

7. Being a Faithful Church Member

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[0 : 0 0] Well friends, you might like to turn with me to 1 Thessalonians chapter 5, and if you have one of our visitors' Bibles, you'll find this on page 988. You'll see the title, Being a Faithful Church Member.

That perhaps looks a little bit forbidding, but I hope you'll see what I mean as we go into this. We're going to consider various aspects of being a faithful and true member of a congregation. So let me read from 1 Thessalonians 5 verse 12, and I think I'll read down to the end of the chapter.

I only want us to look at verses 12 to 15 today, but we'll get the slightly bigger context by reading to the end. So verse 12. 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. And we urge you, brothers, admonish the idle, encourage the faint-hearted, help the weak, be patient with them all.

See that no one repays anyone evil for evil, but always seek to do good to one another and to everyone. Rejoice always. Pray without ceasing.

[1 : 1 9] Give thanks in all circumstances, for this is the will of God in Christ Jesus for you. Do not quench the spirit. Do not despise prophecies, but test everything.

Hold fast what is good. Abstain from every form of evil. 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.

He who calls you is faithful. He will surely do it. Brothers, pray for us. Greet all the brothers with a holy kiss.

I put you under oath before the Lord to have this letter read to all the brothers. The grace of our Lord Jesus Christ be with you.

For this is the word of the Lord, and may it indeed be a blessing to our hearts and souls. Well, I'm due to be here with you for a little run of three Wednesday lunchtimes, today and the next two, and God willing, my plan is to take the second half of 1 Thessalonians chapter 5, this very passage that I've just read.

[2 : 3 4] Now that will seem a little bit odd to you, I'm sure, but the reason is simply that I've been preaching my way through 1 Thessalonians here at St. George's Tron on Sunday evenings for the last few weeks, and I've just run out of Sunday evenings, but I haven't quite finished the letter.

So I just wanted to cram this in to a few Wednesday lunchtimes so I can finish the job properly. But I'm very glad to have this opportunity, because this final section of chapter 5 is the kind of Bible passage that can be overlooked.

It's tucked away in a rather odd little corner of the New Testament, and it's not very well known, but it's packed with treasure concerning how to live the Christian life in the local congregation.

Now the situation here is that the Apostle Paul was writing to a very young church, this church at Thessalonica in northern Greece, a very new church which he had planted, by the grace of God, just a few months previously, in company with his fellow missionaries Silas and Timothy.

But he'd only been able to stay with the new Christians for a matter of a few weeks, because persecution had very quickly broken out against the new church, and Paul and his missionary companions came under great pressure from Jewish opposition in the town, and indeed the civil authorities as well, and they had to leave.

[3 : 5 1] And Paul would have loved to have stayed on for quite a lot longer, because he wanted to teach the church more, so that before he moved on, they'd have a really firm foundation beneath them. But that was not the case.

It wasn't to be. So what Paul did, having left Thessalonica, is that a month or two later, he sent Timothy back to strengthen them and encourage them and give them further teaching. And then after Timothy had returned to him, with the good news that they were standing firm as Christians, he then sent on this letter as a kind of follow-up to give them further teaching. Now one of the reasons behind all Paul's letters to the churches that he wrote to was to put petrol into their tanks.

If you like, to give them fuel to keep going and keep persevering on the long haul of the Christian life. And that's one reason why we need to read them today, to put fuel into our own tanks, so that we're strengthened for the long haul of living a persevering and joyful Christian life, even in the dark and chilly days of January.

Now this final section of chapter 5, verses 12 to 28, is a mixed grill of ethical instructions. There's a lot of variety here. But Paul's big concern throughout this section is to see this very young church growing up and becoming more mature.

[5 : 12] If you like, away with nappies and infancy. Nappies are fine when you're 12 months old, but the time comes when you need to cast them off and grow to maturity. And in the same way, a baby church needs to learn the principles of growing up into maturity.

And let's notice that these instructions are written to a congregation and not simply to individuals. Now of course they need to be worked out in the individual Christian life, but they're directed first and foremost to a church.

And if we too are to keep on growing in the Christian life, we need to see ourselves always as members of our own congregation who are deeply concerned for the welfare of the church that we belong to.

Yes, certainly we need to watch our own individual Christian life and conduct. But it's as we give ourselves to the building up of our local congregation, then we really begin to understand Paul's letters.

Paul is concerned for the individual Christian, but his big concern is to build strong churches. So with that in mind, let me take verses 12 to 15 under two headings.

[6 : 21] And both of these are about the good local church, local congregation. First, the good church respects and loves its pastors and leaders.

Let me read verses 12 and 13 again. 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. Now, Paul is not writing like this because he is wanting to secure a privileged position for pastors and church leaders.

And Paul was never a man himself to claim rank or privilege. He was always ready to forego sleep and comfort, even food, if that was going to help the churches.

So he's not trying to surround pastors with privilege. His concern is for the good order and the good health of the congregation. And I'm sure we know from our experience, and there will be a lot of varied experience represented here today.

[7 : 22] We know the difference between a church whose pastors are loved and respected and a church whose pastors are disliked or mistrusted. And we know which of those two types of church we would prefer to belong to ourselves.

So let's notice how Paul describes the local church leaders. First, they're laborers. And the verb really means making great exertion, doing something that is tiring and strenuous.

So a good pastor is a laborer. Now, he may not have bulging biceps on his arms, like those men who are drilling and pouring concrete out in the building next door. But the pastor is to be a worker. If he's the sort of man who looks at his watch and says, well, I've done 39 and a half hours this week and I'm going to take the rest of the week off. I've done quite enough. He'll never be a pastor. Now, I don't mean that he should work so hard that he becomes a workaholic and sends himself to an early grave.

Not at all. That's no good for him or his family or his congregation. But he needs to be a person prepared to roll up his sleeves and tackle the job willingly and thoroughly, painstakingly.

[8 : 34] And then secondly, Paul says that the pastors are over you in the Lord. Which means that in the Lord's way of organizing church life, these people are placed in a position of responsibility and leadership.

And when Paul says that they're over you, he doesn't mean that they're necessarily people of greater intelligence or greater integrity than the members of the congregation. After all, the ethical teaching that Paul gives in all his letters is addressed to all Christians and the churches.

He doesn't require a different standard of behavior, of leaders. Everybody is called to live a holy life on the same basis. So the leaders are over the congregation in the sense that they must direct the congregation's life and be overseers of the congregation's activities.

They are to take responsibility. And Paul uses this word admonish. They labor among you and are over you in the Lord and admonish you.

It's a rather old-fashioned word. Not a word we use every day in our conversation. And it really combines the ideas of instruction and warning. So instruction in the gospel and in the godly lifestyle that springs from the gospel.

[9 : 47] But also warning against the constant temptations of the world, the flesh and the devil that assail us. And if the congregation respects its leaders, and to use Paul's other phrase, esteems them highly in love, that congregation will be a good congregation to belong to.

Now let me bring in a cricketing analogy. I want to compare a pastor with a batsman for a moment. The very best batsman in cricket can play shots all around the wicket.

You just think of him. The late cut. The square cut. The cover drive. The full-blooded straight drive, which perhaps, in the case of Andrew Flintoff, ends up as a six in the Lord's Pavilion.

The on drive. The pull. The hook. The delicate leg glance that trickles over the boundary for four runs. You know what I mean? The good batsman has got shots all around north, south, east, and west.

There aren't many batsmen, however, who can play all those shots really well. Now in the same way, there are very few pastors in our local congregations who are strong in every department of Christian work.

[10 : 59] Most churches will have a pastor who is strong in some areas of work, but weaker in others. So for example, he might be a good preacher, but not much of an administrator.

Or he might be excellent at helping a family who is going through a real sudden sharp crisis, and yet not much good at organizing his team of youth leaders.

Another person might be a fine scholar, but hopeless if you put him in front of a school assembly. They don't know what to say to 15-year-olds. Now pastors like that, who are good in some areas, but weaker in others, and as I say, almost all pastors are like that.

They need the respect and loving esteem of their congregations. If the congregation will respect them and love them, those pastors will be able to maximize their usefulness.

They'll be able to play to their strengths. And the congregation, rather than grumbling about their weak points, will actually help to strengthen them at their weak points and provide them with extra resources to shore them up at those places where they're not so strong.

[12 : 02] And in that way, a church whose pastor is not a ten-talent man can still make really good progress and be fruitful in its gospel work. But let's notice the final sentence of verse 13.

Be at peace among yourselves. The author of one of my Bible commentaries writes this about this last sentence. The final clause of the verse, be at peace among yourselves, has no word connecting it to what precedes it.

And there is therefore some difficulty in knowing its precise relevance. That seems to me to be the classic comment of a man who has spent his life in university libraries rather than pastoring actual churches.

Not that I look down on academic theology, not at all. But the connection between that final sentence in verse 13 and what goes before it seems quite obvious to me. And that is that if the members of a church will make every effort to be at peace among themselves, they will be greatly helping the pastors to do their work.

I know that when I was a local church pastor down in England, people would sometimes come to me and they would say, what's the hardest part of the pastor's work? I suppose it's taking funerals, isn't it, and helping people with bereavements.

[13 : 24] And I would say, not at all. Taking funerals and helping bereaved folk, that can be quite stressful and quite emotionally demanding, certainly. But the thing that is really difficult is when the pastor has to sort out quarrels between members of the congregation.

That's the thing that makes the pastor reach for his pen and start drafting a letter of resignation. When folk in the congregation are falling out at loggerheads with each other over something, whatever it may be.

But certainly where there is strife within the church, that is always going to gnaw at the vitals of the congregation. So if the pastors are not to be severely handicapped in their work, the congregation members need to work at peaceful and loving relationships within the fellowship.

If there is war in the congregation over something, then we must take responsibility and work as hard as we can to be peacemakers and not rest until the warring parties are reconciled and peace is re-established.

So there's the first thing. The good church respects, loves, helps its pastors. And then second, the good church takes responsibility for its members.

[14:35] Here's verse 14. And we urge you, brothers, admonish the idle. That doesn't mean so much the idle in society, but any idle members of the church.

Admonish the idle. Encourage the faint-hearted. Help the weak. Be patient with them all. Now let's notice the different parts of this verse. First of all, the church members, not the pastors, but the church members are called upon to admonish the idle.

Admonish here seems to carry the force of rebuke. Now who are the idle? Well, I guess it's true that all of us, to some degree, are constitutionally lazy, aren't we?

If we're offered the choice of the armchair or an hour in the gymnasium, we're naturally going to go for the armchair. But Paul seems to be talking here not about the general temptation to laziness that I guess we all have, but rather about specific people, church members, who are refusing to work at a trade, or in modern terms refusing to get a job when they could get a job.

Just turn back to chapter 4, verse 11, where Paul raises the same question. We urge you, brothers, to aspire to live quietly, to mind your own affairs, and to work with your hands as we instructed you, so that you may live properly before outsiders and be dependent on no one.

[16:01] So it's clear that there were some folk in the church at Thessalonica who were not earning their living when they could be and they ought to be. And Paul's concern there in chapter 4 is with what outsiders are going to think about that.

It's going to bring the gospel into disrepute. Local people who are not believers will be scandalized if they look at professing Christians who are capable of working but aren't actually working.

They'll say, look at young John MacKillop down the road, fine healthy young man who doesn't lift a finger to earn his keep, and they say he's a Christian. Well, if that's Christianity, you can keep it. It's that kind of thing that Paul is concerned about.

So for us as members of congregations today, we have a responsibility for the sake of the gospel's reputation to encourage our fellow Christians to be active, contributing members of society.

Now, Christians who are unwell, Christians who are too old to work, of course they're in a different category. But idleness is something that needs to be lovingly admonished, which is another way of saying that a kick up the rear end is sometimes required for some people.

[17:12] And then second, Paul teaches us to encourage the faint-hearted and to help the weak. Now this, I think, is a lovely instruction. Paul knows that there are fit people who are lazy, but he also knows that in every fellowship there will be folk who, perhaps for long periods of life, are faint-hearted and weak.

I think it's always a significant thing to ask how well a particular local church is looking after its weaker members. Now that will include the elderly folk, especially those who are confined to home and can't get out, but it will also include those who are suffering from chronic physical or mental illnesses.

And also folk whose constitutions are somehow not built to withstand a lot of pressure. And there are some people, of course, who can be strong at various parts of their life and yet go through a weak patch for some reason because of illness or stressful circumstances.

So Paul is teaching us that our churches should lovingly include and take care of folk who are faint-hearted and weak. Just a couple of evenings ago, Monday evening, I was taking part in a meeting of the pastoral care team here at St. George's Tron.

And at our church, that's quite a big group of people. I think about 50 people are involved who visit elderly and sick members of the church. And I happened to be talking to one of the ladies briefly.

[18:36] And she was telling me about how in her little group within the pastoral care team, she and her friends were discussing Mr. X and Mrs. Y. Have you visited this one? Who's been to see

this one? My heart was really warmed as I thought of these folk, some of them quite elderly themselves, who are prepared to go out regularly and visit and take care of those who are in quite a tricky situation.

It exactly accords with verse 14 here. And then, still in verse 14, Paul says to the Thessalonian congregation, Be patient with them all.

Now, why should Paul the Apostle need to say that? Surely because he realized, he knew that church members can test each other's patience.

Have you ever prayed, give me patience, in the face of provocation from a fellow Christian? Yes? I guess you have. And it works the other way around.

There'll have been fellow Christians who've looked at me or you and said, give me patience because of this man. Now, let's notice the last word of verse 14. Be patient with them all. Now, it's easy to be patient with 95% or even 99% of our fellow believers.

[19 : 49] But it's possible that there is one person in our church that we find exceedingly provocative. And Paul says, be patient even with him, even with her.

So, Paul is concerned here that the congregation should be filled with a spirit of sweet, tender-hearted love. And that thought in verse 15 carries us straight on from the instruction to be patient with them all.

Paul says in verse 15, see that no one repays evil for evil. And I think the link with the end of verse 14 is obvious. Here you are in your congregation, your patience being tested by a fellow Christian in your church.

Imagine that that fellow Christian has let you down in some way, perhaps has spoken ill of you, maybe has barged in in front of you and has taken over some responsibility that you've been handling for years and doesn't seem right that he or she should take it off you.

And you feel miffed. You feel cross with your fellow Christian. In fact, you wish you could pick him or her up by the scruff of the neck and say something very strong. But Paul says in verse 15, don't.

[20 : 59] Don't do it. Don't repay evil for evil. Yes, your patience will be tested. Yes, you will be tempted to say or do something very nasty in return for what has been said or done to you.

But, says Paul, don't do it. Our instinct, our sinful instinct is to give tit for tat, isn't it? You smack me in the face, I'll give you a 4.1 in the chops in return.

Isn't this exactly what is happening in Gaza at the moment? This is the same problem writ large with the Israelis and the Palestinians. The Israelis say, you keep firing your rockets into our towns and we'll send in our military and our air power.

And the folk of Hamas reply, we're only retaliating in return for everything you've done to us. And that kind of tit for tat retribution can only escalate into the kind of monstrous, wicked horror that we see going on in Gaza at the moment.

But, unbearably destructive. Now, in a situation like that, what we see is the problem of sinful retaliation writ large. But, in a church fellowship where members repay evil for evil, it may be done on a smaller scale, but it's exactly the same thing in principle.

[22 : 15] You've hurt me, I'm going to hurt you in return. But, Paul says, don't do it. In fact, when you look carefully at the way he words verse 15, I think you'll agree with me that it's very strongly worded.

See that no one repays anyone evil for evil. No one, however much they've been slighted or hurt, however much they might feel justified in hitting back, is to return evil to anyone, however badly that person may have behaved.

You see how strong the words are. Paul is saying that there is to be no place in the Christian fellowship for any kind of behavior of that sort. And, of course, Paul is exactly following the teaching of the Lord Jesus.

Remember, he says in Matthew 5, you've heard that it was said, eye for eye and tooth for tooth. But I say to you, do not resist one who is evil. If anyone slaps you on the right cheek, turn to him the other also.

If anyone would sue you and take your tunic, let him have your cloak as well. It's a glorious, liberating moral code. It turns the world's wisdom, the world's way, on its head.

[23 : 26] It's the way of love. It's a foretaste of the new creation. It's a breath of life from the new world in which hatred and retaliation have no place. But we need to read the second half of verse 15 as well as the first half.

So verse 15, see that no one repays anyone evil for evil, but always seek to do good to one another and to everyone. So how does this work out?

Well, there you are, a Christian in your fellowship who has been hurt. You've been hurt, wounded, upset by another Christian. And you go to that other Christian, you make a move towards him or her, and you do something loving and delightful and supportive to that very person who has ill-used you.

Now, to behave like that towards someone who has hurt us is to behave just as Jesus has behaved towards us. Because we have hurt him and ill-used him and rejected him.

And how has he responded? With hatred and rejection? No. With love so great that he laid down his life for us. Just think again of the Israelis and the Palestinians.

[24 : 43] If they were to lay down their weapons and embrace each other with love and rebuild each other's shattered communities and care for each other's children and teach their own children to love and serve and help the folk from the other side, that would be a heartbreakingly beautiful thing.

Now, alas, it looks most unlikely to happen because that conflict between the Jew and the Arab. It has roots that go back to the days of Abraham. But that kind of astonishing love can be seen in our churches.

And it will be seen when Christian people read these verses and say, I will do what the apostle teaches me to do. I will refuse to repay evil for evil.

I will seek only the good of those who have hurt me. So, friends, here are the apostle Paul's simple but profound instructions for the Christian who wants to help their church to be what a true church ought to be.

Let's respect our church leaders and esteem them highly in love. Let's care for the weaker, needier members of our churches. Let's be patient with all, especially with those who test our patience most, not repaying evil for evil but seeking to do good to each other.

[26 : 04] And if we take our apostles' teaching seriously, our churches will be places of delight, outposts of the life of heaven itself. Let's bow our heads and pray together.

Dear God, our Father, we thank you for this astonishing teaching from the apostle and for the way in which it turns the standards and ways of the world upside down.

And we pray that you will help each of us as individuals to respond to this teaching and to put it thoroughly into practice. And we do pray for our congregations, all the congregations represented here to which we belong.

And we ask that you will help us to relate in such a way to our fellow Christians that those congregations become communities of love and joy and support, care, and that in doing so, the Lord Jesus and the good news about him will be honoured in our communities.

And we ask these things in Jesus' name. Amen.