

## **Build One Another Up (1 Thessalonians 5:12-15)**

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Human relationships are a difficult thing. They can be a tremendous source of joy and encouragement. But they also bring significant challenges into our lives. Have you ever found yourself thinking, “Lord, if all these other people would just go away, you and I could have such a great relationship!” I become the most amazing husband, father, and friend in the world when I’m out in the woods all by myself.

One of the reasons we run into trouble in relationships is our tendency to separate our relationship with God from all our other relationships. If I’m the sun, my relationship with my wife orbits over here, my relationship with my kids is over there, and my relationship with God is somewhere out there. Then of course there’s my relationship with all of you and all my friends.

When we’re at the center the relational universe, we don’t see any connections between who God is or what God’s doing and all our other relationships. Questions like these determine the way we relate to other people: How have they treated me? What do I feel like saying to them? Or what do I think they deserve?

But when we recognize God as the functional center of the relational universe, and start making connections between who He is, what He’s doing, and all our other relationships, a different set of questions begins to call the shots. What is Jesus doing in the world? What is Jesus doing in this other person? What is Jesus doing in me? 1 Thessalonians 5:12-15 is all about keeping God at the center of our relational universe and connecting the way he relates to us and the way we relate to other people.

The second part of 1 Thessalonians 4 and the first part of 1 Thessalonians 5 are focused on what God is doing in the world and, in particular, what Jesus will do on the day He returns to make everything wrong right. The Apostle Paul concludes the whole section with a strong word of encouragement to Christians, to those who have turned away from living for themselves and chosen to trust and obey King Jesus. Verse 9, “For God has not destined us for wrath, but to obtain salvation through our Lord Jesus Christ, who died for us so that whether we are awake or asleep we might live with Him.”

What does that verse tell you about God, Christian? It tells you He’s a *sovereign* God. He’s ordained your destiny. He’s also a *loving* God. He died for you so that when



Jesus returns, you will not be condemned on account of your sin. Through faith in Christ, you will be transformed into the perfect image of the Son of God. You will finally become fully and truly human – able to enjoy life with God as it was meant to be. That's your destiny, my friend! The most important thing about you is not what you're doing for yourself. It's what God has done, is doing, and will do for you through Jesus.

Even if you're surrounded by relational difficulties, the grand story of your life, Christian, is not "Oh look. There goes Joe, meandering through a relational wasteland." You are walking the path to salvation! Jesus is with you, Jesus is for you, and Jesus will bring you home. If you have that hope, if you cherish that hope, and if you believe as Paul says in verse 10 that all your brothers and sisters in Christ share the same destiny, it will not just affect your relationship with God. It will change the way you relate to everyone around you, including people who hurt you.

Keeping the gospel, our hope of salvation, in view keeps God at the center of our relational universe, which will affect all our other relationships. That's exactly what Paul's getting at in verse 11, "Therefore (in light of what is gloriously true about your relationship with God, your hope of salvation in Him) encourage one another and build one another up, just as you are doing."

Verses 12-15 show us how to do that, how to build one another up, by addressing the way we relate three groups of people – church leaders, fellow believers, and our enemies. The groups are different, but the main point is the same. The hope of salvation compels us to build one another up. So how do we do that?

### **1) HONOR OUR LEADERS (verses 12-13)**

We live in a culture that has a real issue with authority. At best, we're suspicious. At worst, we're insubordinate. Sadly, both of those attitudes often carry over into the church and our relationship with the spiritual leaders God has placed in our lives. When they do, we suffer, our church suffers, and our witness to the world suffers.

God has something better for us, friends. He knows (and I'm convinced) that one of the single most important factors affecting the long-term health and spiritual fruitfulness of a church, KingsWay included, is the strength of relationship between the members of the church and the leaders in the church. When it comes to the way we relate to our spiritual leaders, Paul gives us two commands. Verse 12,

“respect” them. Verse 13, “esteem” them. So who exactly are these spiritual leaders who we’re supposed to respect and esteem?

Paul identifies them with three phrases. They are, first, those “who labor among you.” Notice the local emphasis. They are not spiritual leaders on TV. They are not streaming their voice into your living room via podcast. They are “among you.” They’re in your midst. They’re close to you. They know you and you know them. The Lord does not command us to respect or esteem spiritual leaders in general. The Lord commands us to respect and esteem the elders He has called to pastor us as members of a particular local church.

How do we know “those who labor among you” refers primarily to the elders or pastors of a church? Because Paul says those who “labor among you” are “over you in the Lord.” The word he uses here is not a description of raw power. It combines the ideas of ruling, leading, protecting, and caring for someone else. It’s the same word Paul uses in 1 Timothy 3:4-5 to describe the way a qualified elder “manages” his own household and in 1 Timothy 5:17 to describe elders who “rule” well, “especially those who labor in preaching and teaching.”

Spiritual authority can be horribly misused, but it’s fundamentally a good thing because it’s an expression of the authority of God Himself. 1 Peter 5:1-4, “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: 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; not domineering over those in your charge, but being examples to the flock. And when the Chief Shepherd appears, you will receive the unfading crown of glory.”

King Jesus cares for the church as the Chief Shepherd of the church by ordaining qualified under-shepherds to lead, feed, guide, and protect His church with the authority he has entrusted to them. His care for us on the path to salvation isn’t impersonal. It isn’t faceless. It’s expressed through your pastors. That’s one reason merely attending church on Sundays is dangerous. Covenant membership matters because it’s only when we formally join a particular local church that we place ourselves under the spiritual oversight of a particular group of elders.

Until then, you’re on your own. I’m not “over you in the Lord” and nor is anyone else. That’s a spiritually perilous place to be, friend. You’re essentially saying to God, “I don’t need the means of grace you think I need,” when in reality, you do. You



need a pastor. You need a shepherd to admonish you with the Word of God and lead your brothers and sisters in affirming and overseeing your profession of faith.

So how should you relate to your pastors? Assuming they are biblically qualified, you should “respect” and “esteem” them. That means (at a minimum) listening and leaning forward to follow their spiritual leadership, honoring them in your heart and mind - NOT because you agree with everything they say, but because you know the Lord has placed them in your life for your good and his glory. Not cold submission. Not begrudging servitude. Loving support and deep appreciation for the work they are doing to care for your soul, primarily through the ministry of the Word of God and prayer.

Mind you, esteeming your pastor pastors “very highly” does not mean putting them on some kind of spiritual pedestal. Far too many professing Christians do that. And when their spiritual pope of choice inevitably stumbles or falls, proving they are still a normal human being, they stop going to church and/or give up on the faith entirely. Don’t do that, friend. Don’t esteem your pastor because you think he’s perfect. Esteem your pastor because Jesus has charged him to care for your soul and the Savior he represents imperfectly is perfect in all His ways.

Hebrews 13:17 says it well. “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.”

Brothers and sisters, I would be remiss if didn’t take this opportunity, on behalf of our entire eldership, to thank you for the way you respect and honor us. In so many ways, you make my work a joy. I love being your shepherd. Like Paul with the Thessalonians, I address this point not primarily to correct you, but to encourage you to do so more and more, both for the future health of our church and the wellbeing of your own soul.

You want pastors who enjoy their work because of you. You don’t want pastors who groan because of you. You want to know the best way to avoid that? Verse 13, “Live at peace among yourselves.” Few things sabotage a pastor’s strength and joy in ministry like conflict. Be a peacemaker – especially in your relationships with your fellow brothers and sisters in the church. We build one another up on the road to salvation by honoring our leaders.

## **2) CARE FOR OUR FELLOW BELIEVERS (verse 14)**



Verse 14, "And we urge you, brothers, admonish the idle, encourage the fainthearted, help the weak, by patient with them all." There's a tremendous diversity to the spiritual challenges God's people face on the path to salvation.

In the Thessalonian context, the idle seem to have been church members who were unwilling to work and preferred sponging off other people. But the underlying principle isn't limited to earning a paycheck. We become idle anytime we are reluctant or unwilling to obey the Lord in any area of life. Some of us grow fainthearted. You know what God requires of you as a friend, student, employee, parent or spouse. You've done as much for a long time, but now you're tired, really tired. Your will to endure is on its last legs.

Some of us grow weak. It could be a physical weakness like a chronic illness or disability. It could be a spiritual weakness like a besetting sin that keep knocking you down. Most of us don't have to think long to identify at least one area of life where we wish we were more like Jesus. You feel stuck. You feel discouraged. You don't see a way out of the trouble around you or within you.

We do not all struggle with the same challenges on the path of salvation. The idle are not doing what's right. The fainthearted are getting tired of doing what's right. The weak feel utterly incapable of doing what's right. To complicate matters even further, we can be idle in one area of life, fainthearted in another, and weak in a third. We can also be idle, fainthearted, and weak in different respects in the exact same area! Life is messy and our troubles are manifold.

Praise God, brothers and sisters, that the diversity of his grace exceeds the diversity of our troubles - He does not work in a "one size fits all" way. I love the promise the Lord makes in Psalm 94:19, "When the cares of my heart are many, your consolations cheer my soul." There's nothing generic or boilerplate about the way God cares for us. He meets us with specific mercies for specific troubles. Consider for a moment just a few examples from the book of Revelation.

In Revelation 2:5, Jesus admonishes the idle. "You have abandoned the love you had at first. Remember therefore from where you have fallen; repent, and do the works you did at first." In Revelation 3:8-11, Jesus encourages the fainthearted, "I know that you have but little power, and yet you have kept my word and have not denied my name...Because you have kept my word about patient endurance, I will keep you from the hour of trial that is coming on the whole world, to try those who dwell on the earth. I am coming soon."



In Revelation 2:9, Jesus helps the weak. "I know your tribulation and your poverty (but you are rich) and the slander of those who say that they are Jews and are not, but are a synagogue of Satan. Do not fear what you are about to suffer. Behold, the devil is about to throw some of you into prison, that you may be tested, and for ten days you will have tribulation. Be faithful unto death, and I will give you the crown of life."

Jesus gives us the privilege of following his example, of joining in the work He's doing, by building one another up on the road to salvation. He urges you to admonish the idle, to encourage the fainthearted, and to help the weak. We need to avoid two dangers here.

The first is the danger of assumption. We tend to arrogantly assume we know the person lying next to us in bed, sitting across the table, listening on the other end of the phone, or reading our latest email. We need to be quick to listen and slow to speak. We need to do the hard work of asking good questions, of bringing our friend or spouse before the Lord in prayer to get a sense for the main issue Jesus is working on in their life before we open our mouths or start typing.

For example, their idleness in one area may be the thing that annoys you the most, so you walk in locked and loaded to bring a little (or not so little) word of admonishment. They may very well be idle, friend. But they could also be fainthearted, and it might be their faintheartedness that the Lord cares about the most right now and wants you to care about the most. Don't assume you know the person you're talking to. And don't assume your change agenda for their life reflects God's priorities.

The second danger is selfishness. Have you ever heard someone say, "I'm just one of those people who says it like it is. I'm a truth speaker. That's my spiritual gift." You're like Arnold Schwarzenegger in an action movie. No matter what's in front of you, you always pull out a massive machine gun and start spraying everything with bullets. Collateral damage? "Oh well. It's just the way God made me."

Or maybe you've heard someone say, "You know, I just don't like confronting people. It's too messy. I'd rather just love on people, trusting that in due time, God will help them change." What's present in both those scenarios? Selfishness. Acting like everyone is idle or everyone is fainthearted is selfish because we're not starting with what the person in front of us actually needs. We're starting with what's comfortable for us and are unwilling to do whatever doesn't come naturally.

In either scenario, people get hurt. Admonishing a fainthearted person as if they are idle misrepresents God and creates spiritual damage. Encouraging an idle person as if they are fainthearted misrepresents God and creates spiritual damage. Notice Paul doesn't say, "We urge *some* of you to admonish the idle, others to encourage the fainthearted, and a third group to help the weak." No! He says, "And we urge you, brothers, (implying *all* of you) to admonish the idle, encourage the fainthearted, help the weak." Do the hard work of really getting to know someone and then follow Jesus example in bringing a word in season suitable to the greatest need in their heart.

I find the last phrase in verse 14 the hardest of the bunch. "Be patient with them all." Oh Lord, did you have to say that? Is that really the standard? Why does the Lord say "be patient" whether we are admonishing, encouraging, or helping? He commands us to be patient because few people change quickly! It usually entails two steps forward and one step back. We also need patience because none of us helps perfectly and none of us receives help perfectly. You will sin against the person you are trying to help and they will sin against you. For that too, we need to be patient.

Let me give you an example. I have heard Christians go on-and-on about all the terribly hurtful and insensitive things other people have said to them in the name of trying to admonish, encourage, or help them. And at the end of their tirade, I find myself thinking, "Lord, I sure hope I never have to care for them. I'm bound to say or do something that offends them."

Don't be that person, ok? Don't turn 1 Thessalonians 5:14 into a hammer you use to beat up anyone who tries to help you. "What? You're acting like I'm idle! Don't you know I'm just fainthearted? What's with the rebuke? How about a little encouragement over here!" Friend, to the degree that's your experience, be humble. Be patient, whether you're on the giving or receiving end of the equation.

And don't be so afraid of getting it wrong or misidentifying someone that you functionally count yourself out of ever being used by God in your own weakness to build up a fellow believer. God doesn't just use really mature Christians with counseling degrees. He's commissioned ALL of us. If you're on the path of salvation, verse 11 is your mission. "Therefore, encourage one another and build one another up." He's destined your brothers and sisters in Christ for salvation and invites you to join in the work He's doing in their life. Building one another up means we care for our fellow believers.

### **3) DO GOOD TO OUR ENEMIES (verse 15)**

This is probably the most difficult relationship of the bunch. A curious thing happens to most people who experience genuine evil at the hands of another person. They are filled with a sudden desire to repay them, to make them suffer in proportion to the suffering they have caused. So why does Paul tell us to do the exact opposite? "See to it that no one repays anyone evil for evil, but always seek to do good..."

Plenty of secular people would say, "Well, because it's the right thing to do. The cycle of hate has to stop somewhere." Ok, but why is it right? If you embrace a secular worldview, if you believe human beings are nothing more than the product of an evolutionary cycle built on the survival of the fittest, on what basis do you insist we should not repay evil for evil?

Christianity has a better answer. Romans 12:19, "Beloved, never avenge yourselves, but leave it to the wrath of God, for it is written, 'Vengeance is mine, I will repay, says the Lord.'" We should not repay evil for evil because God says avenging the wrongs done to us is His job, not ours, and He promises to not let a single act of evil go punished. How can He say that? Because either the evildoer dies for their sin or Jesus dies for their sin. There are no exceptions. The justice of God will prevail.

The only people who are completely and totally free from vindicating themselves are people who cling to the hope of salvation through Jesus Christ. They know Jesus is coming back to right every wrong, which frees them from having to vindicate themselves. But what if God doesn't punish them the way I want Him to? What if He gives them grace? They haven't done anything to deserve mercy! None of us have, friend. That's why it's called mercy.

Gordon Fee puts his finger on the root issue: "The real difficulty most of God's people have with this admonition is that God may not give such people what they deserve, but may show them the same kind of mercy that he showed to themselves." For as Paul says so clearly in Romans 5:8, "While we were still sinners, Christ died for us."

Doing good to our enemies, loving those who hurt us, is one of the most important ways we demonstrate that we understand the gospel and are actually walking the path of salvation as genuine sons and daughters of God. Matthew 5:43-45, "You have heard that it was said, 'You shall love your neighbor and hate your enemy.' But





I say to you, Love your enemies and pray for those who persecute you, so that you may be sons of your Father who is in heaven. For he makes his sun rise on the evil and on the good, and sends rain on the just and on the unjust."

Allow me to conclude this point with two brief words of application. The first has to do with our expectations, the second with our actions. First, notice in verse 15 how the command to "do good *to one another*" (instead of doing evil) implies that even people who are part of the church will sin against us. Don't expect more of your fellow church members than God tells us to expect. We all still struggle with sin. They too will hurt you. They too may commit evil against you and treat you like an enemy.

Second, please notice the Lord's standard for "building one another up" isn't limited to not repaying evil for evil. We must go further because Jesus went further. We must do good to one another (fellow believers) and to everyone (people outside the church). Sometimes we give ourselves a pass and say things like, "Well, I'm not going to repay them, but I'm certainly not going to pursue relationship with them. I'm just going to stay neutral. I won't do anything bad, and I won't do anything good. I mean, that's better than retaliating, right? Surely that's enough."

Friends, praise God he didn't adopt that kind of loveless attitude toward us. While we were still sinners, Christ died for us. He didn't give us the silent treatment. He moved toward us in sacrificial love and affection. He secured our greatest and highest good - eternal satisfaction in Christ by giving us nothing less than himself. The hope of salvation, the love God's poured out on us through Jesus, is the only power strong enough to free us from the cycle of retaliation and enable us to do good to our enemies.

## **CONCLUSION**

Friends, church isn't a meeting we attend. It's not a worship service. It's a counter-cultural community. We belong to the day, to the day of Christ's return. We have a sure hope of salvation. And that hope makes a radical difference in the way we relate to church leaders, to fellow believers, and to people who hurt us.

As the glory of the sun sheds it's light on every planet in our solar system, so the gospel of Jesus Christ transforms even the most difficult human relationships. Don't keep acting like you're the relational center of the universe. Humbly recognize God is, God has been, and God will always be.



When it comes to how you relate to other people, don't start with what you feel like saying or doing or think they deserve. Start with the Lord. Start with what Jesus is doing in the world, what Jesus is doing in them, and what Jesus is doing in you. The hope of salvation through Jesus compels us to build one another up. May that be our story as a church family for generations to come.