

“The Reign of Peace in the People of God”

1Thessalonians 5:12-15

December 12, 2021

All of us want peace. And nothing disrupts our peace more than interpersonal conflict or relational tension. We often pray for peace and long to have greater peace in our relationships, but how often do we intentionally act in concert with our prayers. That is, do we simply expect God to do a miracle that transforms our unsettled relationships, or do we take the necessary steps of a peacemaker. Do we live as though we love peace to the degree that we will deal radically with anything in our hearts that stands in the way of true grace-filled reconciliation?

- How can I please and honor God in this situation?
- How can I take responsibility for what I have contributed to this conflict?
- How can I speak the truth in love in a way that truly serves the other person?
- How can I demonstrate a genuine heart of reconciliation?

Peace among us (relationally) is the result of conquering the conflict within us (internally). Rather, we so often think that if our troubled relationship will smooth out then I will have internal peace. And while that may be true to a degree, the reality is that when I deal with the conflict of sin internally, I have the ability to pursue true peace relationally. Sin has impacted our deepest desires and motivations. It has created an internal battle in each of our souls—a battle between the flesh and the Spirit—a struggle for control. And nothing exposes this struggle more than relationships that challenge our desire for control or our desire for the world to revolve around our personal desires and preferences. And so we can never truly have peace reigning among us relationally, by merely competing with each other. The peace of God can only reign in our relationships when we deal with the rebel heart within and give Jesus His proper place as the sovereign king of our hearts.

As we approach Paul’s final, practical instructions in 1 Thessalonians, the most dominant theme that seems to be the call to live in peace with one another. ***As we obey God’s call to rightly ordered relationships, He sanctifies us and empowers us to live in peace with one another.*** I’m trying to capture and harmonize two things happening in this passage regarding peace.

- Command: “Live in peace with one another” (13).
- Prayer: “May the God of peace Himself sanctifying you entirely...” (23).

So, actual peace in our relationships is the result of both human and divine action. We experience peace in our relationships as the result of God’s sanctifying grace yet not apart from our obedience to pursue peace in our godly interactions with each other. So as we obey God by exercising self-control, compassion, and forgiveness to live in peace with one another, God does the actual work of change (sanctification) in our lives that results in true peace with God and one another. (simply applying the doctrine of sanctification and the role of obedience in sanctification to our relationships.) Here’s the bottom line. We will never experience true peace in our fellowship without God’s sanctifying work in us, yet we will forfeit His sanctifying work if we are not obeying the call to live peaceably with one another. Our obedience embraces God’s transforming work.

Paul concludes 1 Thessalonians by drawing our attention to a variety of relationships that must be rightly ordered if we will walk in peace with one another during the tumultuous times of the later days.

- Vs. 12-13 – How the church relates to its leaders.
- Vs. 14 – How leaders relate to the church
- Vs. 15 – How believers related to each other and the world
- Vs. 16-18 – How the church relates to the Lord (rejoicing, praying, giving thanks)
- Vs. 19-21 – How the church relates to the work of the Spirit
- Vs. 22 – How the church relates to sin

This morning we are going to explore the first of these relationships through four principles:

1. **Living in peace requires honoring godly leadership** (12-13a).

[vs. 12-13a] It may be helpful to remember how young the church of Thessalonica was. Paul had not even been able to finish His basic instruction to this new church plant before he was driven out of town by severe

persecution. But apparently, Paul had identified those whom God was raising up to lead and serve the church. Yet these are not seasoned leaders. Nor does the church have a history of identifying elders. So you can imagine that some in the church may have viewed these new leaders with reservation.

So Paul highlights 3 ways in which these leaders/elders are serving. First, they are *diligently laboring* among the church. They are engaging in the hard work of serving and taking responsibility to see that the needs of the body are being met. Keep in mind, this is a church that is suffering persecution, so needs are many and anxieties are strong. Every decision is weighty. But these leaders are not shrinking back, but engaging God's people with servant-hearts. They are working for the benefit of the church, carrying the burdens of others often to the point of personal exhaustion.

Second, these leaders are carrying the responsibility of leadership. As those who are called forward to lead, they bear additional accountability before God. Notice that they have charge over the flock "in the Lord." This means that they are not self-appointed, but rather appointed by God so that they lead with a delegated authority from Christ. This is why it is so important for the church, on one hand, to acknowledge and submit to the authority that God has entrusted to church elders as they lead in submission to Christ and the word, yet on the other hand recognize that they are human (they are not flawless), so we must pray that God will give them grace and wisdom to carry out their calling faithfully as unto the Lord and for the growth of God's people.¹ May God continue to raise up men who will lead us with true humility to follow Christ.

Third, these elders were doing the work of teaching—"give you instruction" (12). The word Paul uses here actually means to admonish or exhort. In other words, they are taking the truth of God's word as they receive from Paul, and pressing it to the hearts of believers. At times this includes addressing doctrinal errors or confronting sinful actions or attitudes. Speaking the truth in love can be challenging because not everyone wants to be exhorted or admonished. Spiritual leaders sometimes face resistance

because the truth of God's word challenges the deepest core of our humanity.

Take note of what we learn from the qualities Paul calls us to honor in those who lead the church. Spiritual leaders are distinguished not by their titles or status, but by their labors of love, their leadership and provision, and their positive moral influence over others out of self-sacrificial service.²

So Paul instructs the church to respond to those who are taking up the mantle of hard work through God-given leadership and teaching by appreciating them. The ESV translates the word as *respect*, but *appreciate* is a better rendering because the word Paul uses is more personal in nature than mere respect. It means to know by experience. Paul is not talking about an aloof respect. Rather he's talking about a personal regard that opens one's heart to being shepherded. This is further supported by the fact that Paul goes on to call the church to esteem her leaders "very highly in love because of their work" (13). No work is more precious than that which nourishes the soul, and so Paul calls for loving honor to be rendered to those who exercise servant-leadership for the church.

2. Living in peace requires intentionally pursuing peace (13b).

This should be quite obvious, but I simply want to point out Paul's direct command here: "live in peace with one another" (13b). The implication is that the only way to have peace in our relationships is to pursue peace, which means fighting the war against sinful and selfish desires within our own hearts. Peacemaking is not waiting for the other person to see their wrong. It is humbly pursuing reconciliation, by taking responsibility for anything that we have contributed negatively to the situation. And even before conflict arises, doing whatever we can to avoid causing unnecessary offense. You will not have peace in the church, in your marriage or your workplace without pursuing peace. I'm not talking about peace at all costs (wisdom from above is first pure then peaceable—James 3:17). We don't compromise honesty or obedience to God to have peace at all costs. Rather,

¹ G.K. Beale, 1-2 Thessalonians (IVP). Pg. 161-162.

² Gene Green, The Letters to the Thessalonians (Pillar), pg. 250.

we speak the truth in love while always looking for the sanctifying work that God wants to do in our own lives.

By the way, notice that this command to live at peace with one another is tacked on to the end of verse 13 regarding elders. One of the best ways that you can lighten the load of your elders, is by doing whatever you can to live at peace with your fellow believers. The most weighty burdens for elders to carry are those that involve personal conflict within the body or hardened resistance to sin and its impact on others.

3. **Living in peace requires serving God's sanctifying purposes in each other's lives (14).**

[14] Paul now turns his attention to the manner in which elders are to relate to various members of the church. Yet, of course Paul's instructions apply to all of us as we live together in the body of Christ. By highlighting four different categories of people, Paul is clarifying our need to live with each other in an understanding way. That is, we need to respond to each other and serve God's sanctifying purposes in each other's lives on the basis of individual needs.

First, we are to admonish the unruly. The term unruly can be translated as idle, disorderly, or undisciplined. Undisciplined living leads to chaos, disorder, and in some cases rebellion. What's the most loving thing we can do for the undisciplined person? The most loving response is to admonish him. That is, to warn him of the serious consequences of his actions. To help him see how a lack of discipline is disrupting his own life and the lives of others. Admonishing someone is not the same as being judgmental or critical.³ Yet, often those who give admonishment are accused of being judgmental or critical. Why? Because admonishment runs against the independence of our humanity. So be very careful if someone admonishes you, to not dismiss them too quickly as judgmental. You may be taking offense precisely because your heart is out of order and struggling with rebellion. The unruly can be helped in no other way than to warn them out of concern for their good.

³ John MacArthur, *1&2 Thessalonians*, pg. 177.

Second, we are called to encourage the fainthearted. The term faint-hearted literally means "small of soul."⁴ This is the person who is easily discouraged or worried. One that lacks courage and suffers from timidity. One who is tempted to lose heart in the face of opposition. The fainthearted need our encouragement. They need us to strengthen them and put wind in their sails by reminding them of the greatness of God, the grace of God, and the faithfulness of God that can be traced through the generations. Don't be hard on the fainthearted. Encourage them. Good spiritual leaders know how to encourage.

If you recognize that you are fainthearted, you need to proactively feed faith by instructing your heart with the strength of God's character and promises and by reciting past experiences of His faithfulness. Like a covid patient who needs steroids administered directly to their lungs, a generic approach of just breathing deeply won't do. You need spiritual steroids--You need to adopt specific passages, promises, and Bible stories that you use to fuel faith in the face of fear. You cannot treat faintheartedness generally. You must develop faith-building regiments and cultivate the discipline of practicing them to overcome the hurdles of anxiety.

Third, vs. 14 calls us to help the weak. This could be a somewhat broad category. Paul may have in mind those who are physically or weak in conscience or weak in faith, but most likely has in mind those who have been marginalized or disadvantaged in society, either because of persecution or simply because they have lacked means according to worldly standards. However, we find people characterized by weakness, we are called to help them. Greek society despised weakness. But Jesus embraced human weakness to help us in the frailty of our humanity. As a result the church is a community in which weakness is embraced and those who are weak are treated with dignity and honor. So we don't walk past those who appear to be weak. We take an interest, we pay attention, we remain loyal. We remember that to walk past the weak is to walk past Jesus and to embrace the weak is to embrace the strength of Jesus' character.

⁴ Beale, 165.

Fourth, we are called to be patient with everyone (14). All of us need the grace of forbearance because everyone of us has flaws, idiosyncrasies, insensitivities, and inclinations toward sin. All of us are at a different mile marker in our maturity. If the church is a place where sinners are being converted and learning to grow, then we will need the patience to admonish the unruly, encourage the fainthearted, and to help the weak. The church is populated with those whom God has not only forgiven, but continues to show His forbearance and patient toward day by day. "So, Lord, give us the grace to be patient with each other and to serve God's sanctifying purposes in each other's lives!"

4. **Living in peace requires overcoming evil with good** (15).

[vs. 15] The church is a community of people defined by the cross. And the cross is a place where sin and evil are no longer free to reign because they have been crucified, and in their place, grace reigns supreme. The cross is the place where God not only condemns sin but also unleashed his goodness to undeserving sinners. This is why we don't return evil with evil. This is why we seek the good of one another and all people. Because our lives are to be a reflection of the cross.

This is not to say that we won't sin against one another. But when we are sinned against (or when we simply take offense to something because our pride is offended), we don't have to respond sinfully in return. Perhaps the greatest indicator that God is doing His sanctifying work in our hearts is when we can respond to someone who has been insensitive to us or rubbed us the wrong way, by seeking to extend them grace and acting for their good. We need to step back in every situation and ask ourselves, how does the cross/gospel inform the way I will respond to this situation?

When we take in the very practical exhortations of vs. 12-22, it seems that Paul is simply calling us to the kind of community and relationships in the church that can only be explained as the way of the cross. When a community of believers is truly defined by the cross, we will love and honor those who pour out their lives to serve and lead us to follow Jesus. When our relationships are defined by the cross, we will admonish the unruly, encourage the fainthearted, help the weak, and extend patience to each

other just as God has been patient with us. When our fellowship is defined by the cross, we will resist the temptation to return evil with evil, but rather do good to one another even when it is undeserved. When the cross shapes our perspective we will be a people who rejoice in God's grace, we will pray without ceasing, and we will overflow with gratitude. When the cross takes hold of our hearts, we will embrace the work of the Spirit, love and cling to the truth, and abstain from evil by resist sin's luring temptation.

This is what it means to be the church. Not just a place to attend services or even a gathering of Christian friends, but a family of believers that are helping each other live in ways that are defined by the cross and serving God's sanctifying purposes in each other's lives.

Taking God's Word to God's Throne

Father, You have been so gracious to us to place leaders amongst this body to labor for our progress and joy in the faith. God, we are so thankful for their work and so desire to honor them in love for who they are and what they do to equip and build up the body of Christ. Protect them, Lord, and keep their hearts set on pleasing and serving You. Let the peace of Christ rule in our hearts, to which indeed we have been called in one body. Father, we acknowledge our brokenness and our need for You to work deeply in our hearts to unify us and cause us to work for one another's good. Please give us Your heart to admonish those who are idle, unruly and disruptive. Motivate us to encourage and lift up those who are fainthearted and discouraged. Give us strength to help bear the burdens of those who are weak and heavy laden. May we show the patience of our Lord Jesus Christ and His heart towards all who are suffering and stuck in sin.

We believe You are mighty to save. Work through us, Lord. Keep us, Lord, from repaying anyone evil for evil. May we always seek to do good to one another and to everyone, because You have sought our highest good in Jesus by sending Him in into this world to live perfectly righteous and fully pleasing to You, to die in our place for our sins to satisfy Your just wrath, to rise victoriously over the grave, and to reign at Your right hand, granting to us eternal life and a lasting relationship with You, Father God. You are so good to us. We praise and thank You in Jesus' precious and glorious name. Amen.