

Good morning, Moon Valley!

We are continuing our sermons series titled, □ “Living Like He’s Coming.” It is based on a study through the New Testament letter of 1 Thessalonians.

Our text for today is □ 1 Thessalonians 5:12-15. You may recall from the immediately preceding context that Paul has encouraged the Thessalonians to be ready for the day of the Lord because we belong to him. When we live in continual readiness for the day of the Lord, reflecting faith, hope, and love, we bring honor to his name—the name we carry. It’s who we are.

Now, in the text we’re covering today, Paul expands on what we can do to be ready for the Lord, issuing nine specific commands in just four verses. On first read, it’s like drinking water from a fire hose.

These commands share a common theme. All of them are about our relationships with others. In particular, the focus is on our response to people in the church that can be difficult.

On the screen is a □ list of different types of difficult people represented in our text. Directly or indirectly, Paul mentions six types. We have the leaders, the antagonists, the idle, the fainthearted, the weak, and the evildoers.

Keep in mind, these are people in the church. They were all represented in the church in Thessalonica. And they are all represented here today.

I can say this with confidence because, at one time or another, I have been all of them. These are not fixed categories; rather, they are descriptions of believers at particular points in their lives. Perspectives

pinball. Seasons seesaw. I can be an antagonist one day and an evildoer the next. In fact, I am a leader and fainthearted right now because I spent all day yesterday doing my income taxes. I have to adjust my gross outlook and itemize my blessings.

The idea is not so much to indelibly label people, but to recognize that, at any given point in time, the church is comprised of all kinds of people at all different points in their lives. And it can be challenging to get along. Our list represents people in the church who can be difficult.

Here's the overarching big idea I draw from the text: □ Our readiness for the Lord is reflected in our response to difficult people. If I want to know how ready I am—how mature I am in Christ—how honoring I am to his name—I can look at what I am like toward people who can be challenging.

This list starts with □ leaders, which may seem odd. If we did the Sesame Street game, “which one of these is not like the other ones,” most of you would probably pick the leaders. After all, how could a lovable teddy bear or a leader like me be difficult?

Aside from the personal flaws all leaders have, including me, it is good to keep in mind the historical context. Remember, the believers in the Thessalonians church are facing hardship. And whenever a group of people are facing hardship, whenever things are not going as expected, whenever members of a group start thinking, “I didn't sign up for this,” it is common for the crosshairs of criticism to be aimed at leaders.

It's not necessarily that the leaders themselves are being difficult, though they certainly can be. It is that some followers find it difficult to resist the temptation to scapegoat leaders, especially when things go south.

Think of the leader, Moses, centuries before Paul wrote our text. As recorded in the Hebrew Scriptures, God had used Moses to lead the people of Israel out of slavery in Egypt to the Promised Land. On their journey, the Lord miraculously and repeatedly provided what the people needed—the plagues on the Egyptians, the pillar of clouds and fire to lead them, the parting of the Red Sea, the manna from heaven, the tablets engraved by God from Mount Sinai—all affirming that Moses was leading them rightly, according to God’s will.

When they came to the Promised Land, they sent some spies to check it out before conquering it. The report came back that the people occupying the land were incredibly strong, and their cities were large and heavily fortified. Some of the spies concluded that it would be impossible to take the land.

The Israelites were not expecting this. They were afraid. So, they lash out at their leader, Moses. □ Numbers 14, beginning in verse 1 records their response.

ESV Numbers 14:1 Then all the congregation raised a loud cry, and the people wept that night. □ 2 And all the people of Israel grumbled against Moses and Aaron. The whole congregation said to them, “Would that we had died in the land of Egypt! Or would that we had died in this wilderness! □ 3 Why is the LORD bringing us into this land, to fall by the sword? Our wives and our little ones will become a prey. Would it not be better for us to go back to Egypt?” □ 4 And they said to one another, “Let us choose a leader and go back to Egypt.”

The people grumbled against Moses. They wanted to fire him and get a new leader who would make their lives better.

Of course, sometimes leaders lead poorly and deserve to be fired.

But Moses didn't deserve this. Moses experienced what many good leaders experience: blowback from followers whose lives seem hard and not what they were expecting.

Back in Thessalonica, Paul wants to head off such blowback by explaining how hard-working leaders in the church ought to be treated. In □ verses 12 and 13, he says,

ESV 1 Thessalonians 5:12 We ask you, brothers, to respect those who labor among you and are over you in the Lord and admonish you, 13 and to esteem them very highly in love because of their work. . . .

Paul describes the leaders as □ “those who labor among you and are over you in the Lord and admonish you.”

The original Greek word translated “labor” means to work hard.

The phrase “over you in the Lord” indicates a position of spiritual authority within the church.

In modern English, the word “admonish” commonly means to scold, showing disapproval for someone's behavior. But the original Greek word need not involve such scolding. Here, it simply describes giving instructions in regard to belief or behavior.<sup>1</sup>

At Moon Valley, such leaders would certainly include pastors and elders who work hard in positions of spiritual authority, providing guidance concerning belief and behavior.

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<sup>1</sup> Friberg.

Paul gives two commands regarding how to treat such leaders: □ respect them and esteem them very highly in love.

These may be my new favorite verses!

To respect leaders is to appreciate them, to have regard for them, to honor them.

To esteem is roughly synonymous with respect. But Paul turbocharges it with the phrase □ “very highly in love.” The words “very highly” are a rather understated translation of a single Greek word which describes the highest form of comparison imaginable: surpassingly, exceedingly superabundantly, extremely, immeasurably.

The phrase “in love” is a translation of the Greek word, ἀγάπη (agape). In Scripture, this word is connected with action. It is not just something to feel; it is something to express in words and actions.

Let’s close in prayer!

This is not an unqualified respect and esteem. Remember, the leaders in view are those that are working hard, thus Paul says we are to esteem them “because of their work.”

Having spent fifteen years as a leader in business before being a leader in church for nearly thirty years now, I can tell you that, if a church leader is doing his job, he is working harder than you might imagine.

When people learn that I was in business before, some have said, “Must be nice to be out of the rat race,” as if ministry must be easier than business. For me, ministry is definitely not easier.

I remember years ago, one woman in our membership orientation class asked me, “Do you have a regular job during the week?” as if pastoring is just a weekend gig.

I said, “Nope. They gave me a bunch of sermons in seminary, and I just read ’em on Sunday. The rest of the time, I just praise the Lord for getting paid for doing nothin’.”

I didn’t say that.

But I thought it.

The elders who aren’t paid pastors are the real unsung heroes. They have a thankless job. As the spiritual shepherds of the flock, they prayerfully agonize over staff issues, budgetary issues, doctrinal issues, benevolence issues, legal issues, property management issues, insurance issues, interpersonal issues, discipline issues, discipleship issues—all to insure the protection and growth of the flock. All without pay. They are the guys I go to for help. The buck stops with them. I could not be more grateful for their support and hard work. They are deserving of our respect and esteem.

You may be secretly thinking, “I don’t even know who they are.” Which is understandable. They are not showy. □ Here they are on the screen.

Oh, my word, someone has defaced the photos! Now, that is disrespectful!

All the more reason for you to track down these guys and thank them because of their work.

Now, we move on to the antagonists. I see them at the end of □ verse 13, where Paul says,

ESV 1 Thessalonians 5:13 . . . Be at peace among yourselves.

The presence of antagonists is inferred because, without antagonists, there would be no need for this command. A group of perfectly peaceable people don't need to be told to be at peace with one another. So, somebody must be prone to acting up. Maybe everybody.

To be at peace means to put an end to enmity or hostilities. This can be done in one of two ways.

First, we can avoid getting into needless conflicts with antagonists in the first place. As Barney Fife would say, we can nip it in the bud. One way could be to respond gently to an antagonist who is harsh or angry.

□ Proverbs 15:1 says,

ESV Proverbs 15:1 A soft answer turns away wrath, but a harsh word stirs up anger.

This is certainly helpful, but some conflicts are inevitable. And when they do arise, we can be at peace by pursuing reconciliation constructively and quickly.

Of course, reconciliation requires both sides to come together, and we only have control over our own side. Our antagonist may not be conciliatory. But we must make every effort to do our part. In □ Romans 12:18, Paul says,

ESV Romans 12:18 If possible, so far as it depends on you, live peaceably with all.

Is there someone with whom you have an unresolved conflict? What step can you take right now toward reconciliation?

Another group who can be difficult to get along with is the idle. And I don't mean Billy. Paul mentions them in □ verse 14, saying,

ESV 1 Thessalonians 5:14 And we urge you, brothers, admonish the idle, . . .

The idle are most likely those perfectly able to work but unwilling to do so. They are lazy and evade responsibility. In the church in ancient Thessalonica, it is hard to imagine any members who were independently wealthy and didn't have to work to earn their living. By implication, the idle are those who freeload off the generosity of others. You may recall back in 1 Thessalonians 4:11-12, Paul encouraged the idle to get to work.

Here, Paul says to admonish the idle. I have already mentioned that the Greek word for "admonish" need not involve scolding; it can simply describe giving instructions in regard to belief or behavior.

So, how do you admonish the idle? What do you say? Paul gives an example in □ 2 Thessalonians 3:10, warning,

ESV 2 Thessalonians 3:10 . . . If anyone is not willing to work, let him not eat.

That's Paul's way of saying to those perfectly capable of working, "Don't expect a handout; earn your keep."

Another entirely different group that can be tricky are the fainthearted. In □ verse 14, Paul says,

ESV 1 Thessalonians 5:14 . . . encourage the fainthearted . . .

To be fainthearted means to feel overwhelmed, despondent, or discouraged. It is the feeling that you don't have what it takes to carry on. I suspect this net catches many people in our culture today. And in our church.

Paul urges us to encourage the fainthearted. The word “encourage” is a translation of the Greek word παραμυθέομαι (*paramuthéomai*). It is sometimes translated “comfort” or “console.” It carries the basic meaning of coming close to someone's side and speaking in a friendly manner.<sup>2</sup> By our physical proximity and our empathic words, we convey to the fainthearted, “I am with you.”

In John 11, the sisters, Mary and Martha are examples of the fainthearted who needed to be encouraged or consoled. Their brother, Lazarus had become seriously ill, and the sisters had called for Jesus to come and heal him. Jesus did not make it before Lazarus died and was buried. Mary and Martha were despondent over the death of their brother and discouraged by the delay of Jesus. The text says friends came to their home to console them. “Console” is a translation of the same Greek word, παραμυθέομαι (*paramuthéomai*).

Sometimes we feel like we have to have an answer or a solution or just the right words to talk the fainthearted out of feeling so low. But, as the Greek word implies, just coming close to someone's side can be encouraging. Instead of trying to pull someone up out of the pit of despair, sometimes it is more helpful to empathically climb down into the pit and just be with them in it for a while.

Who do you know that may be fainthearted right now? How might you encourage them today?

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<sup>2</sup> Friberg.

Another challenging group Paul mentions is the weak. In □ verse 14, he says,

ESV 1 Thessalonians 5:14 . . . help the weak . . .

The weakness in view most likely relates to the inner life.<sup>3</sup> It can include a weak faith or a lack of maturity or a deficient conscience. In ancient Thessalonica, it most likely includes new, immature believers in the church whose consciences had not yet been trained by the word of God.<sup>4</sup>

The conscience is our inner sense of right and wrong. Elsewhere, Paul describes a weak conscience as one which has not been trained by and aligned with the word of God.

Today, the weak can include those who have been believers for a while, but whose consciences have been trained by years of religious tradition as opposed to biblical truth. And sometimes tradition and truth don't line up.

For example, over the years, some attenders have criticized Moon Valley for the "sins" of not passing the plate, for having a preacher who doesn't hold a Bible on stage, for having a worship leader who wears a hat, for having lights that are too fancy, for doing services remotely during the height of the COVID pandemic, and for not singing "Jesus loves me" more often in our children's program.

While some of these things may be violations of certain religious traditions or personal preferences, they are not violations of Scripture.

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<sup>3</sup> BDAG, Logos sense.

<sup>4</sup> Wilkin, Robert N., "The First Epistle of Paul the Apostle to the Thessalonians," in *The Grace New Testament Commentary*, ed. by Robert N. Wilkin (Denton, TX: Grace Evangelical Society, 2010), 947.

In keeping with Paul’s directive, our challenge is not to berate or belittle such critics, but to help them—to help them to understand and apply the word of God as the highest authority for determining what is right and wrong, not traditions.

Who do you know who may be weak? How can you help them today?

In the last part of □ verse 14, Paul says,

ESV 1 Thessalonians 5:14 . . . be patient with them all.

Grammatically, this refers to back to the idle, the fainthearted, and the weak.

The word “patient” comes from the Greek word, μακροθυμέω (*makrothuméo*). It is a compound word made up of two constituent parts: *makro* meaning “long,” and *thumos*, meaning “temper.” Thus, it is to be long-tempered or long-suffering. It is the quality of self-restraint that does not hastily punish but is merciful in the face of frustratingly slow progress.<sup>5</sup> Don’t lose it, for example, when fainthearted are slow to come out of their doldrums. Don’t vent your irritation when the weak aren’t progressing as quickly as you hoped.

The final group Paul mentions is the evildoers. In □ verse 15, he says,

ESV 1 Thessalonians 5:15 See that no one repays anyone evil for evil, but always seek to do good to one another and to everyone.

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<sup>5</sup> Vine, W. E., Merrill F. Unger, and William White Jr., *Vine’s Complete Expository Dictionary of Old and New Testament Words* (Nashville, TN: T. Nelson, 1996).

The command not to repay evil for evil implies that some evil was done in the first place; ergo, there must be evildoers. And they are in the church.

Our modern conception of evil tends to be monstrous. But here the idea of evil is more mundane. It is simply a wrong that has been done that ends up hurting us. When that happens, Paul says we should not repay the evildoer with some retaliatory evil of our own. Instead, we are to do good to them.

Doing good for those who do not deserve it is called grace. It is what the Lord has extended to all of us.

This is not the only text where Paul urges us to extend grace to those who hurt us. In □ Romans 12:19-21, he says,

ESV Romans 12:19 Beloved, never avenge yourselves, but leave it to the wrath of God, for it is written, “Vengeance is mine, I will repay, says the Lord.” □ 20 To the contrary, “if your enemy is hungry, feed him; if he is thirsty, give him something to drink; for by so doing you will heap burning coals on his head.” 21 Do not be overcome by evil, but overcome evil with good.

The idea here is to forsake vengeance, leaving it to God. Instead of seeking revenge, we are to do good to those who hurt us. The consequent heaping of coals on the head of the evildoer is a reference to Proverbs 25:1-2 and is likely a metaphor for the burning pangs of shame and guilt. When we offer goodness in exchange for hurt, we overcome evil by awakening a sense of shame in the evildoer and encouraging repentance.

Having worked our way through the passage, we can now stand back and review the big idea with a more informed perspective: □ Our

readiness for the Lord is reflected in our response to difficult people. In our text, we just covered some examples of what that entails.

In our culture, it is easy to take this in an entirely individualistic way, as if this is only about getting myself ready by being good toward those other people with issues.

But remember, we **are** the difficult people. At one time or another, we all play these roles. Maybe not all the time, but from time to time, we are the leaders. We are the antagonists. We are the idle. We are the fainthearted. We are the weak. We are the evildoers.

It seems to me the greater emphasis is on readying the body of Christ as a whole. It's about creating a mutually supportive church culture.

And this fits perfectly the biblical picture of the church as the body of Christ.

When we respond to difficult people in these Christlike ways, we are serving them, we are supporting them, we are building them up. And the body of Christ is fortified.

Conversely, when **we** are the difficult people, we want others to serve us in the same way. And when they do, the body of Christ is also fortified.

So, we need each other. Our readiness for the Lord is dependent on other brothers and sisters in the body of Christ.

When I was a newer believer and had been involved in church long enough to encounter some difficult people, I used to think, "Who needs this?"

It took me a while to realize that the answer is, “I do. I need this.”

The difficult people in church are not my invitation to leave; they are my opportunity to learn—to learn how to love and grow in Christlikeness, to graciously support the difficult ones. And to be graciously supported when, inevitably, I am the difficult one.

This is how we grow up as believers in the body of Christ. Our readiness for the Lord is reflected in our response to difficult people.

Let’s pray. Lord, help us to deal with difficult people in the church in a Christlike way that we may honor you and be ready for your return. Amen.