On the contrary, the parts of the body that seem to be weaker are indispensable, ²³ and on those parts of the body that we think less honorable we bestow the greater honor, and our unpresentable parts are treated with greater modesty, ²⁴ which our more presentable parts do not require. But God has so composed the

body, giving greater honor to the part that lacked it, ²⁵ that there may be no division in the body, but that the members may have the same care for one another. ²⁶ If one member suffers, all suffer together; if one member is honored, all rejoice together.

Be patient (longsuffering) with them all.

Helping those who are struggling takes endurance. It takes grace. Helping takes effort. Healing takes time. Christianity is not about trying to look better than we are. It's about helping one another where we really are.

Applications

- Who are the individuals you know who are idle, fainthearted, and weak?
- How are you warning, encouraging, and holding on to them?
- How can you show longsuffering to such brothers and sisters?

3. With Those who Wrong You (15)

See that no one repays anyone evil for evil, but always seek to do good to one another and to everyone.

Evil—harmful behavior—The Thessalonian believers were well acquainted with what mistreatment feels like. The church was born in a swirl of persecution so great that the missionaries had to escape to other towns.

To repay evil for evil is our natural reaction. We want to strike back. But that is not what we've learned from Christ. Nobody is getting away with anything. There will be a payment exacted for sure. God is judge. He will repay. We can turn over whatever vengeance we might feel in our hearts to Him. He can take care of it perfectly, and He will.

Either such evil workers will repent and trust in Jesus as the One who has borne the wrath of God for them—just as the rest of us have; or they will pay. There are built-in consequences for evil behavior. Even if in this life there seems to be little payback, eternity in the lake of fire will be entirely sufficient. I don't have to add a thing. God does not need me to do His job as Judge of the Universe. Christ Jesus is coming back and He will deal with all evil and do so perfectly and completely.

Instead

Always pursue (like a hunter pursues whatever he's hunting) doing good—what morally right and therefore, also beneficial

"Good" suggests a higher law established by God. His definition of what's right drives your behavior, including your responses to evil done against you. The circumstance or the wrong done is not king of your life. God is. Helps keep you consistent in what you do and

say. You're not just reacting. You are proactively pursuing doing whatever God defines as right.

Toward whom do we behave this way?
One another—brothers and sisters in Christ
Everyone (Good Samaritan)

If we do good only to those who do us good, what kind of righteousness is that? Where is Jesus Christ, who came to save sinners, in that kind of living? How can we possibly advance the gospel among sinners if we are seeking revenge? And what hope can we possibly have for ourselves since we are sinners too? We have hope only because Jesus rescued us from the wrath we deserved.

Applications

- What resentments do you harbor that make you want to retaliate?
- How could you overcome the evil done against you with good?
- To what believers or unbelievers do you need to show positive kindness?

Conclusion

Jesus is coming back soon. If He were to inspect your life today, what would He find the health of your relationships to be?

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Summary of Applications

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- How could you grow your love for those who serve this way despite their flaws?
- When you intercede for them, what petitions would tend toward growing their capacity to care for God's flock?
- What is your normal response when a spiritual leader warns you in some way?
- Who are the individuals you know who are idle, fainthearted, and weak?
- How are you warning, encouraging, and holding on to them?
- How can you show longsuffering to such brothers and sisters?
- What resentments do you harbor that make you want to retaliate?
- How could you overcome the evil done against you with good?
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Additional Discussion Questions

1. What kinds of things happen to a church family when members and church leaders are at odds?

2. What kinds of Christian actions or interventions have you found helpful when you or others are struggling?
3. What example of overcoming evil with good have you observed that you could share?