

## Teaching on Church Life: Church Leaders and Fellow Believers

### 1 Thessalonians 5:12-15

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#### Background Notes

One of the characteristics of Paul’s epistles is that usually they can easily be divided into the doctrinal content and the practical exhortations. This is certainly true of 1 Thessalonians. In chapter 5 there is a clear transition from the doctrinal content to the practical application. We have studied great doctrine about the return of the Lord throughout this epistle, and in the first half of chapter 5 we had a heavy dose of doctrine about the Day of the Lord.

Now, beginning with verse 12, we have practical teaching that continues on to the final greetings at the end of the chapter. In verses 12-15 this teaching is about church life. In verses 12-13, the teaching concerns the relationship between believers and their church leaders. And in verses 14-15 the very practical teaching is about relationships between believers with one another. Verse 15 may even reach beyond the relationship between fellow believers to the relationship between believers and unbelievers.

#### Doctrinal Points

##### 1. Believers should love their elders.

Verses 12-13: *“And we urge you, brethren, to recognize those who labor among you, and are over you in the Lord and admonish you, and to esteem them very highly in love for their work’s sake. Be at peace among yourselves.”*

Who are *“those who labor among you”* (v12)? They are the church leaders, or elders, of the local church at Thessalonica. The elders have responsibilities for the believers, and the believers have responsibilities to the elders.

First of all, notice the use of the word *“those.”* This means that there was more than one leader. The Bible teaches that in each local church there should be a plurality of church elders. Nowhere in the New Testament do we ever read about a church with only one elder, or only one “overseer,” or only one pastor or minister over any one church. The leadership is ***always plural***. For examples, see Acts 20:17 and Philipians 1:1.

## ***a. Two responsibilities that the elders of a church have for the believers.***

- The elders were “over” the Thessalonian believers, because God has set up an authority structure for the church. The local church is not a democracy. The elders are the church leaders, and their authority “over” the believers in the church comes straight from the Lord Himself. They are responsible to discipline believers who are harming themselves and the other believers by a sinful lifestyle - including excommunication if need be.
- The elders were to “admonish” the believers. Elders are to correct believers who are wayward or straying, and to admonish or instruct the believers in biblical Christian living.

However, elders do not “rule over” and “admonish” as dictators, or bosses, or drill sergeants - but as shepherds! As shepherds, they do much more than just rule and admonish the sheep. They feed the sheep; they lead and guide the sheep; they work with the sheep; and they gently care for the sheep. That is no easy job! Talk to a shepherd of literal sheep, and he will tell you that it’s hard work taking care of sheep! That’s why verse 12 says believers are to recognize and esteem “*those who labor among you.*”

## ***b. Three responsibilities of the believers to their church leaders.***

- *The believers were to recognize and acknowledge the shepherds.*

Verse 12: “*And we urge you, brethren, to recognize those who labor among you, and are over you in the Lord, and admonish you.*”

We learn from Acts 20:28 that the elders, or overseers, or shepherds of a church are chosen by the Holy Spirit - not by the church members! However, it is up to the members, or flock, to recognize or acknowledge these spiritual leaders or shepherds. This can be done in a number of different ways. No one method for recognition is taught in Scripture. However, it is not a popularity contest - or a power play! The bottom line is that those who are spiritual will automatically recognize spiritual leadership. Any way that a particular church can allow this process to take place amicably is the best method.

- *The believers are to highly esteem in love their church leaders.*

Verse 13: “*And to esteem them very highly in love for their work’s sake.*”

Notice two things about this responsibility to love your elders with *agape* love, and for their work’s sake.

*Agape* love is not love of the emotions. It is love of the ***will***. You may not be naturally attracted to a particular elder. You may not much like a church leader because your personalities clash - but you can love him in the Lord! *Agape* love is an act of the ***will***.

Second, love your elders for their work’s sake. You may not like all their decisions, and you may not agree with all the ways the church is being run, but remember - your church leaders and elders are working hard - before the Lord - to do what they believe is best for the spiritual growth of the whole church.

- *The believers are to “Be at peace among yourselves.”*

The context of this admonition is the relationship between you and your church leaders. Don't be critical of your church leaders or elders. Don't be contentious. Don't be selfish, always wanting everything to be done **your** way. Don't rock the boat!

In these verses there is certainly there's an assumption that the church leaders are good leaders – that they're not power hungry or manipulative or involved in sin. It's assumed here that they're meeting the qualifications for elders in 1 Timothy 3 and Titus 1. Good elders really are hardworking shepherds who are feeding and caring for the flock.

Now comes the obvious question. Suppose you're involved in an un-ideal church situation. From your point of view, the leaders are not good elders. They are not functioning as shepherds, but behaving more like dictators - or perhaps are even involved in sin. What should you do? You follow the directives of 1 Timothy 5:19-20: *“Do not receive an accusation against an elder except from two or three witnesses. Those who are sinning rebuke in the presence of all, that the rest also may fear.”* These verses refer to dealing with elders who are not doing a good job as shepherds.

Unfortunately, sometimes a church leader must be disciplined for sin or for doing a poor job as a leader. If an errant elder refuses to step down from his leadership position, the church can deal with this situation in various ways. I believe the most biblical way is through the other elders of that local church – and that's one reason why the Bible teaches that there should be a plurality of elders. In this way, no one man can get away with sin or gain control over the church and become a tyrant, because he's accountable to the other elders.

Having said all that, we come back to our doctrinal point: believers should love their elders! Even when an elder must be disciplined, it should be done in the context of love. **Tough** love - but still in the context of love. Believers should love their elders.

## 2. Believers must deal with problem people.

Verses 14-15, *“Now we exhort you, brethren, warn those who are unruly, comfort the fainthearted, uphold the weak, be patient with all. See that no one renders evil for evil to anyone, but always pursue what is good both for yourselves and for all.”*

*“Warn those who are unruly...”* Notice that these verses are addressed to “brethren.” They're not just for elders dealing with church members - they're for all of us! We **all** have a responsibility to *“warn those who are unruly, comfort the fainthearted, uphold the weak, be patient with all.”* Some people are “unruly” - they don't like to be under authority. As a result, they are disorderly and idle. I've had students like that, and they had to be warned. At some time **you** may be required to lovingly warn a fellow-believer.

*“Comfort the fainthearted.”* Don't yell at someone who is weary, frightened or discouraged. Strident or angry words will only make their fear and discouragement worse. In these situations believers must use tender loving care and comfort.

*“Uphold the weak.”* Some Christians are just plain weak - weak emotionally, weak morally, weak spiritually. Don't write them off! Don't blame them, or say “That's your problem - deal with it!” No. We are responsible to hold them up and strengthen them as best we can. Hebrews 12:12-13: *“Therefore strengthen the hands which hang down, and the feeble knees... so that what is lame may not be dislocated, but rather be healed.”*

As I was preparing this talk, I was reminded of a “weak Christian” I know, so I called him right then, and arranged to have coffee with him to see how he's doing. Why? Because in some areas he's a weak Christian, and the Bible commands us to uphold the weak. Do you know any weak Christians? Don't write them off! Uphold them – and do your best to strengthen them.

*“Be patient with all.”* Sometimes this is hard to do! I can name a few situations in which it's very hard to “be patient with all” - but no matter how difficult, we are **commanded** to be patient with all! This command may go beyond our relationship with fellow believers and include non-believers.

*“Be patient with all. See that no one renders evil for evil to anyone, but always pursue what is good both for yourselves and for all.”* The Thessalonian believers were undergoing persecution from unbelievers, but still they were not to render evil for evil to anyone. Romans 12:19 says, *“Never take your own revenge.”* So believers must be patient and learn how to deal with problem people.

## Practical Application

### Always follow the “always” of 1 Thessalonians 5:15!

*“Always pursue what is good both for yourselves and for all.”*

In verse 15, notice that “yourselves” is plural. It refers to pursuing what is good for the church, and then what is best for **all** believers, and even for all outside the church.

For example, let's suppose that your church is planning a new church building. You have your own personal ideas on what **you** think would be the best location, and what building design **you** would like, and what interior decor **you** prefer. We all have our opinions and personal preferences. So what should we do? We should **always follow the “always”** of 1 Thessalonians 5:15! What's best for the rest of the church? What's best for the community - even in the design of the building? Many other examples could be given.

Read Philippians 2:1-4. Then remember this teaching: **Always follow the “always” of 1 Thessalonians 5:15!**