

Life In The Local Church

1 Thessalonians 5:12-22

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In our study in 1 Thessalonians, we saw, in chapter 1, Paul commending the believers in Thessalonica. This was his commendation for their faith, love and hope. In chapters 2-3, we saw Paul's vindication, as he was being attacked in his ministry, and he defended his ministry and his message. And in chapters 4-5, we saw instruction or admonition. Now we come to chapter 5, verses 12-22, in which Paul ends his letter also with instruction or admonition.

The local church is an individual fellowship. The universal church is the body of Christ universal. Everyone who believes in Jesus Christ and is born again is part of the body, the fellowship of God. But we have individual churches; we are Revival Christian Fellowship, an individual, local church with our own leadership, our own fellowship and our own worship. That is what Paul will deal with in our passage: life in the local church.

Paul uses a repeated word, in verses 12, 14, and 26, of "brethren." He is addressing the believers in the church in Thessalonica. He is speaking to the family of God. When you become a Christian, God becomes your Father, you become a child of God and you have brothers and sisters in Christ. We are to love each other, encourage each other and grow together, in order that we might glorify and honor God.

It's sad when people today determine that the local church is not necessary for their Christian life, and they neglect or ignore their local church family. I don't believe that we can grow and honor God as believers unless we're linked to and a part of what God is doing in the local church.

It's interesting that in the verse just before our text, in chapter 5, verse 11, Paul says, "Therefore comfort each other and edify one another, just as you also are doing." So Paul ended the section on "the day of the Lord" telling them that they need to "comfort each other"—that's local fellowship—and "edify one another"—that's also the local fellowship. So they are to comfort and build up one another.

No local church is perfect. There will be problems with the leadership, with the laity and with the people of that church. You can't just run from church to church trying to find the perfect church. If you ever find a perfect church, don't join it, because it won't be perfect anymore. But God has ordained leadership, fellowship and worship in the local church.

Paul's closing admonition, in our text, focuses on three essential aspects of the church life. It focuses on leadership, fellowship and worship. In verses 12-13, we have reference to the church leadership. "And we urge you, brethren..."—there's that key word—"...to recognize those who labor among you, and are over you in the Lord..."—that's a reference to the local leadership in the church—"...and admonish you, and to esteem them very highly in love for their work's sake. Be at peace among yourselves." So Paul is addressing these words not to

the pastors or leaders but to the people. He is addressing the people on how they should relate to the leaders in the church.

The believers in Thessalonica were taught that the Lord's coming back soon in the rapture, in chapter 4, verses 13-18, and "the day of the Lord" would come following that. Some had quit their jobs, they weren't working but sponging off other believers and weren't being diligent in the church. So they had been told to be quiet, mind their own business and get to work. The leaders had admonished them for what they were doing, and it's possible that some of the believers weren't responding very well to that admonition. When your pastor says, "Be quiet, mind your own business and get to work," that's when some people say, "I'm going to find another church!"

So Paul had to address the importance of God-ordained leaders and how they should be responded to by the members of that local church or fellowship. This is very, very important.

Another problem—and it runs all the way through this passage—is that the church was young, because they had all come to Christ at the same time and were all baby believers, so to ordain elders in the church could have caused some rifts or strife between people. "Why did you choose him and not me?"

But we can't underestimate the importance of godly leadership in the local church. The church rises or falls based on its leadership. Leadership today, as it always has been, must be Biblical leadership. The leaders of our churches must have a Biblical philosophy, following the Bible and preaching the Scriptures. They should not adapt the philosophies of the world in leading the church of God. That's what pastors are to be and do.

1 Timothy 3:1-13 is one of two key Scriptures where we have the offices of the church and the qualifications for these offices. It discusses the offices of the pastor and deacon. I believe there are only two offices in the church today: pastor, which is also known as elder, bishop or overseer; and deacon. The word "pastor" means "shepherd." It conveys the idea that he is to feed, lead, guide and protect his congregation. It also implies that the congregation consists of sheep, and the pastor is to be the shepherd under the chief shepherd, Jesus Christ. It also implies that since they are sheep, they are weak, silly and dumb.

But the shepherd, the pastor, is also weak. He is a brother in Christ. He also has sheep needs: he needs other's love, encouragement and fellowship. He is a part of the church just like those who sit in the pews. But because of the pastor's position of leadership in the church, he is also a shepherd. That makes it a challenging position to be over the flock as well as among the flock.

A pastor is also known as an "elder." From the word "elder" we get our word "Presbyterian." That means that an elder is to be a "mature overseer." From the word "bishop," we get our word "Episcopalian." That means an "overseer." So these words are interchangeable for the same office of pastor.

The office of “deacon” means “servant.” These are those who are ordained in the church to serve in the area of helping in the church.

In our text, Paul first describes pastors in several ways. Number one, they are to work hard, in verse 12. It says “labor among you.” The word “labor” means “wearisome toil or effort.” It means you work so hard that you are physically, emotionally, spiritually exhausted. It means to labor to the point of being weary.

In 1 Thessalonians 2:9, Paul said, “For you remember, brethren, our labor...”—there’s the same word—“...and toil; for laboring night and day, that we might not be a burden to any of you.”

In 1 Timothy 5:17, Paul said to Timothy, “Let the elders who rule well be counted worthy of double honor, especially those who labor...”—there’s the word—“...in the word and doctrine.”

So a pastor, contrary to a lot of common ideas about pastoral work, is to work very hard, especially in laboring in the Word and in doctrine. I’ve often had people ask me, as a pastor, “Well, what do you do all week? You only work one hour on Sunday morning.” Trust me, on Sunday I work many hours, and I also work every day of the week. Pastors labor to the point of wearisome toil. They are to be hard working. If you’re looking for an easy life, don’t enter into pastoral ministry.

Number two, pastors or bishops are described as overseers. They “labor among you, and are over you in the Lord,” verse 12. The word “bishop” is the word “episkopos” or “Episcopalian,” and it means “to oversee.”

The problem in Thessalonica was that as young believers all saved at the same time, they had a hard time recognizing the giftings of elders or leaders among themselves. The shepherds lead, feed and protect; the elders are to be spiritually mature; and the bishops are to oversee the functions of the local church. Not recognizing these characteristics in those in the church caused tension and strife among the believers.

And the pastor is to be an undershepherd. Jesus Christ is the Good Shepherd; He’s the chief shepherd. As a flock of sheep, we have Jesus as our Good Shepherd. And the pastor or pastors are under shepherds. They have to give an account to God someday for how they shepherded or pastored His sheep.

I always keep in mind that Revival Christian Fellowship is the Lord’s church, filled with the Lord’s people, and I am His servant. I’m only to do His bidding. That’s why leaders in the church need to have a Biblical philosophy of ministering. You would think that’s a given, but today the trend is to go away from Bible-centered ministry to a philosophy of the world to grow a church. It’s called “pragmatism.” Their focus becomes growing a big church, so they leave the Bible to do whatever causes the church to grow, rather than focus on the preaching of the Word and being a shepherd, an elder, a bishop or overseer of men’s souls. Biblical pastors are over you, but they are doing it as unto the Lord as under shepherds. So pastoral ministry is humble, servant leadership with the authority invested by God from His Word.

Number three, pastors “admonish you,” verse 12. They work hard among you, are over you in the Lord and they admonish you. The word “admonish” literally means “to put in mind.” It’s warning with instruction for the purpose of correcting. This primarily happens when the pastor does his job as a shepherd by preaching, teaching and feeding God’s people with God’s Word. So the way we warn at Revival Christian Fellowship—whether by counseling, discipleship or mentorship, in the youth groups or in the pulpit—is in, by and through the Holy Spirit’s power and the Word of God.

If you come in for counseling, we’re going to give you Biblical counseling. If you come to church on Sunday, we’re going to give you a Biblical sermon. If you call for help, we’re going to give you Biblical counsel; we’ll tell you what the Bible says and pray for you to submit to the authority of God’s Word.

So they admonish you, warn you with instruction, for the purpose of correcting. In 2 Timothy 4:2, Paul said to Timothy, “Preach the word! Be ready in season and out of season. Convince, rebuke, exhort, with all longsuffering and teaching.” So the pastor is to warn the church and teach the church with doctrine, with reproof, with correction and instruction in righteousness. This is what a faithful pastor is to do: feed the Word of God to God’s people with reproof, with rebuke and with exhortation.

My number one job, among many jobs, is to preach and teach the Bible—nothing more and nothing less. We don’t have any “jugglers” on Sunday morning. We simply open the Bible, we read the Bible and we preach the Bible as faithfully as God enables us. It’s called “expositional preaching.” We read the text, we explain the text and we seek to apply the text so that you understand the Word of the Lord.

Paul is going to say in verse 27, “I charge you by the Lord that this epistle be read to all the holy brethren.” When we simply read the Bible, you are hearing God speak. And the best sermons are those in which the voice of the preacher is eclipsed by the voice of God from His Word. This is why we read the Word, explain the Word and apply the Word. And the Holy Spirit brings transformation, as well as illumination, to the child of God. So all the admonishing of verse 12 is through the Scriptures, the Word of God.

So the pastor labors, leads and feeds or admonishes.

Now how should the congregation respond to this kind of leadership? What attitude should they have toward their pastors? We find the answers in verse 12, “recognize those”; in verse 13, “esteem them” and “Be at peace among yourselves”; and in verse 25, “pray for us.” Also in Hebrews 13:17, “Obey those...and be submissive.”

First, we looked at the pastor, and now we look at how the people should respond to God-ordained leadership in the church. In verse 12, it says we should “recognize those who labor among you.” This means to appreciate them, recognize them and respect them. It doesn’t mean, “Hi, my name’s Mike. Glad to meet you, Pastor John.”

I wish I could take each of you home, that I could have my meals with you, hang out with you, but it's humanly impossible. I meet a lot of you when I go to Home Depot and Lowe's. Many of the workers there go to Revival Christian Fellowship. When I get frustrated with someone at the store, my wife says, "Calm down, John. They all know you're the Pastor. Don't yell at them!" I have Kristy to counsel me in those moments.

So it's not just to know the pastors; it's to appreciate them. It means to recognize them and respect them.

1 Timothy 5:17 says, "Let the elders who rule well be counted worthy of double honor, especially those who labor in the word and doctrine." From the word "honor" we get the word "honorarium." Some point out that it not only means honor but it means double pay; they are to be remunerated, supported and taken care of. If they have sown spiritual things, then the congregation should take care of their material needs and appreciate them, as well.

I have a great love for pastors—probably because I've been a pastor for 48 years. Who knows how long the Lord will have me continue on. I have a love for pastors, because I know their challenges. I know the problems that they face. So many times it's the loneliness and the responsibility of leadership that weighs on them and the demands of preaching the Word every week or multiple times a week. So I've committed myself to do all I can, and we as a church do a lot to support, encourage and minister to pastors.

Ray Stedman said, "I know of churches where pastors are treated as hired servants. They are there to respond to the whims of the board of the church or the vote of the congregation. They are accorded little or no respect, and are at times severely mistreated." That's so sad. One of the big tragedies I see in churches today is the war going on between the people and the pastor or the pastor and the people. They're divided. This is why many times churches split or fire their pastors, and the churches suffer because of it. So pastors are to be respected and recognized.

Second, in verse 13, it says we are to "esteem them very highly in love for their work's sake." So they are to be held "in highest regard in love," as the NIV renders this. The word "love" here is the word "agape." They are to be esteemed because of their work, not because of their charismatic personality, not because of how they look or how funny they are or how creative they are. They are to be esteemed because of their work, what they do in serving the Lord and ministering to God's people. Don't worship them but do value them.

Many times when I'm at another church preaching, and they have an amazing pastor, I encourage the congregation to appreciate, pray for, love and encourage their pastor. And I believe that pastors are given to churches as gifts from God. In Ephesians 4:11-12, it says that God has given pastors/teachers to churches for the purpose of perfecting and maturing the saints "for the work of ministry, for the edifying of the body of Christ." It's so very important.

Now notice, third, that the congregation should live in peace with them. Paul says, in verse 13,

“Be at peace among yourselves.” In the context, Paul is talking about the relationship between the people and their leaders, who are “over [them] in the Lord.” Don’t fight them or resist them or backbite them, but “be at peace” with them.

I’ve also added two more points about the people’s relationship to their pastors. Fourth, in verse 25, Paul says, “Brethren, pray for us.” This is one of the most important things you can do for the spiritual leadership in your local church. Pray for your pastors; don’t criticize them, don’t attack them, don’t oppose them. If you’re going to talk about them, talk about them on your knees before God.

One of the things that blesses my heart more than anything is when people say, “Pastor, we pray for you. We pray for you every day. We pray for you constantly.” I know that’s what strengthens me to do the work of the ministry.

Then notice, fifth, in Hebrews 13:17, the congregation is to obey them and submit to them. The writer of Hebrews says, “Obey those who rule over you, and be submissive, for they watch out for your souls, as those who must give account. Let them do so with joy and not with grief, for that would be unprofitable for you.”

So you are to know pastors, which means to recognize and respect them, you are to esteem them or hold them in highest regard, you are to live at peace with them, you are to pray for them and you are to obey and submit yourselves to them. In Psalm 133:1, the psalmist says, “Behold, how good and how pleasant it is for brethren to dwell together in unity!” That’s what God wants: unity in the church.

Now Paul moves from leadership, in verses 12-13, to the second aspect of church life, which is fellowship, in verses 14-15. “Now we...”—he includes himself with the other apostles—“... exhort you, brethren, warn those who are unruly, comfort the fainthearted, uphold the weak, be patient with all. See that no one renders evil for evil to anyone, but always pursue what is good both for yourselves and for all.” Paul is addressing the same members of the church, “brethren,” in verses 14-15 as he did in verses 12-13, and he’s telling them that now the focus is on one another. So first, the focus is on the pastor to the people and the people to the pastor, and now it is on the people to the people, as they minister one to the other.

The existence of pastors in the local church does not release its members from their responsibility to care for one another. Biblically, I believe that every member of a church is to be a minister; we are all to minister one to another.

I remember when our youngest, our son, was born. There’s a big gap between our third and fourth child. The older girls took care of their little brother. It was really quite easy on us. So I came up with this theory that the more you have, the easier the job gets. We would give Jared to Bethany, and she would sing to him, read to him, pray in front of him and tuck him in his crib. That way we could tend to the others.

This is exactly how we are to function in the body of Christ. We have brothers and sisters. We

have newly-born ones in Christ. They need your care. Many times when we see people coming to Christ and getting saved, and the new-believer classes are growing, I think about the congregation—whether they are praying for them, checking up on them, calling them, inviting them over for meals, mentoring and discipling them, helping them, sharing Scripture with them. It's not enough for them to just come to church; they need your tender love, attention and care. After church is over pray, "God lead me to somebody I can encourage, pray for and invite over." So verses 14-15 is Paul's encouragement to life in the church, that they minister one to another.

What Paul does is he names those in the fellowship who need special care and attention. Look at the list. In verse 14, he says, "Now we exhort you, brethren, warn those who are unruly." First, what we need to do in the church is to "warn those who are unruly" in the body of Christ. The word "unruly" means "to step out of rank." It's a military concept. We would say "to step out of line."

Again, there might have been some tension between the leadership and the church, because they didn't want to submit to the leaders, so they were out of line. They are to be warned. The same word "unruly" is translated "admonish" in verse 12. So the warning, in verse 14, is admonition, as mentioned in verse 12. It's instruction for the sake of warning and bringing them back into line.

If you know someone in the church who has stepped out of line or out of bounds, go to them and warn them in love.

The second thing Paul says to them in verse 14 is to "comfort the fainthearted." They need special attention. It's not talking about their mental capacity but their weakness of spirit. They are easily discouraged. It literally means "weak spirited." You need to comfort them. That means to come alongside and strengthen them. The Holy Spirit is called the "parakletos" or "the comforter." So if the Holy Spirit is filling you, you need to comfort those who are weak spirited.

There are a lot of Christians like that. Maybe you are reading this and you're discouraged. You're ready to "throw in the towel." You want to give up. You need someone to put their arm around you, pray for you, comfort you, encourage you and strengthen you.

Third, we are to "uphold the weak." This means spiritually weak. We are to help or support them. The "weak" here are "weak spiritually" or "spiritually unstable." They have a tendency to fall into sin. When a Christian falls into sin, we finish him off rather than helping him. So we need to help those who stumble and fall. Galatians 6:1 says, "Brethren, if a man is overtaken in any trespass, you who are spiritual restore such a one in a spirit of gentleness, considering yourself lest you also be tempted." So if you know a brother or sister who is spiritually weak, has stumbled or fallen, go to them and seek to restore them in humility and service.

Fourth, we are to "be patient with all," verse 14. We need to have patience with all in the church. It takes patience to raise a family. As a parent, it takes patience: it takes patience to teach a child to eat, to teach them to walk, to teach them to take care of themselves, to teach

them how to use the potty. You're praising God when they get out of diapers! Eventually God sets the captives free.

Patience—when I hear the word “patience,” I get impatient. You want people to grow up, you want them to mature and you want them to walk right off the bat, but it doesn't happen immediately. So be patient with the body of Christ.

Fifth and last, don't take revenge, verse 15. It says, “See that no one renders evil for evil to anyone, but always pursue what is good both for yourselves and for all.” So we warn them who are out of line, we comfort the fainthearted, we support the spiritually weak, we are patient toward all and if someone is evil toward us, we don't render “evil for evil.” We “pursue what is good both for [our]selves and for all.” Someone said, “Evil for good is demonic, evil for evil is human and good for evil is divine.”

When Jesus was dying on the Cross and people were reviling Him, spitting at Him and cursing Him, what He said was, “Father, forgive them, for they know not what they do.” He didn't render evil for evil; He rendered good for evil. That's what makes us like our Father in heaven, when we render good for evil.

So are you actively caring for others in the fellowship, the family of God?

The third aspect of church life is our worship, verses 16-22. “Rejoice always, pray without ceasing, in everything give thanks; for this is the will of God in Christ Jesus for you. Do not quench the Spirit. Do not despise prophecies. Test all things; hold fast what is good. Abstain from every form of evil.”

Paul moved from pastors to the people, from people to pastors, from people to people and now he moves to people in their worship or relationship to God. So we have the pastor's relationship to the people, the people's relationship to the pastor, the people's relationship to one another and now the people's relationship to God.

Worship is our highest calling. Everything we are to do as a church is with an attitude of worship to God. We preach as an act of worship, we hear the Bible as an act of worship, we serve as an act of worship, we give as an act of worship—everything we do is to be an act of worship. We were created to worship God. So we have to be motivated by the desire to glorify God and worship God.

Paul issues seven commands or imperatives in regard to our worship of God. First, we are to “Rejoice always,” verse 16. A little footnote is that this is the shortest verse in the Bible. Some point to John 11:35 where it says, “Jesus wept.” In the English translation, that's the shortest verse, but in the Greek, “Rejoice always” is the shortest verse.

Our worship to God is to be joyful. If there is anything that should characterize a Christian's life it is joy. Someone said, “Joy is the flag flown high from the castle of our hearts that shows the King is in residence there.” When we gather to worship, it should be joyful worship. In

Ephesians 5:18, Paul commands us to “be filled with the Spirit.” He said the result will be, verse 19, that you will speak to others “in psalms and hymns and spiritual songs,” and you will be “singing and making melody in your heart to the Lord.” So the evidence of the filling of the Spirit is a joyful worship.

The second command is “Pray without ceasing,” verse 17. Does that mean we have to stop doing everything, get on our knees, fold our hands and pray? No. It means every issue in your life you take to God in prayer.

I like Philippians 4:6-7: “Be anxious for nothing, but in everything by prayer and supplication, with thanksgiving, let your requests be made known to God; and the peace of God, which surpasses all understanding, will guard your hearts and minds through Christ Jesus.” Tell God your needs, and don’t forget to thank Him for His answers. If you do that, you’ll experience “the peace of God” which will “guard yours hearts and minds through Christ Jesus.” So don’t worry about anything, but pray about everything.

So we should live in an attitude and atmosphere of worship and prayer—all day, every day, throughout the day, in the middle of the night when you wake up. Pray, pray, pray. Your heart should be like a compass; it automatically points toward the Lord every day when you wake up. Every moment of every day should be spent in talking to Him, worshipping Him, celebrating Him, thinking about Him, meditating on Him, praying to Him. So you’re constantly praying to the Lord in fellowship.

If you drive the freeways of southern California, pray. Don’t just talk about the other drivers. Pray to God. And when you pull up to the gas pump to get gas, pray in tongues for half an hour, or you’ll get in the flesh. So we need to just pray continually.

So we are to be joyful and prayerful, and the third thing we need to be is thankful, verse 18. “In everything give thanks.” Now notice it doesn’t say, “For everything give thanks.” We are to give thanks “in everything.” Why? Because we know Romans 8:28 is true: “And we know that all things work together for good to those who love God, to those who are the called according to His purpose.” If we know that God is in control—even in the dark prison that Paul and Silas were in, they sang and praised God, and He delivered them.

God’s recipe for happiness is to “rejoice always,” pray continually and “in everything give thanks.”

Fourth, “Do not quench the Spirit,” verse 19. The literal rendering of that is, “Stop quenching the Spirit.” There are a multitude of ways we quench the Spirit. In context, it means that if we don’t rejoice, if we don’t pray, if we don’t give thanks, we quench the Holy Spirit. If we gripe and complain and don’t pray, we quench the Holy Spirit.

The Holy Spirit is the Third Person of the Godhead. He indwells every believer. And He is subject to personal treatment. He wants to lead us into holiness, godliness and thankfulness. If we’re not praying, rejoicing and celebrating the Lord, we’re quenching the Spirit. Also in context, if we hear His Word and we reject it and don’t obey it, we grieve the Holy Spirit of God.

The Holy Spirit of God works through the Word of God to transform the child of God into the image of the Son of God.

On Sunday mornings when you come to church and hear the Scriptures, if you say, "I don't believe that. I'm not going to do that. That's not for me. I know that's what the Bible teaches, but I'm not going to do that," you're grieving the Holy Spirit. You're quenching the Holy Spirit of God. So we need to be spiritual in our worship.

Fifth, we need to be teachable. "Do not despise prophecies," or "Don't despise God's Word." Paul says, "Do not quench the Spirit." And how do we do that? By despising God's Word or by despising the prophesying of God's Word. The idea of prophecy is the telling forth of God's Word. It's not just the foretelling of future events; it also means the speaking forth of God's Word. So when God's Word is spoken, if you don't obey it and submit to it, then you are quenching and grieving the Holy Spirit and despising the prophesying or the teaching of God's Word. Be teachable in your worship.

Sixth, in verse 21, "Test all things; hold fast what is good." Or it means to prove all things. Be judicious in your worship, be discerning, be a Berean. When the Scripture is preached or taught or shared or prophesied, you are not to despise that, but you are to prove it, check it out. Then hold fast to that which is truth.

There are so many gullible, foolish Christians in the church today. We talked about sheep being dumb. They're not discerning about what is Biblical, what is Scriptural and what is right. They listen to preachers but don't say, "Is that really what that text means?" It's one thing to read a text, it's one thing to preach a sermon, but is that really what it says, what it means, how it is to be applied? We don't want to have a critical spirit, but we want to be discerning about what we listen to, what supposedly is preached from the Word of God. Is it Biblical? Is it true? We need to be judicious.

Seventh, in verse 22, "Abstain from every form of evil." The King James Bible says, "...from all appearance of evil," but it basically means from "every form" or "every type" or "every kind of evil." Paul's not talking about whether or not it looks evil; he's actually saying that it is evil.

Evil comes in different forms, and we can't pick and choose which kind of evil we'll say is okay to indulge in. "I know it's wrong, but I'm going to do it anyway. I don't do this, but it's no big deal that I do that. It's just a little, white lie." Christians want to compartmentalize sins and pick and choose, but the Scriptures say that all sin is evil and to be avoided.

We need to be faithful in our worship. We shouldn't quench the Spirit; we need to be faithful to get sin out of our lives. You might say that verse 22 means "Live in godliness and true holiness."

So we studied these three areas: the leadership, the fellowship and the worship of the local church. May God give us Biblical, godly leaders. May we train the next generation of them and pass the baton. May we have men who serve the Lord in these positions who are humble under shepherds and servants to the people.

In our fellowship, may we love one another, serve one another, wash each other's feet, forgive each other, comfort each other, encourage each other and pray for each other.

In our worship, may we rejoice, may we pray and may we give thanks, all to the glory of God.