



## How To Live in Peace

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**“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, and that you esteem them very highly in love because of their work. Live in peace with one another. We urge you, brethren, admonish the unruly, encourage the fainthearted, help the weak, be patient with everyone. 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”** (1 Thessalonians 5:12-15).

One of the things I love about preaching through books of the Bible is that the Holy Spirit seems to naturally bring us to passages that are exactly what we need to study. When I saw that this was our next passage in our study of 1 Thessalonians, I knew that this is what we needed to hear as a body. After praying about it, and discussing it with our elders, I'm convinced that it's the right thing for me to address an issue that has arisen at CPC over the past year. To be honest, this is not easy for me to do, and it's been a tough week for me. This is probably the hardest message I've given in 17 years here. But every once in a while a leader has to deliver a message that's both pointed and painful, and if he doesn't do it, his leadership is compromised.

One of the hard things about doing this is that I know many of you are new here to CPC. Perhaps this is even one of your first Sundays here. The last thing I want to give you is the impression that this is the norm for us. To the contrary, over the years we as a church have been blessed with an unusual measure of unity, and what I consider a minimum of these kinds of things to deal with. That's why this morning I feel like a football player being thrown a soccer ball and told to catch it with my feet. If I seem a bit clumsy this morning it's because I just haven't done this very much.

I suppose one of the good things about you being here is that you can learn a lot about us by how we handle these things. One of the things we believe is that the church is a family. We know that from time to time, all families have struggles and disagreements. Functional families don't ignore the issues, but they deal with them in a healthy way, they work through them, staying committed to each other in the process.

About eight months ago, most of you received a letter explaining that the elders here at CPC made a decision to ask a member of our pastoral staff to step down. Though it may have come as a surprise and even a shock to many of you, it wasn't a hasty decision. It came after a lengthy and arduous process. What made it so difficult was that we love this man and his family; he was part of our family; he's greatly gifted and has helped many of us. But this was a decision we believe was right. It was the result of a process that took place over the period of over a year, and it was a decision that each one of our seven elders agreed with.

My purpose here is not to explain or defend that decision. We've tried to do that over the past eight months, both with individuals and groups. My purpose is to talk to you

about what's happened in the aftermath of that decision, and hopefully to let God's word speak to all of us about how to work through this as a church family.

For many of you, although you're aware of what took place, this is really not an issue. It's enough for you to know that this is what the elders believe was right. You trust them. You don't need to know all the information; you don't want to know it.

For others, it's been more difficult. You appreciated this man and his ministry, and you don't quite understand all the reasons for letting him go. But somewhere along the line you decided to give the elders the benefit of the doubt. You knew them well enough to believe they wouldn't make this decision rashly or harshly, and you believed that they had genuinely sought the Lord's direction and done what they felt he wanted them to do. You decided to trust God to lead through them, and that you would pray for them, the church, and the brother in question.

For still others, it's been even more difficult. You loved and appreciated this man. His ministry impacted your life significantly. Perhaps you're quite close to him. As you've learned more about the situation, you've decided that the elders were wrong, or that somehow they mishandled the situation. Your hurt and anger has not diminished but it's grown over the past eight months. And you haven't known what to do with that. Do you leave the church? Do you try to hash it out with the elders? Do you find a group of like-minded friends to commiserate with?

I come to you this morning concerned that some of you are allowing this to fester, and you're causing harm to yourself and to others. I know you don't intend to do that, but I'm concerned that even the smallest leaven of mistrust and disunity could do great damage to this body.

What I say this morning may be difficult for you to hear. I hope that you would at least prayerfully listen to what I have to say. If you feel “picked on” it might help for you to know that I have a few words for our leaders too. My prayer is that this will allow us to move ahead with one mind, one heart and one purpose as we try to make an impact for Christ here on the peninsula.

In 1 Thess. 5:12-15 Paul is addressing a problem in the Thessalonian church. We don't know exactly what the problem was, but we know that it had resulted in a critical spirit towards the leadership of that fellowship. In vv. 12-13 Paul addresses the people in the church at odds with the leadership. In vv. 14-15 he addresses the entire church, but his words especially apply to leaders. In the middle of this, he says something that binds it all together; something for both the leaders and the led: *Live in peace with one another*. I find it fascinating that he doesn't even bring up what the issue was; he doesn't say, “You folks over here are right about this and that, but you know you have a point over on this side too.” No, he simply says, “Work it out. Live in peace. There is something bigger than figuring out who is right or wrong, and it's the unity of the body of Christ.

Without that, everyone loses!"

In vv. 12 and 13 Paul speaks to those who are unhappy with the leadership about how to live in peace.

### **I. A word to those in the church (vv. 12-13)**

Notice how gentle Paul is with them. He says, "We request of you, brethren..." He comes to them as a brother; not with an edict, not with a large hammer, but with a kindly request.

He wants them to examine their attitude towards their leaders. He asks them to do two things. First, he asks them "appreciate" or to "respect" them. The word he uses is an unusual one in this context and it calls for respect that isn't forced, but comes from thought and reflection.

I think of a wife who complains to her husband, "You never tell me that you love me. You never appreciate me for all that I do!" So he says to her, "Okay, I'll tell you right now. I love you and appreciate all that you do." Somehow that doesn't do it for her! What he needs to do is go off and think about his wife, and how lost he would be without her, and how crazy he is for her, and then tell her that when she least expects it. That's the kind of thoughtful appreciation Paul is calling for here.

Second, he asks them to "esteem them very highly in love." Paul throws three words together to show that they should lavish them with esteem: "esteem them beyond exceeding abundantly." It's not just some kind of distant reverence that he calls them to. He's not saying leaders should be treated like Popes or Princes, but rather they're to be esteemed in love. This is the loving esteem that a son has for a Father, or a young man for an older mentor.

Paul is just as concerned for their heart attitude as he is for their actions. It's not enough to just act nice, although that's not a bad place to start. We have to search our hearts. You cannot do this with an unforgiving spirit. You cannot do this if you've allowed resentment to fester and turn to bitterness. In the book of Hebrews Paul says, **"See to it that no one comes short of the grace of God; that no root of bitterness springing up causes trouble, and by it many be defiled"** (Heb. 12:15). You see, our bitterness defiles not just us, but it defiles others. It even defiles the very person we think we're defending, who we're trying to help. It defiles our children. If we're harboring resentment against church leadership, if we withhold the kind of appreciation and respect from them that Paul is calling for here, what are we modeling to our kids? What are we teaching them about their attitudes towards the leaders in their own lives: teachers, youth leaders, and even parents?

This begs the question: Why? Why should I do this, especially if I disagree with a decision that the leaders are making? It's interesting that Paul says nothing about the authority of office here. He doesn't say, "You should do this just because they're elders or pastors." That's what we parents say sometimes to our kids, "Because I'm your father and I said so!" With Paul the issue is not rank, it's not the authority of office, but rather it's the authority of lived obedience. It's because of the kind of men they are and the work they do. He says they do three things.

First, he says they labor diligently among you. Esteem them highly *because of their work*. Contrary to what some people think, pastors work more than one day a week. The ministry is demanding. It's even more demanding for elders, who do many of these things in addition to their already demanding jobs, and don't get paid for it.

I want to share with you a report that was made by a pastor in a local church to the Board of Elders on what he had been doing in a year's time. It shows the kind of problems that not only pastors but elders face:

"There are all forms of anger, from long-standing resentment and unforgiveness, to rebellion, violence, child-beating, mutilating, wife torture, threats against life, murder for hire and Mafia-related revenge. There are the sexual offenses of rape, incest, sodomy, homosexuality, gang sex...bestiality, fornication, and the ever-present adultery. There are marital problems of every kind, attempted or contemplated suicide (and an occasional successful suicide), abortions and adoptions. I see many family problems between parents, or single parents, and children. There are also the addicts of every sort -- alcoholics, drugaholics, foodaholics, workaholics, sexaholics, spendaholics, etc. There are the institutionalized, either coming from or going to a prison, hospital, de-tox unit, mental facility. There is the psychotic to deal with or the quieter problems of legal, finances, career questions about a specific passage of Scripture or those simply wanting to know about the church."

How would you like to run into that range of problems in a 12-month period? That's why Paul says we're to value our leaders and treat them with respect and love - they work hard among us.

Second, he says "they have charge over you in the Lord." The word means to stand before and even over, but to do so with sincere interest and care. It's very much like a shepherd watches over his flock, or a teacher over her class, or a coach over his team. Notice they function this way "in the Lord." They keep a kind of spiritual watch over our lives. They're responsible for us. It's their charge. It's their duty.

Third, he says, "they give you instruction." The word for instruction is "admonish." That means correction. That means gently telling someone they're doing something wrong. No one likes to be admonished. That's why leaders are so often resented, because they have to do this from time to time.

Admonishing is the job of leadership, and it's not just true of elders and pastors, it's also true of youth leaders, Sunday School teachers, small group leaders, and parents. And it's hard work. This is why we should appreciate them, respect them and love them. They need not demand it; they've earned it. One of the things that has upset me through this whole process is that I know that the elders and pastors who lead this church work hard at each of these things. I know the people they meet with late into the night. I know the phone calls they get. I know the concern for the church which they carry with them 24 hours a day. I think they've earned this kind of esteem.

The hardest thing for me through all of this has not been the disagreement. We can agree to disagree and remain close brothers in Christ. What has hurt is that after all the years of ministry something like this can happen and all the trust that has been built is thrown out the window. I've baptized some of you, disciplined some of you, married some of you, dedicated your babies, been with you when your parents or your children have died, and prayed regularly for you. But at times I've felt like all of that means nothing. You might think I'm above being hurt by that, that somehow I'm immune to it, but I'm not.

Some of you are probably thinking that this sounds like we are asking for blind obedience. Are the elders infallible? What if they blow it? What if I disagree with some decision they make? What do I do then?

First, you take that to the Lord and ask him for understanding and wisdom for both you and the leadership. You determine before the Lord that you'll not be a source of dissension

in the body.

Then you go to the leadership and try to understand their perspective. As you do that, remember that one of the challenges that leaders have is how much to say. There are things that leaders know which aren't appropriate for them to repeat. They could make their case more powerfully with such information, but they could do a lot of damage in the process. But you listen and try to give them the benefit of the doubt.

What if you still disagree? At this point, or even before this point, some people just leave the church. It's interesting, Paul doesn't mention that option. Of course, in many of the communities of that day, there was only one church, so they didn't even have that option. But even if they did, I don't think that would have mattered to Paul, because leaving doesn't solve anything. You still have to deal with this command, in your heart: *Live in peace with one another*. You still have to deal with your resentment towards your brothers or sisters in Christ, even if they go to a different church! You still have to pray that prayer, *"Forgive us our sins, as we forgive those who have sinned against us."*

I know there are times when it's appropriate for a person to leave a church. For instance, when there are serious doctrinal or moral issues at stake. But disagreement over difficult "judgment calls" are not a good reason to leave. Leaving a fellowship should always be the last option. Dr. Lynn Anderson, who mentors leaders and consults with churches all over the world writes, "If a Christian disagrees with the elders over a matter of conscience, the elders do not become that person's law. However, in matters of judgment, we should be willing to be led by a plurality of elders...I cannot imagine why I should ever think myself too wise to follow their combined judgment. Something would be wrong with my heart (if not my head) should I choose to go my own way rather than respect the combined wisdom of such shepherds."

So what do you do? You go back to where you started. You go back to the Lord. You say, "Lord, I don't understand, but I'm going to leave this with you." You trust that God is sovereign to lead, even when his leaders are wrong. And let me just say, leaders ARE fallible and do make mistakes. But you can be assured that we'll all stand before the judgment seat of Christ and give an account of our actions. Things will be brought to light then that none of us can see now. Whatever was wrong, he'll make right. We can trust him for that. So then, you decide at that point to be like Joseph, who said to his brothers who threw him in a pit and sold him as a slave, "Do not be afraid. Am I in God's place? You meant it for evil, but God meant it for good."

What should never be an option is to stay at a church and spread dissension and mistrust of the leadership. For there to be peace, you not only must guard your heart, but you must watch your words. If you find yourself saying things or even making innuendoes with the intent of making someone else in the body look bad or wrong, then you're spreading dissension. Scripture says, **"Let no unwholesome word proceed from your mouth, but only that which is good for edification, according to the need of the moment"** (Eph. 4:29). That means making a commitment not to talk about it unless you can do so in a wholly constructive way.

Let me be clear: it's not a sin to hurt for your brother in Christ. It's not a sin to experience anger if you feel an injustice has been done. It's not even a sin to disagree with leadership. But if you're spreading strife, it is a sin. Listen to Proverbs 6:16-19, **"There are six things which the LORD hates, Yes, seven which are an abomination to Him: Haughty eyes, a lying tongue, hands that shed innocent blood, a heart that devises**

**wicked plans, feet that run rapidly to evil, a false witness who utters lies, and one who spreads strife among brothers."** If you've done that; if you've talked to or about someone in a way that has spread strife, you should confess that to the Lord and go to that person and confess that to them.

Now, as I said, in vv. 14-15 Paul turns to the entire church and gives some instructions about what they can do to maintain peace. What Paul says applies to all of us, but especially to leaders.

## **II. A word to those who lead (vv. 14-15)**

He speaks about how to treat different people within the body. Like it or not, leaders have to deal with people, and people create problems. One of the challenges of leadership is recognizing that different members of the family need different things. Paul talks about three different kinds of family members who need special attention.

First, he says there are the "unruly." The word is a military term for a soldier who doesn't keep rank, and describes those who are disorderly in conduct and thus derelict in their duty. Paul says these people need to be admonished. They need to be corrected. What kind of General would see a soldier leaving his post and say nothing? We ALL need to be admonished from time to time. There are those here this morning that are unruly and need to be admonished. That's never easy, and it's never fun, but it's critical to the health of the church.

But not everyone is in that category. There are also folks that can be described as "fainthearted." These are those who are discouraged or weary. Life has beaten them up. Paul says they need encouragement; they need someone to come along side of them and cheer them on.

Then there are the "weak." Not physical weakness, but moral and spiritual weakness. In Paul's day, it might have been weakness in shrinking from persecution, but it could also include yielding to temptation, or even weak in biblical understanding. Whatever it was, however, the strong in faith are to "help" them. "Help" literally means to hold onto. It's like they're sinking and we need to latch onto them and keep their head above water.

This is starting to sound like a hospital! I mean, we have the unruly, the fainthearted and the weak. When we come to church, if we only knew what the person next to us was going through. They look just fine, but some of them are unruly and need to be admonished; others are fainthearted and need to be encouraged; still others are weak and need someone to hold onto them. God forbid we become a church where we all look like we're doing just great, where we pretend we're not a hospital but a country club!

Finally, he says to be patient with all people. John Stott has a good word for leaders here: "One might say the unruly, the fainthearted and the weak were the 'problem children' of the church family, plagued respectively with problems of understanding, faith and conduct. Every church has members of this kind. We have no excuse for becoming impatient with them on the ground that they are difficult, demanding, disappointing, argumentative or rude. On the contrary, we are to be patient with all of them."

That's why he adds in v. 15, **"See to it that you don't repay evil for evil but seek that which is good for one another."** One of the ugly things that can happen in a family is retaliation. I've been hurt, so I will say something or do something to hurt you back. Tit for tat. Insult for insult.

Frown for frown. You ignore me and I'll ignore you.

Leaders have to guard against becoming calloused and cynical, and especially against a spirit of retaliation. Unruly, fainthearted and weak people can sometimes wear us out, or even hurt us. This week I received an e-mail and all it said was, "The fancy elaborate building you have built cannot hide the failure from within." I thought a bit about that. Thankfully, I don't get many e-mails like that, but you can imagine how something like that hurts and angers. But I sort of swallowed hard and replied to that e-mail with these words, "Lord, I pray that you would give him the ability forgive; that no root of bitterness would be allowed to steal away his joy in the Lord and his love for your people."

Live in peace with one another. Admonish the unruly; encourage the fainthearted; hold up the weak; be patient with all; don't return evil for evil. These are words addressed to our entire church body, but especially to you leaders. Some of you are excellent at this. I for one have not always done this as well as I should have. I preach and teach with my right hand, but I encourage the fainthearted and help the weak with my left hand.

One of the things that all of us elders have been challenged with through this whole process is that there are some in our body who have felt like we're too removed from the body. Some of you have been at CPC for a long time and yet you still don't know who the elders and the pastors are. We've been blessed with lots of new people at CPC over the past few years. As a result, it's become harder and harder for the elders to know and have a relationship with everyone. As a matter of fact, it's impossible. But what we're trying to do is find ways to stay connected and accessible to the body; to be sensitive to the varied needs that are out there, and to equip you, the saints, to do the work of the ministry. Can we do a better job of that? Absolutely. Are we working on it? You bet. Can we do it all? No way.

## CONCLUSION

I cannot emphasize enough the importance obeying this command: *Live in peace with one another*. I cannot emphasize enough the importance of maintaining the unity of the body of Christ. Let me just read a few verses:

Rom. 12:16. **"Be of the same mind toward one another...do not be wise in your own estimation."**

Rom. 14:19. **"So then let us pursue the things which make for peace and the building up of one another."**

Rom. 15:5. **"Now may the God who gives perseverance and encouragement grant you to be of the same mind with one another according to Christ Jesus;..."**

Phil. 2:2. **"...make my joy complete by being of the same mind, maintaining the same love, united in spirit, intent on one purpose."**

1Pet. 3:8. **"To sum up, let all be harmonious, sympathetic, brotherly, kindhearted, and humble in spirit;..."**

1Cor. 1:10. **"Now I exhort you, brethren, by the name of our Lord Jesus Christ, that you all agree, and there be no divisions among you, but you be made complete in the same mind and in the same judgment."**

2Cor. 13:11. **"Finally, brethren, rejoice, be made complete, be comforted, be like-minded, live in peace; and the God of love and peace shall be with you."**

Why is it so important? What is at stake? Our own spiritual health is at stake. We cannot grow to be the kind of people God has called us to be if we hold onto resentment and bitterness. Not only that, the spiritual health and growth of the young in Christ is at stake. We're blessed with many new believers in this body. Our refusal to forgive and surrender can place serious stumbling blocks before those who are just beginning their spiritual walk. Finally, our witness in the community is at stake. Jesus said, "By this all men will know you are my disciples, when you love one another."

Last week I told you that we're in a battle and we have to wear the armor of faith, love and hope. There is nothing the enemy would love more than to divide us. Don't let it happen! This is a family. Brothers and sisters, live in peace with one another.

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