

## ***The Fainthearted and Weak***

### *1 Thessalonians 5:14*

This morning we are going to finish up our study in Paul's first letter to the Thessalonians. The last seventeen verses of 1 Thessalonians 5 contain at least fifteen commands as well as a couple of implied commands. These imperatives were important for the health of the Thessalonian church; they are equally important for us. If you are able, please stand as I read 1 Thessalonians 5:12-28. I will be reading from the English Standard Version.

12 We ask you, brothers, to respect those who labor among you and are over you in the Lord and admonish you, 13 and to esteem them very highly in love because of their work. Be at peace among yourselves. 14 And we urge you, brothers, admonish the idle, encourage the fainthearted, help the weak, be patient with them all. 15 See that no one repays anyone evil for evil, but always seek to do good to one another and to everyone. 16 Rejoice always, 17 pray without ceasing, 18 give thanks in all circumstances; for this is the will of God in Christ Jesus for you. 19 Do not quench the Spirit. 20 Do not despise prophecies, 21 but test everything; hold fast what is good. 22 Abstain from every form of evil. 23 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. 25 Brothers, pray for us. 26 Greet all the brothers with a holy kiss. 27 I put you under oath before the Lord to have this letter read to all the brothers. 28 The grace of our Lord Jesus Christ be with you.

This morning we are going to focus our attention on a single verse in this passage. If you didn't look at the sermon outline in the bulletin, you would probably have a hard time guessing which one.

- Much could be said about respecting those who labor among you and admonish you.
  - Not returning evil for evil is always a relevant topic; our flesh longs for revenge.
  - Discussing how to pray without ceasing would be a fruitful topic.
  - Paul's teaching on prophecy is always relevant.
  - I would love to do a sermon someday about "greet one another with a holy kiss"; it's a command that seems weird to our western ears, but has a very sweet application.
- But today we are going to consider a verse that is easily overlooked because the people described in this verse are easily overlooked. 1 Thessalonians 5:14 reads:

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

I first want ***all of us*** to understand and receive Paul's challenge in verse 14. Then I want to let you know about a ministry here at Faith that seeks to embody this challenge in a very intentional way. We want you to know about this ministry so that you can receive its benefit; and we want to invite you to consider being part of this ministry in the lives of others.

When Paul says, “we **urge** you,” he is pleading with the church at Thessalonica to take action. He is communicating a sense of urgency. Instead of ignoring or merely tolerating the idle, the fainthearted, and the weak, Paul pleads with them to take initiative with each group of people.

**“Admonish the idle.”** The root of the term translated idle is used only three other times in the New Testament. All three of these occurrences are found in 2 Thessalonians 3 (verses 6, 7, and 11). There Paul is confronting those in the church who refused to work and support themselves; instead they were “busybodies,” meddling in other people’s affairs. As he did in 1 Thessalonians, Paul appeals to his own example: “When we were with you we worked night and day so as not to be a burden to any of you. . .”

It may be that those who were idle, refusing to work, reasoned, “Since the return of Christ could happen at any time, we shouldn’t squander the day working with our hands; we are doing the more important work of warning people to be ready for Christ’s return!” That logic wasn’t very persuasive to Paul. In the Bible, work isn’t a curse or a distraction; work is an opportunity to further the common good and to glorify God (Ephesians 6:7, Colossians 3:24, etc.). Back in 1 Thessalonians 4 Paul had written this:

11 and to aspire to live quietly, and to mind your own affairs, and to work with your hands, as we instructed you, 12 so that you may walk properly before outsiders and be dependent on no one.

Given that we do not know when Christ will return, we should do our work faithfully, unto the Lord, trusting that what we do and how we do it will provide opportunities to share Christ. Here in 1 Thessalonians 5:14 Paul enlists the entire church to admonish/warn those who are idle so that their testimony to outsiders wouldn’t be compromised and so that people wouldn’t be unnecessarily dependent upon others for their material needs.

**“Encourage the fainthearted.”** The term translated “fainthearted” is found only here in the New Testament; it could be translated literally “small in soul/heart.” This is the person who is “losing heart” or “dis-couraged.” Instead being confident and strong in heart, this person finds it hard to move forward in faith.

Each of us is fainthearted at times. I can think of times when I’ve been fainthearted as a follower of Christ, as a pastor, as a husband, as a father, and as a friend. I don’t like being fainthearted; I prefer to be confident and strong in heart. I usually hide it pretty well. But when I’m discouraged, I don’t need a stern challenge to “be strong”; I need someone to give me courage to keep seeking and trusting God.

That’s why Paul writes “**encourage** the fainthearted.” Paul used the same term in chapter 2 when he reminded the Thessalonians that when he was with them he was “exhorting and **encouraging** and imploring” them “as a father would his own children” (1 Thessalonians 2:11). Like a good father, Paul paid attention to the condition of others; when they were dis-couraged, he en-couraged them.

The term encourage is also translated “console” in John 11; Mary and Martha’s friends consoled them after the death of their brother Lazarus. Paul wants those who are doing well to come alongside those who are fainthearted give them courage. It may be that Paul still has in mind those he mentioned back in chapter 4, those who were afraid that believers who died before the return of Christ might not be resurrected. If so, their encouragement would come from others reminding them that we do not grieve at those who have no hope; when Christ returns the dead in Christ will be resurrected first!

You and I both know people who are “losing heart” in this life. Perhaps at one time they had great courage and strong hearts; but now they aren’t sure they’re going to make it in their walk with God. People lose heart for all sorts of reasons:

- A significant loss can make people fainthearted: “I don’t know if I can take one more loss or deep disappointment.”
- Sometimes it’s a besetting sin or addiction that makes a person wonder, “Is there really any point in seeking God; it just seems like the Christian life doesn’t work for me.”
- Sometimes people just get beat down by the condition of this world: “There is so much evil in this world and those who oppose God always seem to have their way. . . I’m not sure it really matters whether or not I seek God from the heart.”

Does anybody come to mind who is fainthearted? Some of you are probably thinking, “Yes. . . me.”

I want to say two things about encouraging the fainthearted. **First**, consider the possibility that God wants to use **you** to give that person courage. Paul doesn’t say **how** we are supposed to encourage the fainthearted. How you encourage others will depend on your giftedness, your experience, your availability, and many other things. You will need to be sensitive to the Holy Spirit in knowing what to say and not say. Ephesians 4:29 says to speak those words that “meet the need of the moment, so that it will give grace to those who hear.” Discerning the need of the moment is hard work; very few people do this. Most people say the first thing that pops into their minds. If you and I are going to encourage the fainthearted, we will need to discern the need of the moment.

**Second**, if you are the one who is fainthearted, it is the will of God for you to receive encouragement from other people. In the body of Christ you were never meant to “suck it up” and get strong on your own. You may be a very private person; you may be a very competent person in many areas of your life; you may have great spiritual insight. Nevertheless, you need what others in the body of Christ can bring to you. It may be that the reason your walk with God doesn’t work is because you haven’t accepted that by God’s design you need other people.

**“Help the weak.”** Paul is referring to those who are weak spiritually, those whose faith is not strong. As with the fainthearted, Paul has a very specific challenge for the rest of the church: *help* the weak. The term “help” is sometimes translated “cling to” (Titus 1:9) or “be devoted to” (Luke 16:13) someone or something. That’s exactly what those who are spiritually weak need, someone who will stick by them and do whatever they can to strengthen their faith. They don’t primarily need people to talk to them; they need people to stick with them and help them.

The greatest thing you bring to someone who is weak in faith is yourself (and your walk with God). As it's often said, you can't give away something you don't have.

Kent Hughes was a pastor in the Chicago area. In the early 80's he was pastoring a church that was not doing well. He got progressively discouraged and cynical. Eventually he had a crisis of faith and announced to his wife:

"God has called me to do something he hasn't given me the gifts to accomplish. Therefore, God is not good."

He writes: "There. Finally, I had blurted out the thought that had tormented me. It fell between us, ugly and misshapen, into the silence of the hot night. I knew I had been called by God; I had never been able to escape that call, nor had I wanted to. But now I felt that I was the butt of a cruel joke. I was a failure. I wanted to quit. And in aching desperation I said to my dear wife, 'What am I to do?' . . . I will never forget her kind and confident response.

"I don't know what you're going to do. But for right now, for tonight, hang on to my faith. Because I believe. I believe that God is good. I believe that he loves us and is going to work through this experience. So hang on to my faith. I have enough for both of us." (*Liberating Ministry from the Success Syndrome*, p.25)

Kent Hughes did hang on to his wife's faith during a time when he didn't have any. That's a great example of someone helping (or being devoted to) the weak. The one who is weak needs the help of the one whose faith is strong.

**"Be patient with them all."** Some people are naturally patient with those who are idle, fainthearted, or weak. But others have a tendency to be irritated or angry at people who are struggling in these ways: "Why can't these people get their act together? I don't have time to put up with lazy, weak, immature people." Not many of us would say that out loud, but we sure think it.

That's why Paul writes, "be patient with them all." Patience used to be called long suffering. If you're patient you are willing to suffer a long time before you get angry. You have a really long fuse. Of course our patience is meant to imitate God's patience; God is slow to anger and abounding in lovingkindness. Where would you and I be if God had a short fuse and weren't willing to put up with people who tend to lose heart and become weak in their faith?!?

The challenges in this verse are for the entire church. All of us are to "admonish the idle, encourage the fainthearted, help the weak, and be patient with all of them." This is a foundational ministry in the church. Like Paul, I am urging/imploring you to pay attention to and notice the spiritual condition of others here at Faith. If you aren't paying attention to others and helping them get through the tough times in their lives, people are suffering alone in ways they shouldn't. I am also urging you to admit when you are fainthearted or weak and to receive the encouragement or help that others can give.

In addition to (not instead of) this ministry that belongs to each of us, there is a team of people here at Faith which specializes in encouraging the fainthearted and helping the weak. It's an amazing ministry, really. I'm referring to our Stephen Ministry. We have 16 active Stephen Ministers, people who have been trained and who are ready to be paired with people who need help and encouragement. Typically they meet with the person for an hour a week as long as that person needs care. Stephen Ministers are not therapist/counselors; but they are full of compassion and trained to come alongside people who need help and encouragement.

I'd like to read the comments of a couple of our current Stephen Ministers. I asked them to share why they decided to commit themselves to this ministry. One person wrote:

I got involved in SM because I wanted to become a better listener and I wanted to be able to engage with people in a meaningful and thought provoking way. I also have felt a need to have someone to listen to me at times and didn't know where to turn. (MH)

She became a Stephen Minister because she wanted people to have a place to turn when they needed someone. Another person wrote this:

I wanted to become a SM because I had been through a long, hard season that I was unable to get out of on my own, and so greatly valued the few that came alongside me during that time. It allowed me to experience God in a way I never had before. . . [I was able to] accept that what [God] says about his compassionate and caring nature was true because I had seen it lived out and displayed toward me through another person. It truly was the most valuable gift I have ever received, and I wanted to be able to give that gift to others. (WC)

We want you to know that Stephen Ministers are available when/if you need someone to walk with you through a tough time in your life. We have a couple of Stephen Ministers that aren't currently paired. We really need more people to become Stephen Ministers.

Therefore, I'd like to extend an invitation to you to explore the possibility of becoming a Stephen Minister. The next round of training will begin in January; we offer this training every two years. Being a Stephen Minister is a significant commitment:

- You'll receive 50 hours of training between January and May.
- Afterwards, you will be paired with someone who has requested a Stephen Minister.
- You would also be part of a supervision group with other Stephen Ministers and members of our leadership team; this group provides input and support.

Please turn your attention to the screen. We'd like for you to hear from a few of our other Stephen Ministers what the training and the experience has meant for them. A couple comments about the terminology you'll hear: The Stephen Minister is the "care provider"; the person s/he is paired with is the "care receiver"; the supervision group is a group of four or five Stephen Ministers that meets regularly for input and support. This

ministry highly values confidentiality, therefore no names or identifying information is shared; no other Stephen Ministers know who is receiving care.

### **Stephen Ministry Video**

If you want more information about becoming a Stephen Minister, we'd like you to come to one of the informational meetings we're offering. The two meetings are identical; you only need to come to one of them. One is tonight and the other is next Sunday night; each of those meetings is at 6 p.m. here at Faith. If interested check the box on the back of your connection card. If you're not able to come to either of those meetings, check the box that says "Becoming a Stephen Minister" and someone will contact you.