

Loving Your Imperfect Leaders

1 Thessalonians 5:12-15

Strong & Ready! (Books of 1 & 2 Thessalonians)

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livinghopechurch.net

Introduction: Open your Bible to 1 Thessalonians 5. I want to bring a teaching to you tonight entitled: “Loving Your Leaders.”¹

“The kind of trust that we are called to give to our fellow imperfect humans in this life, be they family or friends, employers or government officials, or even leaders in a church, can never finally be earned. It must be given as a gift – a gift in faith, in trust more of the God who gives than of the leaders He has given (Eph. 4:11-13).”

- Mark Dever

Reading of Holy Scripture

1 Thess. 5:12-15, “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.”

Introduction

The purpose of Paul’s instruction in **5:12-22** is straightforward: he desires for the Thessalonians to be a “healthy church.” Christ said, “I will build my church, and the gates of hell shall not prevail against it.” How is it that Christ builds His church?

Ephesians 4:15-16 says it this way: “we are to grow up in every way into him who is the head, into Christ,¹⁶ from whom the whole body, joined and held together by every joint with which it is equipped, when each part is working properly, makes the body grow so that it builds itself up in love.”

How do we grow so that we build each other up in love? St. Paul answers that in this last chapter of 1 Thessalonians. We grow in **community** with each other and in our **communion** with God.

I. Grow in **Respect** for your Leaders, (1 Thess. 5:12).

1 Thess. 5:12-15, “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

¹Some of the outline and many thoughts for this study come from Howell, Mark (2015-01-13). *Exalting Jesus in 1 & 2 Thessalonians* (Christ-Centered Exposition Commentary) B&H Publishing Group.

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.”

Need for Leaders

God has woven into the fabric of life the need to have leaders. From marriages and sports teams to corporations and churches, leadership is essential. Without leadership, marriages suffer, sports teams lose, corporations flounder, and churches fail. Leadership makes life better.

If ever a group of people needed bold leaders, the Thessalonians did. Facing persecution from without and searching for answers within, this infant church needed guidance. Since Paul knew that he would not always be there to answer their questions and to calm their anxieties, he urges the Thessalonians to follow the leadership of “those who labor among you and lead you in the Lord” (5:12). This statement implies that pastors had already been

RESPECT PASTORS & ELDERS

A Pastor’s Calling to Work, Lead, and Encourage

1 Thess. 5:12, “We ask you, brothers, to respect those who labor among you and are over you in the Lord and admonish you.”

Respect is due to every pastor and elder who hears the call of God and, by faith, follows that call. Paul says that calling is manifested in three ways: hard work, oversight, and encouragement.

Respect is a translation of the common New Testament word *oida*, which means to know by experience. The connotation here is that believers are to know their shepherds deeply and respectfully and to value their service. Such knowledge is much more than the mere recall of their names or the general awareness of some facts about their personal lives. Instead, it entails a close, personal acquaintance that results in the caring appreciation of the Lord’s servant.²

Negative Attitudes towards Pastors and Elders

It is common for people to be unkind, critical, and indifferent toward their pastors when they do not know them well. But believers will not be as likely to have such negative attitudes toward pastors they truly know. Rather, they are more likely to treat them with heartfelt respect and gratitude.³

Let me be the first to say that I have failed this church on a number of occasions. Thank you for encouraging me and loving me and making sure that no soldier is left wounded on the battle field. We fight not against each other, or flesh and blood, but against the rulers, against the authorities, against the cosmic powers over this present darkness, “against the spiritual forces of evil in the heavenly places” (**Eph. 6:11-12**).

Spurgeon on Weakness

God uses only very weak men. Spurgeon talked often of his own weaknesses. He said, “God does not need your strength: he has more than enough of power of his own. He asks your

² MacArthur, J. F., Jr. (2002). *1 & 2 Thessalonians* (p. 172). Chicago: Moody Press. See e.g., Matt. 7:11; 9:6; Mark 2:10; Luke 20:21; John 4:22; 10:4; Acts 3:16; Rom. 6:16; 8:28; 1 Cor. 2:12; 2 Cor. 9:2; Eph. 1:18; Phil. 4:12; Col. 4:6; 2 Thess. 3:7; 1 Tim. 3:15; 2 Tim. 1:12; Heb. 10:30; James 1:19; 1 John 2:20; 3:2; 3 John 12; Rev. 2:2; 3:8.

³ MacArthur, 172.

weakness: he has none of that himself, and he is longing, therefore, to take your weakness, and use it as the instrument in his own mighty hand. Will you not yield your weakness to him, and receive his strength?”⁴

God only uses men who are ready for great weakness so that they may know all the power comes from him.

THE CALLING OF PASTORS & ELDERS

Pastors / Elders Labor

1 Thess. 5:12, “We ask you, brothers, to respect those who **labor** among you and are over you in the Lord and admonish you.”

The Greek word translated “labor” means “*to exert energy to the point of weariness or fatigue*,” to work *to the point of exhaustion*. A pastor is not afraid of sweat and hard work. He is not in it for paychecks, perks, or a nine-to-five job. In fact, his ministry is not a job— it’s a **calling**. And his calling is his life and passion.

Spurgeon Quote. Speaking to a group of potential pastors, **Charles Spurgeon** described such a calling: “If any student in this room could be content to be a newspaper editor, or a grocer, or a farmer, or a doctor, or a lawyer, or a senator, or a king, in the name of heaven and earth, let him go his way; he is not the man in whom dwells the Spirit of God in its fullness, for a man so filled with God would utterly weary of any pursuit but that for which his inmost soul pants. If on the other hand, you can say that for all the wealth of both the Indies you could not and dare not espouse any other calling so as to be put aside from preaching the gospel of Jesus Christ, then depend upon it, if other things be equally satisfactory, you have the signs of this apostleship. We must feel that woe is unto us if we preach not the gospel; the word of God must be unto us as fire in our bones, otherwise, if we undertake the ministry, we shall be unhappy in it, shall be unable to bear the self-denials incident to it, and shall be of little service to those among whom we minister.”⁵

Hardship of Paul. Paul’s life was a living testimony to the kind of passion required of those in ministry. He practiced what he preached in the presence of the Thessalonian Christians. Take note how he described his personal work ethic in 1 Thess. 2:9: “For you remember our labor and hardship, brothers. Working night and day so that we would not burden any of you, we preached God’s gospel to you.” Look at the vocabulary Paul employs to describe his ministry: *labor*, *hardship*, and *work*. Although he had a right to live off the gospel, he chose instead to provide his own financial support by working as a tentmaker so as not to burden the churches (Acts 18:3).

Tents in Day, Preaching at Night. Paul most likely worked on tents during the day and then turned around and preached the gospel all night.⁶ No pastor would ever make such a commitment if he were not sure of and passionate about his calling.

⁴ Spurgeon, 2209.331

⁵ Spurgeon, Lectures, 26– 27.

⁶ Phillips, Exploring 1 and 2 Thessalonians, 139.

Pastors / Elders Oversee

1 Thess. 5:12, “We ask you, brothers, to respect those who labor among you and are over you in the Lord and admonish you.”

While it is possible that Paul has in mind to protect and care for the church, the more likely meaning is that just as elders must lead and direct their families, so also they have the unique calling to preside over or direct the affairs of God’s church. Regardless of how this leadership is exercised, we know that is not to be done in a dictatorial manner. Peter makes this clear:

1 Peter 5:1-3, “So I exhort the elders among you, as a fellow elder and a witness of the sufferings of Christ, as well as a partaker in the glory that is going to be revealed: ² shepherd the flock of God that is among you, exercising oversight, not under compulsion, but willingly, as God would have you; not for shameful gain, but eagerly; ³ not domineering over those in your charge, but being examples to the flock.”

Paul underscores this sober responsibility by emphasizing that all pastoral leadership must be done “in the Lord” (5: 12). Beale describes the significance of this prepositional phrase:

“This position of authority is not to be performed in a dictatorial or sinful way, but the elders are over the rest of the believers in the Lord. Their authority can be exercised only in so far as the Lord has given them authority to act.... Church leaders are not autonomous sovereigns but represent Jesus’ authority. They are commissioned by Christ to carry out their oversight of the flock according to his will and not their own.”⁷

Pastors / Elders Encourage & Warn

1 Thess. 5:12, “We ask you, brothers, to respect those who labor among you and are over you in the Lord and admonish you.”

This word admonish means to counsel whether through warning or encouragement, but usually both. The Greek is **νουθετέω** *nouthetéo*; to warn, admonish, encourage, or exhort.⁸ The idea is to come along side and counsel from what you are living. It is a discipleship word.

St. Paul says in another place that every member is “competent to counsel one another” (Romans 15:14). It’s the same word.

Pastors should preach in such a way that you are able to go home and know how to read the Bible for yourself and apply it to your life as a result.

Pastors are also to **come along side** God’s people and encourage, warn, correct, and instruct God’s precious flock.

II. Grow in **Love** for your Leaders, (1 Thess. 5:13).

1 Thess. 5:12-13, “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.”

PEOPLE’S ATTITUDE TOWARD THE PASTOR

With the pastor’s responsibilities to the people established, Paul will now turn his attention to the people’s responsibilities to the pastor. The leadership of even the most gifted shepherd proves impotent if the sheep are unwilling to follow. But as F. F. Bruce rightly notes, this is not a one-way street.

⁷ Beale, 1–2 Thessalonians, 160.

⁸ Zodhiates, S. (2000). *The complete word study dictionary: New Testament* (electronic ed.). Chattanooga, TN: AMG Publishers.

“Pastors and people have a **mutual responsibility** to honor and respect each other. Bruce writes, It will make for the effective life and witness of the church and for peaceful relations among its members if its leaders are recognized and honored and their directions followed. The corollary of this is that the leaders should be the kind of people who deserve to be recognized and honored by their fellow Christians.”⁹

Love Your Leaders

1 Thess. 5:13a, “and to esteem them very highly in love because of their work.” For God’s people to expand the breadth of their influence on the world, they must first grow in the depth of their love for one another. Jesus said it this way: “By this all people will know that you are My disciples, if you have love for one another” (**John 13:35**). We should certainly love our fathers and mothers in the faith.

Specifically concerning pastors, St. Paul says in **Hebrews 13:17**, “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.”

No Pedestals. Don’t put your pastors and elders on a pedestal where they can fall down and disappoint you. Instead realize they are sinners and lift them up in prayer to God.

As God’s leaders lovingly lead you, then “esteem them very highly in love.” Under the watchful eye of God, a pastor leads, keeps watch over, and joyfully cares for his church. Likewise, out of obedience to God, the people follow, respect, and honor the leadership of their pastor. Anyone who has experienced the friction created by poor pastor-people relationships will recognize the damage that such conflict can cause to the testimony of Christ and His church.

William Carey Story. A pastor or elder is not worthy of your love. He is a sinner. But the Bible commands you to love your leaders. And leaders are to have a humble attitude. I think of William Carey.

It is told that “when William Carey was aboard ship on his way to India, he was surrounded by peers of the realm and diplomats, the high British officials who ruled the Indian subcontinent. He was looked upon as a nobody. One snobbish individual sneered at the missionary, “Just a shoemaker, aren’t you, Carey?” he said disdainfully. “No sir,” replied William Carey. “I am not a shoemaker. I am only a cobbler.” Nobody knows the name of that civil servant, but the whole church honors William Carey.”¹⁰

Crazy Moody. I think of D. L. Moody. They called him “crazy Moody.” Whether it’s “crazy Moody” or that humble cobbler William Carey, none of God’s servants deserve your love and respect in and of themselves, but esteem them “for their works’ sake.” Esteem them since God has appointed them. They are God’s representatives.

Pastors would do well to remember that the final evaluation of their ministry has nothing to do with how people treated them and everything to do with how faithfully they fulfilled their calling by loving their people.

Galatian Church’s Love for Paul. Paul had commended the Galatian believers for the godly way they had esteemed him:

⁹ F. F. Bruce, 1 and 2 Thessalonians, 120.

¹⁰ Phillips, Exploring 1 and 2 Thessalonians, 139– 40.

“Though my condition was a trial to you, you did not scorn or despise me, but received me as an angel of God, as Christ Jesus. ¹⁵ What then has become of your blessedness? For I testify to you that, if possible, you would have gouged out your eyes and given them to me.” (Gal. 4:14–15).

Be Skilled at Conflict Resolutions

1 Thess. 5:13b, “Be at peace among yourselves.” One way that you can show love and respect to your pastors and elders is to resolve conflicts among the Body. Be a peacemaker. We need to make peace among ourselves. It’s not easy.

Cyrano de Bergerac. Some of you remember Cyrano de Bergerac, the sword dueler with the very ugly, long nose. I’ll never forget my high school drama teacher, Mr. Doug Reiman who introduced me to his character. Mr. Reiman was brutal was brutal. It was my junior year of high school, and he asked me to play the part of Cyrano de Bergerac. Mr. Reiman was a fantastic teacher, but like all great teachers, he was mean, or at least I that was my first impression. He hounded me, made me speak clearly, taught me to see the world from that character’s perspective. He took nothing for granted, including my posture, eye contact, gestures, and tone of voice. Sometimes his criticisms hurt, but he always explained that he wanted to help me with my gift of speaking.

That year he entered me and another student into a nationwide drama competition, and we placed fourth nationally. My teacher’s constructive criticism has continued to pay rich dividends in my life for the last twenty years. Paul’s constructive criticism was painful for the Corinthians to hear. But their positive response to his confrontation brought about productive change in their lives. Had he not been so careful to confront me on all the nuances of speaking, I would never have placed so high in the drama competition.

Last Time Someone Confronted You? We all have a biblical responsibility to take part in biblical conflict resolution. Often we are called to “admonish one another” and to “speak the truth in love”. We are called to “instruct one another” and to teach and edify one another. All of these things include loving confrontation and biblical instruction on things God calls on us to change. Are you doing that? Are you cooperating with biblical conflict resolution?

Do you remember the last time someone confronted you about a sin issue? Maybe it was someone in the church. Maybe it was a friend or a family member. Perhaps it took you off guard. How did you react? It’s hard to react well, but we must remember that God is using the constructive criticisms of His people to bring to our attention the areas where we need to grow.

There are two types of criticism – **destructive** and **constructive**. If you look at Paul’s letters, he does not ignore the problems. He confronts them with the truth in love. This loving confrontation was a powerful tool that God used to get rid of sin in the congregation.

Easy to “Give Up” on People. It’s easy to just cut people off when they wrong us. Often we just neglect people who “get on our nerves” or misunderstand us. In doing so we grieve the Holy Spirit. Often we do not approach our interpersonal conflicts in a godly manner, and we lose an amazing opportunity to help someone grow in Christ. We need to make peace among ourselves!

III. Grow in **Care** for your Brothers and Sisters, (1 Thess. 5:14-15).

In the New Testament there are about 35 distinct commands to care for “one another” in one way or another. Here Paul gives specific ways we can care for one another.

Really Paul is asking the whole church to pastor one another as he has pastored them and as their leaders are shepherding them.

1 Thess. 5:14-15, “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.”

Warn the irresponsible, “admonish the idle.”

His use of the word exhort indicates that this is more than a simple request. On one hand, Paul “asks” the church to pursue healthy relationships with its leaders, but on the other hand, he “exhorts” them to deal swiftly with certain people within the fellowship. It seems that although the issue of showing proper respect for leaders is important, the matter of dealing with problem people in the church is urgent. Clearly he implies that, if left unchecked, these people had the potential of negatively impacting the testimony of the church. Pretending that problem people are not in the church does not make them go away.

We don’t like to do the hard work of conflict resolution. Although we cannot be certain as to the precise identity of these individuals, likely Paul has in mind the lazy busybodies who were meddling in everyone’s business. The word **irresponsible** pictures a soldier who steps out of line and behaves in a disorderly manner. Based on the meaning of the word, perhaps Paul simply had in mind any church member whose ungodly behavior was threatening the unity and integrity of the church.

Comfort the discouraged, “encourage the fainthearted”

Serving alongside the irresponsible were the “discouraged” (5: 14b). This word most likely refers to one who is worried, fainthearted, or fearful. In this sense, the discouraged would be the antithesis of the irresponsible. The irresponsible would be those overly self-confident individuals who clamor for attention; whereas the discouraged would be those who lack self-confidence and choose to remain on the fringes.

Discouraged people need to be comforted (5:14). According to Paul, helping discouraged people is not that difficult. Often all they need is a simple word of encouragement.

Concerning this, Chuck Swindoll, in his book *Contagious Christianity*, offers a helpful suggestion about the gift of encouragement. He writes,

“This gift may be wrapped in an affirming word, a gentle touch, a smile, or a shoulder to lean on. It may simply be our presence. Too often we isolate ourselves; like strangers in an elevator, we feel uncomfortable even making eye contact or speaking politely to one another. In the family of God, though, these things must be different. Let’s free ourselves to touch one another, particularly the [discouraged], who need to know someone cares.¹¹”

Story of William Cowper. Sometimes a person simply needs to know you are there and that you are not going to give up. I think of the story of William Cowper.

¹¹ Swindoll, *Contagious Christianity*, 81.

In 1759 when he was 28 years old he was appointed, through the influence of his father, Commissioner of Bankrupts in London. Four years later he was about to be made Clerk of Journals in Parliament. What would have been a great career advancement to most men struck fear in William Cowper — so much so that he had a total mental breakdown, tried three different ways to commit suicide, and was put into an asylum.

His father had arranged for the position. But his enemies in parliament decided to require a public interrogation for his son as a prerequisite. Cowper wrote about the dreadful attack of 1763:

“All the horrors of my fears and perplexities now returned. A thunderbolt would have been as welcome to me as this interrogation... Those whose spirits are formed like mine, to whom a public exhibition of themselves, on any occasion, is mortal poison, may have some idea of the horror of my situation; others can have none.”¹²

John Newton was told that the Cowper family near his parish had lost their father and husband. He made the trip and was such a help to them that they decided to move to Olney and sit under his ministry.

For the next 13 years Newton was Cowper's pastor and counselor and friend. Cowper said, "A sincerer or more affectionate friend no man ever had."¹³

Newton saw Cowper's bent to melancholy and reclusiveness and drew him into the ministry of visitation as much as he could.

Newton asked for help with the Olney Hymnal, in which Cowper wrote 15 hymns including,

- *There is a fountain, filled with blood*
- *Oh! for a closer walk with God*
- *GOD moves in a mysterious way*

Listen to the rich lyrics of Cowper's own understanding of God's sovereignty in mental illness:

*GOD moves in a mysterious way,
His wonders to perform;
He plants his footsteps in the sea,
And rides upon the storm.*

There were repeated attempts at suicide, and each time God providentially prevented him. Newton stood by him all the way through this, even sacrificing at least one vacation so as not to leave Cowper alone.

So encourage the fainthearted! Michael Martin so aptly puts it, “The church should support these ‘weak’ brothers as beloved fellow strugglers, not desert them as ignorant or unimportant stragglers.”¹⁴

Be patient with everyone, “be patient with them all”

We are all made out of dust. Everyone is struggling. Think the best of people. Be patient with all men and women and children.

¹² Gilbert Thomas, *William Cowper and the Eighteenth Century*, Ivor Nocholson and Watson, 1935, 204.

¹³ *Ibid.*, 192.

¹⁴ Martin, 1, 2 Thessalonians, 178.

The word patient means to “have a long fuse.” The patient person is someone who does not “blow up” easily when dealing with challenging circumstances or difficult people. Patience is one of those virtues that, though knowing its importance, you struggle to put into practice.

The process of sanctification is a long one. Understand that God is in total control of whether or not someone is sanctified into the image of Christ. That doesn’t mean we don’t toil in sanctification. There are thousands of means. But God promises to sanctify us in this passage, so we can be patient with others during this process.

1 Thess. 5:23-24, “Now may the God of peace himself sanctify you completely, and may your whole spirit and soul and body be kept blameless at the coming of our Lord Jesus Christ. ²⁴ He who calls you is faithful; he will surely do it.”

Refuse to retaliate, vs. 14, “See that no one repays anyone evil for evil, but always seek to do good to one another and to everyone.”

While we may rightly expect that all Christians will love one another, this is sadly not always the case. Sheep sometimes bite! Unfortunately, people within the church are capable of inflicting great hurt on other Christians. Everyone faces the very real possibility of being hurt by a fellow church member.

Despite our best intentions to help, some simply do not want our help and may even resent us for getting into their business. Sometimes this resentment is expressed through anger, slander, gossip, or even false accusations. How then are we to respond when we become the object of another person’s resentment or anger?

Here is where Paul’s command enters the picture. We must pursue only what is good for everyone. Period. He says nothing about whether or not we think someone deserves your kindness. We must resist the urge to fight fire with fire by repaying evil with evil.

We cannot control how others treat us, but we can control how we respond to them. We must do our part and then trust God to do His part.

As Paul told the Romans in **Rom. 12:14, 17-19**, “Bless those who persecute you; bless and do not curse them.

¹⁷Repay no one evil for evil, but give thought to do what is honorable in the sight of all. ¹⁸If possible, so far as it depends on you, live peaceably with all. ¹⁹Beloved, never avenge yourselves, but leave it to the wrath of God, for it is written, “Vengeance is mine, I will repay, says the Lord.”

Conclusion

Ephesians 4:15-16 says it this way: “we are to grow up in every way into him who is the head, into Christ, ¹⁶from whom the whole body, joined and held together by every joint with which it is equipped, when each part is working properly, makes the body grow so that it builds itself up in love.”

How do we do that? Paul says in 1 Thess. 5:12-15...

1. Grow in **respect** for your leaders.
2. Grow in **love** for your leaders.
3. Grow in **care** for your fellow brothers and sisters.

Mark Dever, Pastor in Washington DC at Capitol Hill Baptist said it this way, “the kind of trust that we are called to give to our fellow imperfect humans in this life, be they family or friends, employers or government officials, or even leaders in a church, can never finally be

earned. It must be given as a gift – a gift in faith, in trust more of the God who gives than of the leaders He has given (Eph. 4:11-13).¹⁵

¹⁵ Nine Marks of a Healthy Church, Crossway, 2000, 214.