

A Primer on Relationships in the Church

1 Thessalonians 5:12-15

Every family, every organization, every workplace, etc. has its own culture. More specifically, each of these has an accepted way of treating each other. For example, I grew up in a family in which there was lots of “banter” at the supper table (among the boys at least). Right or wrong, everything that you said got challenged. You never got a pass; nothing was out of bounds. I even remember one time being accosted because of the prayer I prayed before the meal. My dad was running a political campaign for a friend who was running for local office. I prayed for the guy to win (what was I thinking?!?). One of my brothers jumped all over me after the ‘amen’: “You think God is for Jack and not the other guy?” That was the culture of our home; that’s how we treated each other. The first time I brought Brenda home to meet the family, she was bit unnerved by it all.

Other families have a different culture when it comes to how you treat each other. You may disagree strongly with another person but you would never “call them out” in front of everybody else. There are different cultures in different workplaces. One office is very relaxed and gracious and open; in another you have to guard your words carefully because anything you say can and will be used against you.

My point is that every family, organization, workplace, etc. have its own culture relationally; there are accepted ways of treating each other. When you think about it, it’s really vital that you understand the culture of a family or workplace; if you don’t there will be all sorts of confusion and disappointments. You really need to know what is “in bounds” and “out of bounds” relationally.

The same, of course, is true in the church. The Scriptures very insightfully lay out what the culture of the church should be – especially when it comes to how we treat each other. Like everywhere else if we don’t understand what’s “in bounds” and what’s “out of bounds” relationally in the church, we’re setting ourselves up for all sorts of relational pain and confusion. If we do understand how we should treat each other, then we’ll find great freedom and joy; we’ll be in a position to experience a depth of community that few people ever experience.

Today we look at 1 Thessalonians 5:12-15 – a passage in which Paul discusses how we should treat each other in the church. As we consider this passage, imagine what this church will be like as we increasingly embody this culture. Imagine how much more of God we’ll experience. We could consider this a primer in relationships in the church.

Affirmation of spiritual leaders (v. 12-13) Paul makes a bold request in verses 12 and 13:

12 But we request of you, brethren, that you appreciate those who diligently labor among you, and have charge over you in the Lord and give you instruction, 13 and that you esteem them very highly in love because of their work. Live in peace with one another.

You’re probably thinking, “What’s **he** going to say about **that**? Is he going to tell us that we’re supposed to appreciate and highly esteem **him** since he’s a pastor?” The short answer is “yes.” The longer answer is that Paul’s challenge here would certainly apply to me, but it would also apply to appreciating and esteeming many others in the church – maybe even people you’ve

never even considered. I feel incredibly appreciated as a pastor in this church; so many of you do an amazing job of letting me know that you value what I do here. Seriously I feel your love week in and week out. I'm more concerned that we see the broader application of what Paul is writing here.

I'll begin by reminding you that in Paul's day paid pastors were the rare exception. In 1 Timothy 5 Paul did make provision for those who preach and teach to be compensated financially so that they might devote themselves to ministry within the church (see 5:17ff). But notice the description of those who should be appreciated: ". . . those who diligently labor among you, and have charge over you in the Lord and give you instruction. . ."

Paul is describing people who invest *time and energy* in your spiritual well-being: they "diligently labor among you." Caring about the spiritual well-being of others is hard work. Sometimes it's all we can do to care about ourselves. But there are some who pay the price to care about and invest in others. In Colossians 1:28-29 Paul said that he "labors" and "strives" with the power of God which mightily works within him. Having a spiritual impact in the lives of others is spiritually strenuous.

Paul is describing people who *exercise a degree of spiritual oversight* in your life: they "have charge over you in the Lord." It's not so much that they're "in charge" of you but that they "care for you" spiritually. On a congregation-wide level, our elders exercise spiritual oversight; our elders pray about issues in the church and seek to lead the church in the ways that honor God. In a sense, our elders "have charge" over the congregation. We are accountable to God for how we shepherd and lead this church (1 Peter 5). But our elders obviously can't give personal oversight to everybody in the church. That's why we have small groups that meet in homes. We don't merely ask our small group leaders to "run a meeting" once a week; we challenge them to shepherd the people in their groups. That's why we offer the Alpha course. It provides a context where people at any stage of their relationship with God can belong and connect with others; it's a context where people will find others who care about them. That's why we encourage deepening friendships within the church; we each need people that know us well and who can care for us spiritually.

Paul is describing people who *apply truth to your life*: they "give you instruction." This instruction could be in a structured, formal setting (such as teaching a class or preaching a message). But it could also be someone who takes the time to listen to your story and then talks with you about the biblical truth that applies to your situation. It could be a counseling situation or an informal conversation.

Paul's point is that we should highly value such people. They shouldn't be taken for granted. They should be "appreciated" and "highly esteemed in love." This is a critical aspect of the culture of a healthy church. I say that because caring for others spiritually is incredibly demanding. Those who make this investment in others sometimes wonder if the sacrifice and expenditure of effort is worth it. It's so very easy to get discouraged and tempted to pull back and not pay the price of investing in others' lives. We as a church need to say to such people, "Yes, it's worth it! We value the investment you're making in our lives. Keep working hard; keep looking out for others' spiritual health; keep speaking the truth in love."

On a heart level, I would ask you whether or not you really value such people. If not, carefully consider why not. If you do, I'd encourage you to express your appreciation in tangible ways. It is in everyone's best interest that our spiritual leaders be appreciated. Hebrews 13:17 (a little different context) expresses it this way:

17 Obey your leaders and submit to them, for they keep watch over your souls as those who will give an account. Let them do this with joy and not with grief, for this would be unprofitable for you.

It's in everyone's best interest that spiritual leaders serve joyfully. Paul adds in verse 13, "Live in peace with one another." It's not clear whether or not Paul is linking "living in peace" with spiritual leadership or with what follows. In either case, the intent is clear. We are supposed to do whatever it takes to be at peace with each other in the church. Our unity is so precious that it's worth sacrificing for. In other contexts disunity and unresolved conflicts are acceptable, but not in the church.

I would simply ask you, "Do you have unresolved conflicts with anybody else here at Faith? Are you not living in peace with anybody else?" It may sound completely unrealistic to you, but here at Faith we are striving to be the type of church in which we all "live in peace with one another." If you need help resolving something, let somebody else know so they can help out.

Tailor-made Love (v. 14)

In some contexts it's fine to do your own thing and not really notice others' lives; you just work around them. That is not the culture of a healthy church. In this verse Paul advocates a careful attentiveness to others' lives. He advocates noticing each others' condition and circumstances and responding accordingly. Notice what Paul writes:

14 We urge you, brethren, admonish the unruly, encourage the fainthearted, help the weak, be patient with everyone.

Paul mentions four different categories of people: the unruly/idle, the fainthearted, the weak, and everyone. We're supposed to be patient with everyone, but we are supposed to have a distinct approach toward each of the first three categories. Our love should be tailor-made in order to address the dominant issue in each person's life.

Paul urges us (a strong plea) to "admonish the unruly." The NIV translates this phrase, "warn those who are idle." The term unruly/idle carries the broader connotation of someone who is "undisciplined, irresponsible, disorderly" (Holmes, p. 180). We know from 2 Thessalonians 3 that some in the church were so preoccupied with the prospect of Christ's return that they neglected their everyday responsibilities; Paul used this same term (same root) to describe them as "unruly/idle." Paul may have had such people in mind here. Or he may be referring to anyone who isn't doing what s/he should in terms of core responsibilities – family, work, serving others, etc.

You don't want to bird dog people and be critical at the first sign that they're not doing what they should be doing. But if you know somebody really well and it becomes obvious that s/he is undisciplined, irresponsible in core responsibilities, Paul says to admonish or warn that person. Sometimes that person needs a strong challenge to do what is right. As always, motives are

critical. If you're just frustrated and want to tell the other person off, it won't go well. But if you are motivated by love – you genuinely want the other person to thrive – chances are that the person will receive what you're saying.

Next Paul says to “encourage the faithhearted.” The fainthearted (NIV has “timid”) needs an infusion of courage; s/he needs to be encouraged. This would be the person who – because of temperament or circumstances – lacks confidence. Sometimes a person simply needs to know, “I believe in you. By the grace of God you can trust in God and please Him in your life.” You can probably think of people around you who are fainthearted/timid. Such people need to be encouraged.

Next Paul urges us to “help the weak.” The person who is weak spiritually, physically, or emotionally needs tangible, practical help. Psalm 46:1 says that God is a very present help in time of trouble. Many times the help that God supplies comes through us. As the body of Christ we are supposed to do the very things Christ would do if He were physically present with us. The people in your life who are weak need help.

I think it's obvious that we really have to pay attention to each others' lives if we're going to live this out. Otherwise we'll end up administering the wrong medicine. A person who's fainthearted – whose spiritual pulse is 5 beats a minute – doesn't need a strong warning; that would be spiritual malpractice. In the church we pay attention to each others' lives and respond accordingly. This is advocated throughout the NT. In Ephesians 4:29 Paul wrote that our words should build others up “according to the need of the moment.” Hebrews 10:24 says to “consider how to stimulate one another to love and good deeds” – there's the element of intentionality and thoughtfulness.

A lot of times we treat everybody the same. We justify it by saying, “I'm just a direct, honest person; I'm going to tell you what I think.” Or on the other extreme we say, “I'm not very confrontational. Until I'm perfect I'm not going to scrutinize anybody else's life.” In the church we have a different culture when it comes to how we treat each other. It's called love. We tailor-make our words and actions based upon what the other person needs (not on what is easiest or more natural for us). Love compels us to speak and act according to the need of the other person.

Since “love is patient” (1 Corinthians 13:4), it's not surprising that Paul says, “be patient with everyone.” Patience is sometimes translated “long suffering.” If you are patient with another person, you don't have a short fuse; you aren't quickly angry; you “take a lot” before getting frustrated. You can probably think of some people with whom you're very patient; they can hardly do anything that would ruffle your feathers. Other people flip your switch in a second. Paul urges us to “be patient with *everyone*.” It may be fully acceptable in some contexts to speak angry, unkind words, but not in the church. We have a different culture here. The Spirit dwelling within us gives us the fruit of patience. Because God is love, we love each other; and love is patient.

Seeking others' good (instead of retaliation) (v. 15) Notice how Paul gives the entire congregation the responsibility of making sure that nobody retaliates when they're wronged.

15 See that no one repays another with evil for evil, but always seek after that which is good for one another and for all people.

The NIV translates this, “Make sure that nobody pays back wrong for wrong.” We’re supposed to call each other on this when we see somebody retaliating. Paul’s words here echo Jesus’ teaching on loving your enemies and praying for those who persecute you (Matthew 5:43ff).

In other contexts it is perfectly acceptable to “do unto others exactly what they do unto you.” People say, “I don’t get mad; I get even.” That’s the culture of relationships some places, but not in the church. We don’t repay evil for evil because that’s not how God treated us. When we were God’s enemies He sent His one and only Son to die for our sins. How dare we say, “I don’t want God to repay me evil for evil, but I’m fully justified in retaliating against people who wrong me.”

Rather, we “seek after that which is good for one another.” Instead of retaliating when we’re wronged, we ask the question, “What good should I seek for this person?” Sometimes it’s good to ignore an offense (see Proverbs 19:11 – “. . . it is his glory to overlook a transgression.”). Sometimes the good thing to do is to confront the person in love; that’s the best thing that you could do for that person. In 1 Peter 3:9 Peter developed the same idea when he said not to return “evil for evil or insult for insult, but giving a blessing instead.”

Imagine a church whose culture is such that people are so committed to each other that they don’t let anybody get away with revenge/retaliation. To the contrary, they are committed to seeking the good of those who blow it – who do evil. That’s the type of church we should be. That’s a church that – like Jesus – is full of grace and truth.

Notice how Paul adds at the end of verse 15 “and for all people.” He’s advocating a type of consistency between how we treat people in the church and how we treat people outside the church. We’ve talked about this before. In some ways this consistency is a litmus test of our true character. If we don’t seek the good of people we know in everyday life – if it’s only something we do for church people – you have to wonder whether or not it’s really part of our character. You have to wonder whether we’re really followers of Christ or whether we’re just *acting* like Christians when we’re in church. If you find yourself being one type of person around your Christian friends and another type of person around everybody else, this is a great place to begin: begin by seeking the good of people in your everyday life. Begin looking at the people in your workplace, in your neighborhood, and in other contexts and ask the question, “What ‘good’ can I seek for this person?”

Imagine the type of church we will be as we embodied all the things we’ve talked about today: affirming our spiritual leadership, tailor-making our love for each other, and seeking the good of all people – even those who offend us. That’s the type of church that experiences deep, substantive unity. That’s the type of church that matures year by year. That’s the type of church that demonstrates to the world not only that Jesus is Lord but that Jesus is our Lord/Master. By the grace of God, that is the type of church we will become.