4-18-21

1 Thessalonians 5:12-13

In this letter to the Thessalonian church, Paul has poured out his heart. He has told them how much he loves and misses them, and how much he wants to come to visit them. He has expressed how thankful he is to find out that they care for him too and miss him. He has gone on to answer some questions they had.

He has reminded them that the Christian life requires them to turn their back on the ways of the pagan culture. They are to abstain from immorality; from the sexual impurity that is so prevalent in the culture. They are to love each other in brotherly love since all Christians are brothers and sisters in Christ; all are children of God. Each person is to be open to the Holy Spirit’s leading in sanctification; in becoming more and more like Jesus.

Paul explained that those Christians who have already passed away will suffer no disadvantage when Jesus makes His second appearance. In fact, they will receive their new eternal bodies first and meet Christ in the air. Any who remain alive will then join them so that all will be together with Jesus always.

The day that Christ returns is a mystery. It is a day known only to the Father. But when it happens, it will happen suddenly and unexpectedly. It will be a moment of joy for the brethren; it will be a time of terror for the non-believer. We who are disciples of Jesus are to prepare for His coming by constantly being ready. We are to be busy with our God-given work when our Master returns. All these things are joyous to the believer. These are encouraging words and promises. We need to remind each other of these things as we continue to live in a world that increases in evil and progresses to destruction.

The rest of Paul’s letter discusses how the members of the church should behave and then ends with a conclusion. In behavior, he talks about church leadership, interactions among the members of the church, and worship. We are not told why Paul brought up these subjects. Perhaps Timothy brought back some information that there were problems or questions in these areas. Perhaps this was general teaching that Paul simply wanted to remind them of.

Here in verses 12 and 13, Paul is looking at church leadership and how the members of the congregation ought to behave toward them. I must admit, I’m a little uncomfortable discussing this but it is part of God’s word and it is the next section in our study. Church leadership here would refer primarily to elders; bear in mind that a pastor is an elder. Depending on the church structure, it could also include deacons and teachers.

Paul begins verse 12 with, “*But we request of you, brethren …*” He is treating his fellow Christians as fellow Christians; as brothers and sisters in Christ. Here he is not directly using his apostolic authority; although it is there in the background. Paul is writing to a church that is doing its best and doesn’t seem to have any real problems (other than a few that don’t feel the need to work). He feels comfortable enough with them to ask them, rather than tell them. He believes that they will do as he asks.

There are a couple words used describing how the congregation ought to think about their leaders. My translation uses appreciate and esteem. Another possibility is to hold them in regard. The word that gets to the point best is respect. A church is to respect the elders and the pastor God has placed over it. Along with that, the pastor needs to be doing what he is supposed to be doing. While Paul is describing to the congregation the reason for respecting the pastor, the pastor should see what his calling entails.

Let’s consider for a moment the office of elder. In the New Testament, there are several names that are used interchangeably for elder, including overseer, presbyter, and even bishop. These names have come to mean different things to different churches over the centuries and there is nothing wrong with that. In our church, we have pastor, elders, and deacons.

There are qualifications set out in the New Testament for those who would be an elder. In 1 Timothy 3:1, Paul begins with an interesting statement, “*It is a trustworthy statement: if any man aspires to the office of overseer, it is a fine work he desires to do*.” Notice that a man might “aspire” to be an elder; it is something that he “desires” to do. Overall, it is a good thing for him to want to do. This sentence by itself leaves the motivation open, which is why he immediately outlines the qualifications for being an elder or pastor. There are certainly those who want to be a pastor for money or fame or power; but the qualifications narrow the range down to those who experience a sense of calling from God and exhibit the characteristics necessary for others to see that they are qualified for the position.

1 Timothy 3:2-7

*An overseer, then, must be above reproach, the husband of one wife, temperate, self-controlled, respectable, hospitable, skillful in teaching, not overindulging in wine, not a bully, but gentle, not contentious, free from the love of money. He must be one who manages his own household well, keeping his children under control with all dignity (but if a man does not know how to manage his own household, how will he take care of the church of God?), and not a new convert, so that he will not become conceited and fall into condemnation incurred by the devil. And he must have a good reputation with those outside the church, so that he will not fall into disgrace and the snare of the devil.*

As we read through this list, it is easy to see that those who are simply after money, fame, or power are disqualified. This is a person who is exhibiting the fruits of the Holy Spirit. They are to be able to teach; therefore, they are a mature Christian. They must be an effective head of their own household which gives them experience in leading a church. There are obvious pitfalls in letting a new convert, or even a new church member, have a position of leadership. It is far too easy to let this go to one’s head which will cause all sorts of problems. Again, Christian maturity is needed; there is a reason they are called “elders”.

It might seem odd that they have a good reputation with people outside the church. But it can be damaging to a church if one of their elders causes problems in the community or even with just a few people. Word travels and it can make evangelism more difficult. Further, satan will take advantage of any anger or disagreements. He uses these for snares.

Looking at the character required of an elder or pastor, it is easy to see why they should have the respect of the congregation. Certainly, no man is going to fulfill all these things perfectly. No man is going to do all the things required of a pastor equally well. A congregation should not seek perfection from its elders or pastor, but should be quick with understanding and forgiveness. Just as the pastor must do for the congregation.

Paul lists three things here that give reason for respecting and appreciating the elders; which are also three things the elders must be careful to fulfill. First, they *diligently labor among you*. The wording used here indicates hard physical exhausting labor. Paul uses it elsewhere regarding farmers and his own work as a tent-maker. This goes completely against the idea that the pastor only works an hour a week and goofs-off the rest of the time; although, unfortunately, there are some who do this.

For the most part, a pastor spends many hours a week studying for sermons and Bible studies. He studies the Bible to gain knowledge in the word of God. He visits the sick or hurting and is generally available for the people in the congregation God has entrusted to him. Funerals and weddings take place, and meetings for running the church. Much prayer is given for the members of the flock and his heart aches for each pain they experience. This is not a call for sympathy; these things are a joy to the one called to pastor, even in the midst of the stress. Pray for the elders, whoever they might be.

The second thing Paul brings up is that the elders “*have charge over you in the Lord*”. Everyone has to be very careful to interpret this with other Scripture. This has nothing to do with the elders being boss. Jesus and the New Testament are very clear about leadership; it involves servanthood.

Mark 10:42-45

*Calling them to Himself, Jesus said to them, “You know that those who are recognized as rulers of the Gentiles lord it over them; and their people in high position exercise authority over them. But it is not this way among you; rather, whoever wants to become prominent among you shall be your servant; and whoever wants to be first among you shall be slave of all. For even the Son of Man did not come to be served, but to serve, and to give His life a ransom for many.”*

The pastor is to be a servant to the church. The elders are to be servants of the church. But this doesn’t mean that the congregation is boss either. I think the best way I’ve heard this said is that as pastor, *I am your servant, but you are not my master*. I serve you in my preparation and teaching, but I teach from the Bible what is true and that may not be what you want to hear. This is part of being “*in the Lord*”; He is the Master and He is the One that all of us look to and answer to.

Also, “*in the Lord*” limits the sphere of the pastor’s authority. While there are some gray areas, for the most part, what a person does in their private lives is none of the pastor’s business. As some examples: Some church leaderships require their members to submit their income tax returns so they can make sure they are tithing properly. That is wrong; tithing is between a Christian and God. It is of no concern to the church leadership.

Some churches require a couple who want to date to come before the eldership for an interview and receive permission to date. This is beyond the authority of the church leadership. Some require the same permission for a couple to get married. While getting together with the pastor for some pre-marital counselling is a good idea, the decision is ultimately the couples. According to Ephesians 4:11-12, pastors were given to the church “*for the equipping of the saints*”. In other words, if the pastor is properly teaching the people, hopefully they will be able to make their own decisions in a proper Christian manner.

One of the touchier areas would involve living in serious sin. If a member of the congregation was involved in an adulterous affair, it would be the pastor’s business to say something to the person in private, attempting to lead the person out of sin. A person’s sinful behavior can affect the whole church, especially if that person is an elder or a deacon. Just consider the effect Achan’s sin had on the nation of Israel. Along with the pastor’s responsibility to speak with someone living in sin is the person’s responsibility to listen.

This actually leads us into the third area Paul mentions which is “*give you instruction*”. The word in my translation, instruction, softens the actual meaning of the word: the word is *admonish*. Now this does not mean a harsh chewing-out, but gently correcting an errant behavior. It does also involve teaching and instruction; instruction in the proper ways of conduct for the Christian life.

Considering these three duties of the pastor, Paul calls the church to respect them. As he says in verse 13, the respect is because of their work. He also says to “*esteem them very highly in love*”. We must be careful with this too; this does not mean to put the pastor on a pedestal. The higher the pedestal, the more shaky it is, and the farther there is to fall. This is a call to Christian love. A simple respect doesn’t mean that there can’t be some joking or that all interactions have to be formal. There is plenty of room for fellowship.

Paul ends with “*Live in peace with one another*.” This comes from a mutual respect for each of the members of the body of Christ to have for others. The gift of pastor/teacher is just one gift among many and each person has a gift from God. While the congregation needs to respect the hard-working pastor, the pastor needs to respect the hard-working congregation, each of whom is using their gifts to the glory of God.

Prayer

Lord Jesus, it is part of our rebellious nature to sometimes reject any who seem to be in leadership. It is also part of our fallen nature to believe that some abilities might be better than others. May the Holy Spirit lead us to submit first of all to You; to understand that leadership in Your kingdom means serving others sacrificially; and to know that each person’s gift is given by You for Your purposes so none is better than another.

Keep us focused on You and on eternity, that we become inclined to use the abilities You have given us for Your glory, and not simply for worldly gain. We pray that our best efforts be for the church; for Your body here on earth; to prepare Your bride that she is ready when You return.

It is our desire that You would help us to live in peace with one another. Set our minds on Christian love and respect for each other, remembering that each one is a child of God. Show us which things are the most important, and which things to let go in the interest of fellowship.

It is in Jesus’ name we pray

Amen