**The Inner Working of the Church**

(1 Thess. 5:12-22)

While waiting for the Lord’s return, God’s people are to demonstrate love for their church leaders, for the church family, and for God. A flourishing church is identified by how its people relate to one another and to God.

INTRODUCTION 3/14/21

Some years back, Ellie wanted to go skiing with some friends. I gave her the green light and accepted the responsibility of taking care of the kids. As Ellie was gone, we had a great time at home. We ate some unhealthy food; played games. The house was a mess. The day before Ellie flew back, we quickly cleaned up the house, threw out the trash, vacuumed, and put everything back in order before Ellie returned.

Christ promised to come back again. Not knowing when he might return, we tend to relax and take it easy. But as we have studied earlier, Christ’s return is imminent. What will Christ find us doing when He returns? From the two previous passages in 1 Thessalonians, Paul has looked into the future concerning His second coming. Today’s passage, Paul redirects our focus back to the present. While waiting for the Lord’s return, we need to be actively preparing for His return just as I was preparing for Ellie to return.

Back in 1 Thessalonians 4:9-10, The Thessalonians were described as believers that loved one another. Paul challenged them to excel in love still more. Indeed, demonstrating love is a critical evidence of a flourishing church. As Paul closes out his letter, he provides a detailed list of how we are to love one another. It describes the inner working of the local church. He highlights three groups of people that we are to love. 1) The Thessalonians are to demonstrate love to the church leaders. 2) They are to demonstrate love toward the church family. 3) They are to demonstrate love toward God. [ Let us look at the first targeted group, the church leaders, as we read from 1 Thessalonians 5:12-13, “We ask you, brothers, to respect those who labor among you and are over you in the Lord and admonish you, and to esteem them very highly in love because of their work. Be at peace among yourselves.” ]

1. Demonstrate Love toward the Church Leaders (5:12-13)

The believers are to demonstrate love toward the church leaders. In order for the church to flourish, the relationship between the pastors and his flock must be healthy. Some people think that the pastors and ministers only show up on Sunday and do not do much during the week. But in reality, they work tirelessly for the kingdom of God. They wear many hats and members expect them to be experts in all of these areas.

It takes 15- 20 hours to prepare a sermon. That’s just the beginning. There are additional Bible lessons to teach, numerous committee meetings to attend, sick people to visit, future programs to plan, marriage problems to counsel, worship services to organize, emails to answer, funeral, weddings and baptisms to perform. Easily, ministers put in 50-70 hours a week. Although a minister is surrounded by people every day, yet it can be a lonely job. It is emotionally draining handling problems people bring to them regularly .

It is probably one of the most difficult and demanding jobs. Because there is so much stress, study shows that 70% of preachers in the Christian church drop out of the ministry during the first 10 years. Therefore, the Apostle Paul encourages the believers to respect them and to esteem them very highly in love.

1. Believers are to respect the leaders of their church

The word respect has the root meaning “to know;” that is know more than knowledge, but experiential knowledge, which causes one to acknowledge, recognize, appreciate, and respect. There are three things that we ought to know. 1) Know that the church leaders labor among you. This word labor means to work to the point of exhaustion, toil until worn out. 2) Know about their worth because they are over the believers or they lead the church. 3) Know that they care enough about the flock to admonish them, warn them, and correct them. People need to know all the tasks they do so that they will acknowledge them, recognize them, appreciate them, and respect them. In verse 13, it records the second way we ought to treat the church leaders: to esteem them very highly in love.

1. Believers are to highly esteem their leaders

The verb “esteem” means to “think well of.” But Paul said more than to esteem them; believers are to esteem them very highly in love. It means to do it “beyond all measure.” I like how the Message translates this verse: it says “Overwhelm them with appreciation and love!” How can you esteem the church leaders? Compliment us verbally or write a personal note sharing specifically what you appreciate about us. I keep these encouraging notes that people send me. When I get discouraged, I would read them. You can ask the church leaders how you can pray for them. Then pray for them right there. Even better, follow-up and ask how we are doing in that specific area. Yesterday, I had a member that texted me asking how my dad is doing. I was really touched. I felt valued. My parents and I have been vaccinated. Therefore, I am flying out to California to visit them. Another way to esteem us is to ask how you can support us? One member of my community group quickly offered to drive me to the airport. I felt appreciated. Last Sunday, a couple that I have been counseling brought dinner and fruit to express their appreciation for my ministry. I felt highly esteemed.

1. Believers and leaders are to be at peace among themselves

Paul closes this section by asking the believers and the leaders to be at peace among them. Note this exhortation is given to the leader as well as to the believers. The followers of Christ are not to criticize, grumble, or oppose their leaders. One can differ, but not oppose- unless the leader has acted contrary to Scripture. The flock should submit to the leaders. On the other hand, the leaders are not to abuse their authority by using it for personal gain. These actions will bring disharmony. God’s kingdom cannot be advanced. Therefore, believers and leaders are to be at peace among themselves.

[ Paul transitions from how the Thessalonians ought to demonstrate love toward the church leaders to how the Thessalonians ought to demonstrate love toward the Church Family. Let’s read vv.14-15, “And we urge you, brothers, admonish the idle, encourage the fainthearted, help the weak, be patient with them all. See that no one repays anyone evil for evil, but always seeks to do good to one another and to everyone.” ]

1. Demonstrate Love toward the Church Family (5:14-15)

Because we are family members, we need to pay attention to those that need to be loved more. Paul names three targeted groups: the idle, the fainthearted and the weak.

1. Admonish the idle

The first group to pay more attention is those that are idle. This word “idle” is a military word used of a soldier who did not keep rank. He is insubordinate and rebellious. This word is also used of a soldier who failed to keep his watch. He would leave his guard post early or he wouldn’t show up at all. In anticipation of Christ’s imminent return, we are to be busy sharing the Gospel. However, many believers have gone AWOL on God. These members needed to be admonished and corrected out of love and concern for them. The idea of admonish carries the idea of putting sense into someone’s head or alerting him of the serious consequences of his actions. To be a flourishing church, members need to confront sin out of love.

[ The second targeted group that needs extra love are the fainthearted. Instead of a firm correction, the fainthearted need a gentle touch. Paul instructs them to encourage the fainthearted. ]

1. Encourage the fainthearted

The second targeted group of the church family that needed more attention is the fainthearted. These are the ones that lose heart and give up easily when faced with tough times. They want to do what is right, but are too emotionally depleted. They needed encouragement, which literally means “come alongside.” Instead of yelling at a fainthearted at a distance, one should come close and speak tenderly to them. The Thessalonians were under persecution and the fainthearted were discouraged. Paul instructed the brothers and sisters to encourage the fainthearted and point them to God, who gives them hope.

ILLUSTRATION: There was a couple that is struggling in their marriage. They were losing hope and wanting to quit. I sent them scripture to remind them who God is and how he could strengthen them through impossible obstacles.

1. Help the weak

The third targeted group of Church family that needed some more love is those who are weak. Paul is not talking about those who are physically weak, but spiritually weak. who easily yield to temptation. They might lack courage and trust in the Lord to do the right thing. The word for “help” means “to hold firmly,” “to support.” They just need someone to come along their side to help them and support them. The church is a family and we need each other to support one another.

1. Be patient toward all

Within our spiritual family, there are members that mature faster than others. We need to be careful not to despise or look down at those that mature slower. Instead, we are to be patient with them. The word patient has the idea of a long fuse. Although one might be frustrated and even provoked to anger, yet he chooses to refrain from getting mad. He is able to endure under affliction. [This leads us to verse15, “See that no one repays anyone evil for evil, but always seek to do good to one another and to everyone.” ]

1. Look after every believer: see that no believer render evil for evil to any person.

For Christians, the most painful disappointments do not come from the unbelievers, but from the believers within the church. It is disheartening to see brothers and sisters harming one another- especially if one is trying to help another. When we are mistreated, it is natural to seek retaliation, which is just the opposite of patience.

Instead of retaliating, we are to seek to do good by showing kindness. The word “seek” gives the idea of hot pursuit. Apostle Paul also says the same in Romans 12:18-21, “If possible, so far as it depends on you, live peaceably with all. 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.” To the contrary, if your enemy is hungry, feed him; if he is thirsty, give him something to drink; for by so doing you will heap burning coals on his head.” Do not be overcome by evil, but overcome evil with good.” Even when someone sins against us, we are to return good for his evil. This behavior is supernatural. It can only come from the Lord. This is true evidence of love.

[ We have seen Paul instructing the Thessalonians to demonstrate love toward the church leaders and toward the church family. Now they are to demonstrate love toward God as they worship corporately. ]

1. Demonstrate love toward God (5:16-22)

Paul is talking about the corporate life of worship in this final section. He is not referring to our individual life toward God because all the verbs here are plural. The first three imperatives go together. They are acts of worship. Let us read 5:16-18, “Rejoice always, pray without ceasing, give thanks in all circumstances; for this is the will of God in Christ Jesus for you.” These three commands- Rejoice, pray, and give thanks are summed up as a unit, as what is the will of God. These three imperatives are worship directed toward God. We worship and love God by rejoicing, praying and giving thanks. Let’s look at each command a little closer.

1. Worship directed toward God
2. Rejoice always:

When Christians are living in the center of God’s will, they can rejoice always. This requires trusting in the Lord. Instead of complaining, we are to rejoice. May we see life through the lenses of the Lord.

In spite of whatever the circumstance we can rejoice always. The difference between joy and happiness is that happiness is dependent on circumstances. If things are going well we will be happy. However, if things are not going according to our plans, then we are not happy. Joy is totally different. It does not depend on circumstances. God gives us the inner peace although outwardly, things are chaotic. Our focus is not on the circumstances, but on the Lord. That is the beauty of having a close relationship with God as we worship Him by praising Him and rejoicing in Him. The second part of the triplet is to pray without ceasing.

1. Pray without Ceasing

I love Chuck Swindoll’s definition of prayer. It says prayer is one’s personal conversation with the Almighty God that includes both expressing our concerns and listening to His response. It is also an authentic seeking of His plan as we adjust our plan to match His. We love God by having consistent personal conversation with Him throughout the day. It speaks of how you are enjoying one another’s company. Pray without ceasing carries the idea of consistency. It does not mean that a person is on his knees 24 hours a day. It is like a nagging cough. Throughout the day, we are to be communing with God. In another words, we are worshipping God through prayer.

ILLUSTRATION: It is like texting your best friend throughout the day to let him know what is going on. When you have a problem, you will text him to consult with him right away. Likewise, we are to pray without ceasing. [ The 3rd part of this triplet is to give thanks in all circumstances. ]

1. Give thanks in all Circumstances

It does not mean that “in everything give thanks.” It does not necessarily mean “for everything give thanks.” It means that in every circumstance, no matter where God puts you, no matter what your difficulties are, in those circumstances you can thank God for all He has done for you. You may be praying diligently that God will change your circumstances. You can still give thanks to God because you know that He is in control and He desires the best for us. For this is the will of God.

[ We also demonstrate love toward God in worship directed toward building one another up in His Word. In the final four imperatives, we have two negative ones in vv.19-20, followed by two positive imperatives, recorded in vv. 21-22. Let me read vv. 19-20, “Do not quench the Spirit. Do not despise prophecies.” ]

1. Worship directed toward building one another up in the Word
2. Do not quench the Spirit

The word “quench” means to “extinguish or smother.” There is power in the Holy Spirit. When we extinguish the Holy Spirit, we extinguish the power. We do this when we ignore His leading and not do the things the Spirit commands as recorded in God’s Word. This command not to quench the Spirit is connected to v. 20, “Do not despise prophecies.” Let me first define what prophecy is.

1. Do not despise prophecies

Prophecy is the capacity to receive and speak forth truth from God. That can be seen in two ways. One way is the ability to predict or foretell the future. However, since Scripture has been completed, foretelling of the future is not necessary. The second way is the ability to proclaim God’s Word or forthtelling, God’s truths. Do not quench the Spirit by treating prophecies with contempt. Probably some of the Thessalonians, like some of the Corinthians placed great value upon the more spectacular gifts, such as tongues, and placed little value upon teaching or prophesying. As a result, they quenched the Spirit. They were not upholding God’s Word. Instead we read in v.21-22 the two positive imperatives, “But test everything; hold fast what is good. Abstain from every form of evil.”

1. Test everything; hold fast what is good.

One can react in one of two extremes concerning prophesying: 1) Reject all teaching , even though it comes from God. That is why in v.20 Paul says, “Do not despise prophecies.” 2) Accept all teaching, without testing it to see whether it comes from God. We are to cherish God’s Word. Yet at the same time, may we not blindly accept what people say, even if it is the preacher. We need to test by Scripture. The only way to know truth from error is to know the Word of God. (Acts 17:11) “Now these Jews were more noble than those in Thessalonica; they received the word with all eagerness, examining the Scripture daily to see if these things were so.” We need to hold on to that which is good and get rid of that which is bad. If we receive counsel that is good and is in line with Scripture, we should “hold fast” to it. If the counsel is harmful and not in line with Scripture, we should reject it. If we are to love God, we need to embrace God’s Word.

1. Abstain from every form of evil.

When we talk about our relationship with God, we need to take sin seriously. Satan camouflages evil by making it appears gorgeous on the outside, but deadly on the inside. He will try to get us to taste evil. Before we know it, we are hooked. Therefore, if we love God, we would abstain from every form of evil. If something even has a hint of evil, get out of there. If there is a chance that you would fall into a trap, leave it alone. Be cautious of sin. (Rom. 12:9) “Let love be genuine. Abhor what is evil; hold fast to what is good.”

Conclusion:

While waiting for the Lord’s return, God’s people are to demonstrate love toward their church leaders, toward the church family, and toward God. It describes the inner working of the local church. A flourishing church is identified by how its people relate to one another and to God. (John 13:35) “By this all people will know that you are my disciples, if you have love for one another.” May we as God’s family represent God well by loving one another and by loving God.