

Life Giving Participation in the Church

1Thessalonians 5:12-15

Back when I was in grade school I played as many sports as I could.

One of the teams I played on was the volley ball team.

The coach of that team was a pretty competitive guy and really wanted our team to win, but he was also deeply concerned about the character and attitude of the players he coached.

I got that lesson loud and clear one time as our team was coming out of the locker room for a game.

It was a game against a pretty good team that historically our school did not win against.

As we were just outside the dressing room door walking onto the gym floor one of my teammates grabbed me by the shoulders and said, “We’re going to win!!!”

If I had been smart I would’ve said, “Yeah!!!!”

Instead I put my hands on his shoulders and said, “We’re going to lose!” and the coach heard me say it.

I’m telling you the look on his face was really scary and I instantly knew I had made a big mistake.

He didn’t say too much right away, but I knew he was really upset with me.

He gave me a tongue lashing after the game, benched me for the next two games, and even weeks later made sure I didn’t forget my mistake.

He wanted me to see the importance of being a good teammate.

He wanted me to see that when you are part of a team your skill as a player is only part of the equation.

Having a bad attitude, being self-centered, being proud, disrespectful, or mean really hurts the team.

The attitude that a player comes with can either bring a team up or it can bring a team down.

I believe that is true in anything that involves being a part of a group, including the church.

[The church is more than a bunch of people sitting together in a room for a little over an hour once a week. Coming to church ought to be very different than going to a movie theater. The Bible describes the church as the body of Christ. It is made up of a variety of parts (meaning individual people) bound together through the power of the gospel in order to point people to Jesus. Our text for this morning **1Thessalonians 5:12-15** shows us how we can be a positive part of the body of Christ. In these verses the apostle Paul shows us how believers are called to relate to one another in the local church. If we listen to these things and strive after them we

will be life giving participants in the church which is what God wants for our lives. Let's first look at verses 12-13a which show us that...]

Point #1 – Christians are called to honour godly leaders. (Verses 12-13a)

God has decided to empower people to teach His word and exercise authority in the life of the church and subjecting ourselves to that teaching and authority is good for us and God's people.

Verse twelve opens with the words "We ask you, brothers"

Sixteen times in the five chapters of this book Paul refers to these believers as 'brothers'. Why repeat it so many times? I think one reason is that we want his affection for them to be at the forefront of their minds as he is teaching them.

These people are brothers and sisters in Christ. He loves them in the LORD with an unbreakable affection because they are sons and daughters of God through their faith in Jesus.

It is out of that love that he writes what he does here.

The word ask here is the plea of a friend who wants what is best for them.

This is the plea...verse 12-13a.

The word respect here has the sense of recognition.

He gives three things by which the congregation is to recognize these people.

Those that are to be recognized are those who labour (likely labour in teaching God's Word), those who have oversight, and those that admonish (that means to warn or reprimand).

When we put those three tasks together it seems fairly certain that he is referring to elders/pastors in the church.

It is really important to see that this encouragement from the apostle is to the congregation.

The role of the elder is the work hard, exercise his authority in a godly way, and to point people to what is right.

It is the people who decide whether or not they will 'recognize'/'respect' that work.

The pastor/elder who demands 'respect' because of his office in the church is a complete fool.

On the other hand the church member who recognizes a pastor working hard in the word, the congregation who can see that the pastor is straining to point people to Jesus and lead in humility and honours that is a life giving part of the body, the one who rejects it hurts the church.

[I imagine this like a team running through an obstacle course. When the team leader is working hard, giving good direction, and the team is following the leader the team does well. If the team leader is lazy and/or there is a revolt among the team members the team will do poorly.]

I am vividly aware that the LORD holds elders/teachers/leaders accountable for how they serve in the church.

It is also equally true that the LORD holds the congregation member accountable for how they respond to the teaching and leadership of the elders.

You are perfectly free reject what is said from this pulpit.

You will never hear us say, “You have to listen because I am the pastor!”

What we will continue to strive for is telling you what the word of God says and you have to decide what to do with it.

[A pastor who leads according to his own wisdom ought to be rejected, but pastors who labour in the Word and lead according to what God wants ought to be recognized and embraced. God calls us to that for our own good and the good of the church. Have you considered recently what kind of participant you are in the life of the church? One of the ways we can assess that is by assessing our respect and esteem for the elders in the church. Here is something else we are called to as believers...]

Point #2 – Christians are called to overcome conflict. (Verse 13b)

Anytime a group of human beings get together over an extended period of time there will be disagreements. What makes the Church unique is that believers seek to solve those disagreements in the power of the gospel.

The end of verse 13 is a command. Here is the command...verse 13b.

If I ask you to form a picture in your mind of what the early church was like, what picture comes to mind?

The picture that comes to my mind is Acts 2:42-47.

It is such an amazing description of fellowship. Everyone was listening to the apostles, they had everything in common, there were miracles being performed, they were praying together, worshipping together, and caring for each other in uncommon ways.

It was an amazing time, but it would be a mistake to think it was trouble free.

By the time you get to chapter five of Acts you see some major problems, in chapter seven people are fighting over bread, and as people are saved in different places and churches are established people fight with each other.

It is more than likely that Paul gives this command to these believers because there was some conflict in the church.

What causes that? Do you know what it says in James 4:1? It says that the cause of fights in the church is “[our] passions at war within [us].”

We get mad because we don’t get what we want and we most often have someone to blame for that and as a result we have conflict.

That brothers and sisters is the human condition and though we are redeemed by the blood of the lamb, we still have to deal with our sinful nature.

Since the church is made up of sinners there is going to be conflict at times.

That is true in every group whether it is made up of believers or unbelievers.

[How many of you are a part of a family? Ever fight with your husband, wife, mom, dad, brother, or sister? How many of you have jobs? Have you ever had a job where the workplace is constantly conflict free? What about the playground? I would guess that conflict is fairly common on the playground. Why? Because when we don’t get what our sinful heart wants there is going to be a fight.]

That is true in the church and the command here is for us to deal with those things and ‘be at peace among yourselves.’

Recently someone said something really profound to me on this subject.

She said, “There is a big difference between trying to ‘keep the peace’ and ‘making peace’.

Trying to cover over problems simply to avoid conflict is not being at peace with one another.

When we think of peace in the bible we need to think of something more than the absence of conflict.

Peace biblically speaking has the idea of a relationship being made whole.

Here is a tremendously important question, “Where do we find wholeness?”

In Christ is the only right answer to that question.

[If Jesus is our greatest treasure. If we rightly see that everything that we need for satisfaction, joy, and contentment is found in Him, then we are well prepared to obey this command to ‘be at peace’ in the body of Christ because we won’t be looking to people for what only Jesus can provide. That is the way to real peace. Having that, I believe, enables us to obey what we are called to in verse 14. In verse 14 the apostle gives us four commands in regards to our relationship with each other. Each of these commands shows us that...]

Point #3 – Christians are called to be responsible for one another. (Verse 14)

As believers we have an obligation towards those who name the name of Christ, to point each other towards what is right and to encourage those who need encouragement.

Verse 14 begins with the words “And we urge you brothers...”

The word ‘urge’ here levels up the strength of the plea from verses 12-13.

It is a strategic reminder of the authority of Christ that was given to Paul for directing believers towards the Lordship of Jesus.

Let’s look together at the things he is urging believers towards one at a time.

Verse 14a (stop at idle).

The concern here is likely people wanting to remain part of a common practice in Roman society were lower class people would be beholden to upper class people.

It was a way to make money without much consideration for the moral compromises that had to be made.

Paul wanted everyone in the congregation to call the people caught up in that to work for a living for the sake of being a better witness to the gospel.

Next he says, “...encourage the fainthearted.”

The idea of being fainthearted is someone who is weary and wanting to give up.

The church had gone through some tough times and there were those who need to be reminded that persevering with Jesus is worth it.

He then adds this command, “...help the weak”.

More than one commentator on this passage believes Paul is speaking to moral and spiritual weakness here.

People who are easily taken in by temptation need help.

Those who struggle to understand and enjoy the freedom Christians have need people to come alongside them and point them to the finished work of Jesus.

Fourthly he writes “be patient with them all”

Most people take time to change and mature in their faith.

That means walking with brothers and sisters in Christ takes persistence.

Will it be frustrating at times? Absolutely, but we need to stick with people for the long haul because as brothers and sisters in Christ we are responsible for one another.

[How many kids are with us this morning? How many of you have younger brothers or sisters? Have you ever been asked by your parents to watch them? Listen, for moms and dads it is one

of the coolest things ever to have live in babysitters. When your parents ask you to watch your brothers and sisters they are asking you to do your best to keep them safe and out of trouble right. They are asking you to be responsible for them for a short time.]

That is what God wants from us towards one another.

He wants us to watch out for each other.

Warn each other when there is trouble, pick each other up when we fall, carry each other in our weakness, and stick with it despite having all kinds of reasons to say, ‘you are on your own.’

[It is a challenge to be a good teammate in the work of the gospel. It requires honouring godly leaders, it means overcoming conflict, being responsible for one another, and it also means taking seriously what verse 15 points us towards. This one, I think, is the hardest one of all. This is something that is completely contrary to our fallen nature which makes it hard but also an extremely powerful testimony to the gospel. Here is what we are called to in verse 15...]

Point #4 – Christians are called to act rightly when wronged. (Verse 15)

How we deal with insult and injury is an opportunity to examine how much we have been affected by what Jesus has done for us.

Listen to how verse 15 begins. (Verse 15a)

It is one of the most basic human reactions to respond to getting hurt by trying to hurt someone back.

[Just think back to the playground at school. If someone hurt you what did you want to do back? I clearly recall a kid coming up to me and slapping me in the face at school. I did not turn the other cheek.]

I’m sure most of you would agree that people generally speaking keep that basic operating principle going far beyond the playground.

But the clear command of this text is to go against our fallen nature.

There are no exceptions here. Every single Christian is to resist the desire to retaliate against evil with more evil.

What are we supposed to do instead? (Verse 15)

It is not enough to ‘not to evil’, we are supposed to respond to evil by “seeking to do good...”

Seeking here means to go after something with great effort.

[Have you ever lost your keys or wallet before? When that happens to me the hunt is on. I will retrace my steps, pull out couches and dressers, and ask everybody in the house if they have seen what I am looking for. I will go to great effort to seek out what I am missing.]

That is what we are supposed to do when we are wronged as believers, we are supposed to go after with great effort doing what is good.

It doesn't say, "Seek to do what is easy."

Ignoring evil for the sake of trying to keep the illusion of peace is a giant fail on this command.

When a fellow Christian does evil to us, they need to be told, "That was wrong and you need to repent of it!"

Seeking what is good means seeking what is right out of love for our fellow believers.

Gossip in the form of a prayer request is evil for evil.

Flying off the handle and yelling at people is evil for evil.

Being passive aggressive is evil for evil.

Slander, malice, and bitterness is evil for evil.

When we act like that do you know what we are doing?

We are acting just like unbelievers.

Do you know what the result is? Unbelief!

The gospel calls us to something different.

The Church isn't different from the world because we never hurt one another.

What makes the church different from the world is a Holy Spirit empowered ability to forgive and love one another in the face of being hurt.

That is the example that Jesus gave. Who endured more injustice than Jesus?

No one. He always told the truth and did what was right and yet people hated Him for it.

People hated Him so much they wanted Him dead.

He could have taken them all out with a mere thought, but what did He do instead? He endured all the evil.

More than that, we He died on the cross He took upon Himself the punishment for all of our evil so that we could be justly forgiven and made right with God forever.

We need to consider the fact that we have done far more against God than anyone has ever done to us.

Our default is to minimize the sin that we do to others and maximize the sin that is committed against us.

If we believe the gospel, that should be the other way around.

We should maximize our sorrow at the evil we do to others and minimize our reaction to the evil done to us.

Imagine what our families would look like if we did that?

Imagine what our church would look like if we did that?

It would look like we actually believed that Jesus died for us and that our hearts have been changed by that faith.

Listen, it is easy to steal, kill, and destroy.

That is our default. That is the way of the world.

It is easy to give into our sin nature, but it is so much better to be a life giving member of a local church.

I believe most of you want that!

I'm very thankful for the way this church honours those who teach God's word.

I'm very thankful for those who seek to make peace.

I'm thankful for those of you who do what you can to look after each other and I'm thankful for all those who take it on the chin and still seek what is right.

If we strive for those things we will be a part of something that is life giving, we will be living out the gospel before a world that desperately needs it.

May God grant us the grace and strength needed for such a glorious task.