

Lesson 8

General Issues, Part 1

1 Thessalonians 5:12-15

Introduction

Paul will now begin to conclude his letter by addressing various general issues relevant to life within individual congregations, having previously tackled significant topics such as sexual conduct, brotherly love, and misunderstandings about the end times in 4:1–5:11. His closing remarks are similar to what is found in other New Testament writings, like Romans 13:1–7, 1 Peter 2:13–17, 1 Peter 1:6–7, and James 1:2–4. Specifically, in verses 12-22, he revisits the themes of Romans 12:9–18, integrating early church teachings tailored to the specific needs and shortcomings in the faith of the Thessalonian church. This section stresses the importance of these teachings for the thriving of the early Christian churches, suggesting that modern churches should also consider these teachings carefully.

Here, Paul emphasizes the importance of supporting and respecting church leaders who work diligently among the congregation, care for them, and admonish them. Paul stresses the need for love and respect towards these leaders, which are earned through their sacrificial service. He also instructs the congregation to minister to different groups within the church, such as the idle, disheartened, and weak, urging them to be patient and strive to do good for one another. Additionally, Paul advises against retaliation and encourages believers always to seek to do good to others. He highlights the characteristics of the Christian life, including rejoicing always, praying continually, and giving thanks in all circumstances. Paul also addresses the role of prophecy in the community, urging believers to test prophecies and hold on to what is good while rejecting evil. The letter closes with a prayer for sanctification, a reminder of God's faithfulness, requests for prayer and unity among believers, and a closing benediction invoking grace and peace from the Lord Jesus Christ. Paul's final words reflect his pastoral care and desire for reconciliation and spiritual growth within the church.

5:12-13 – Love and Respect for Shepherds

Paul urges the Thessalonian Christians to show love and respect for their church leaders who have emerged quickly in the face of persecution. He emphasizes the hard work, care, and admonition these leaders provide, highlighting the need for the congregation to acknowledge and support them. Paul stresses that respect should be accompanied by love and esteem, not just obedience to authority. The leaders deserve the highest regard for their sacrificial service, which should be expressed through love. The community's harmony is linked to the love and respect shown to leaders, creating a peaceful environment despite external pressures and internal challenges. Paul emphasizes that proper spiritual growth requires admonition and the removal of hindrances rather than just positive feedback. Ultimately, he calls for profound honor and love towards church leaders based on their work and loving care rather than their positions of authority.

In these verses, we discover three essential aspects of their work as they serve the local church:

5:12a – They Labor Among the Flock

Paul liked to use this term to describe the work of ministry.²³ Spiritual leaders need to be prepared to engage in diligent, hard work on behalf of those they serve. *Labor* comes from a word that means to exert great effort, often to the point of sweat or exhaustion. Spiritual leaders labor to proclaim the gospel (2 Timothy 4:5), teach and bring saints to maturity (1 Timothy 3:2; 2 Timothy 4:2; Titus 1:9), warn and admonish (Romans 15:14; Colossians 1:28; 3:16; 1 Thessalonians 5:14), and provide biblical counseling (2 Timothy 3:16-4:4). Effective church leadership is achieved by those who are dedicated to tirelessly working towards spiritual goals and divine directives, which include spreading the gospel, founding churches, and nurturing the faith of believers.

5:12b – They Lead Saints in the Lord

The “lead” has dual meanings in the context of leadership: one emphasizes authority, such as ruling or presiding, and the other highlights caregiving and assistance. Paul uses this term to denote both aspects in different texts. Interestingly, in the Roman context, these roles often merged in the figure of the patron—a wealthy benefactor who both governed and supported their clients. This suggests that Paul envisioned church leaders similarly, as figures who guide and nurture those they serve. Paul suggests that this dual role of authority and care should be exercised in Christ's name and by His empowerment, implying that these two facets are interconnected and essential for effective leadership.

Shepherds have been tasked with multiple responsibilities, including setting a spiritual example, maintaining unity, providing personalized support, addressing congregational challenges, and finding scriptural resolutions to problems through diligent effort and reliance on the Holy Spirit. The term “in the Lord” shows how these leaders are divinely appointed through the authority of the Word rather than self-selected, with their authority rooted in God's designation, not human approval. Their leadership is meant to serve God's purposes and the church's well-being, not personal ambitions for power or gain. This divine appointment obliges them to lead with integrity and a focus on spiritual stewardship rather than personal benefit.

5:12c – They Admonish Fellow Saints

In the New Testament, “place something in someone's mind” usually refers to admonition rather than positive instruction, mainly to correct or warn, as seen in its usage to address the idlers in Thessalonica. This admonition is crucial for spiritual growth, as it involves challenging members to eliminate hindrances to their spiritual development. This concept may clash with today's culture of positive reinforcement.

5:13 – Sheep Have Responsibilities Too

As highlighted in Thessalonica, respect alone is insufficient for church leaders; they should be deeply esteemed and loved for their dedicated service. They were to hold their leaders in high regard, an expectation intensified by the phrase “most highly,” which implies exceptional honor and love. This high esteem is not about enforcing authority but about reciprocating the love and care provided by these leaders, building obedience that stems from genuine respect and affection, not just duty.

Paul emphasizes that the highest regard for church leaders should be expressed through love, a vital characteristic of the Thessalonian church. This respect and love are due not because of their positions of authority but because of their sacrificial service and loving care, aligning with Jesus' teachings against domineering leadership. The leaders' dedication earns them this love and respect.

Additionally, Paul advises the church to "live in peace with each other," linking the command to church harmony and the broader context of love. When love prevails, peace and harmony naturally follow. This guidance is crucial for addressing external pressures and internal challenges, such as those posed by less active members, urging a unified and peaceful approach within the church family.

5:14-15 – A Commitment to Ministry

In a shift similar to one in 4:1, Paul transitions from discussing church leaders to urging the entire congregation to address specific issues. He highlights the need to assist members struggling with particular disorders within the church. Although Paul does not identify these as distinct groups—except possibly the first—he continues from his earlier mention of those lacking in faith (3:10) and identifies three types of individuals requiring special care. By referring to the congregation as "brothers and sisters," he emphasizes the familial aspect of the church's duty to aid these members in overcoming their spiritual challenges and reconciling with God.

5:14a: The Idle

Paul instructs the Thessalonian congregation to "warn those who are idle and disruptive," using the same term for "admonition" as he does in 5:12 to address problematic behaviors. He refers to this group as "the idle," implying they are both lazy, refusing to work, and disruptive, ignoring godly virtues and the leaders' directives. This behavior effectively burdens the church financially, as outlined in Ephesians 4:28, where Paul criticizes such individuals for not working productively and instead relying on the church's resources, which should be reserved for those in need.

Specific social dynamics may have exacerbated the situation, such as dependency on wealthy patrons like Jason (Acts 17:6, 9), who might have enabled their idleness. Another possibility is that some of these individuals were holding out for the imminent return of the Lord and chose to stop working and live off the church while awaiting His return, thereby straining church resources and creating tension within the community. The exact circumstances are unclear, but the disruptive impact of their behavior on the church family was evident.

5:14b: The Discouraged

Comforting or consoling those troubled in spirit translates to "small soul." It identifies individuals who are discouraged and depressed, possibly on the brink of giving up. Given the pressures and persecution faced by the church, as well as confusion about the fate of deceased believers upon Christ's return, their despair is understandable. Such individuals require reassurance about the ultimate triumph of God's people and encouragement to remain steadfast in their faith.

Paul's guidance on aiding those within the church who are anxious or distressed is straightforward: those who are confident and assured should support and encourage the worried. "encourage" suggests providing comfort by "speaking alongside" someone. Confident believers should act as personal mentors and role models, affirming biblical truths to the worried—such as the assurance of answered prayers (1 John 5:14-15), assurance of salvation (John 10:27-29), participation in the resurrection (John 11:24-27), eternal love from God (Romans 8:38-39), and the divine orchestration of life's events (Proverbs 19:21; Romans 8:28-29). These affirmations serve to uplift those who are disheartened or fearful.

5:14c – Help the Weak

The "help" verb implies a commitment beyond simple assistance—it suggests a deep devotion or attachment. Here, we are speaking of a strong sense of engagement, such as "to hold firmly," "to cling to," "to support," and "to hold up" (as in Titus 1:9). Paul instructs the stronger members of the church to closely support the weaker ones by forming personal bonds, offering them doctrinal teaching, and encouraging them towards righteousness while steering them away from sin.

This is not just casual help for the common good but a dedicated engagement with "the weak." Identifying who the weak are—whether they are the ill (physically weak), the poor (economically weak), or outcasts (socially weak)—is not entirely clear. Most commentators, however, believe it refers to those who are spiritually or morally weak, similar to the divisions between the "weak" and the "strong" in Rome, who disputed over food laws and holy days (Romans 14:1–15:13). Paul's advice likely encompasses all these interpretations, emphasizing the need for deep pastoral care for those facing such challenges. The call is for everyone to embrace and cultivate the gift of helping those in need, regardless of the specific nature of their difficulties.

5:14d – Be Patient with Everyone

Paul concludes his guidance by emphasizing the importance of patience with everyone and stressing the need to be "longsuffering." This type of patience involves enduring others' shortcomings and even their sins, reflecting God's patience as described in the Old Testament (Exodus 34:6; Psalm 103:8; Joel 2:13). Recognized as a fruit of the Spirit (Galatians 5:23), this virtue is crucial for fostering empathy and tolerance within the church. Patience is foundational to ministry and central to our salvation—without God's forbearance, none would be spared. Thus, exercising patience with one another is vital inside the local church.

5:15 – Refuse to Retaliate when Wronged

Paul instructs Christians to refrain from retaliating when persecuted, emphasizing vigilance in not repaying "wrong for wrong." This call to non-retaliation reflects a departure from the Old Testament's "eye for eye" principle, advocating instead for love and forgiveness as seen in commands like "love your neighbor as yourself" and prohibitions against seeking revenge. This theme of rejecting vengeance spans both the Old and New Testaments, promoting a life centered on benevolence.

Instead of seeking retribution, Paul urges us to exert great effort ("strive") towards doing good for each other and everyone else, underscoring our commitment to goodness and good works. This approach adheres to godly values and serves as a witness to those in the world who, despite their accusations, may recognize these good deeds and ultimately glorify God. This principle of doing good, especially to fellow believers, aligns with the teachings in Galatians 6:10 and is further echoed in 1 Peter 2:12, highlighting the incredible power of visible, positive actions in our local community.

What's In This for Us?

Support and Respect Church Leaders: Emphasize recognizing and supporting church leaders who labor diligently for your congregation. As they guide and nurture the local church, showing them love and respect—not just out of obligation but from genuine appreciation for their efforts—enhances unity and builds a peaceful church environment.

Engage in Loving Care: Actively support members of the church who face various challenges, whether they are struggling with idleness, discouragement, or weakness. This involves offering practical help and spiritual encouragement to strengthen their faith and integrate them more fully into the church's life.

Promote Patience and Non-Retaliation: Cultivate a spirit of patience and forbearance within the church, especially in response to wrongs or personal offenses. Encourage members to resist the urge for retaliation and instead respond with acts of kindness that reflect Christ's teaching on love and forgiveness.

Demonstrate Active Goodness: Strive to perform good deeds within the church and towards those in the world. This active goodness is a powerful testimony to the gospel, potentially leading others to glorify God through observing these actions, particularly in the face of false accusations or misunderstandings about the faith.

Conclusion

Paul's teachings to the Thessalonian church are as relevant today as they were in the early church. His emphasis on supporting and respecting church leaders, engaging in loving care, promoting patience and non-retaliation, and demonstrating active goodness forms a strong framework for building strong, compassionate, resilient local churches. By living out these principles, believers can create an environment of love and respect that strengthens their church and serves as a beacon of Christ's love to the broader world. Integrating these teachings into our daily lives contributes to a living testimony of the power of the Gospel in the modern world.

Thought Questions for Discussion

1. How can we better recognize and support the efforts of our church leaders? Can you share examples of how this has positively impacted your local church?
2. How can we improve our care for members struggling with idleness, discouragement, or weakness?
3. What practical steps can we take to foster patience within our church family, especially when dealing with difficult situations or individuals?
4. Discuss the impact of not retaliating when wronged. How does this reflect on our witness as Christians in the broader community?
5. What challenges do you face in striving to do good to others, particularly those who might not share the same beliefs or values? How do you overcome these challenges?
6. How does understanding the dual role of church leaders—as authorities and caregivers—change your perspective on their responsibilities and your response to their leadership?
7. What are some practical ways to encourage and uplift church members who feel discouraged or disconnected?
8. Discuss the concept of 'bearing with one another' in love. How does this play out in day-to-day interactions within the church?
9. What role does forgiveness play in our interactions within the church, and how can we cultivate a more forgiving attitude?
10. How can we practically apply Paul's exhortation to 'always strive to do what is good for each other and everyone else' in our current social and cultural context?

²³ See Romans 16:6; 1 Corinthians 15:10; 2 Corinthians 10:15; Philippians 2:16; 1 Thessalonians 1:3; 3:5.