

"God's Flock and His Under-Shepherds" – 1 Thessalonians 5:12-15

With verse 12 of Chapter 5, Paul turns from a doctrinal discussion of Jesus' second coming and begins to give a series of instructions to the church in Thessalonica. Those instructions apply to us as well. The verses we're looking at today speak about Christ's Under-Shepherds.

Jesus is the Great Shepherd. He is building His Church in such a way that the gates of hell will never prevail against it, but He has also appointed certain members of His Church to be the means by which He shepherds His flock. These are His under-shepherds. This passage tells us how we are to respond to those who have the ministry of spiritual leadership. At the same time, it is an exhortation to those who are in spiritual leadership.

Those who place their faith exclusively in the finished work of Jesus Christ comprise the Church universal. This is a subset of the visible church because in this age, there are tares among the wheat. There are those who masquerade as Christians, but they don't really know Jesus. And more importantly, Jesus doesn't know them. When He returns, those folks will hear those terrible words:

"I never knew you; depart from Me, you who practice lawlessness!"
(Matthew 7:23)

I don't want any of you to hear those words. So, I beg you, trust Jesus for your salvation. Don't count on your own righteousness – it's a filthy rag in God's sight. Don't count on your piety, because we all fall short of God's glory. Don't count on your success in this world, because this world is passing away. Don't count on your church membership, the size of your offering, the praise of other human beings or any other thing. Just fall before the cross.

It is a good idea to start every day by praying: "Lord Jesus, have mercy on me, a sinner. I believe You died for my sins. I believe You were raised on the third day so I can have a living relationship with you. I want You to be the Lord of my life."

Salvation is a gift. It cannot be earned; it can only be accepted. Those who accept the gift comprise the Church universal.

Jesus loves His Church. The Church is His bride. He loves His bride and He will make absolutely sure that the gates of Hell will never prevail against her. He has given His Church everything she needs to protect herself and carry out her mission in this world.

As Paul wrote to the Ephesians:

And He Himself gave some to be apostles, some prophets, some evangelists, and some pastors and teachers, for the equipping of the saints for the work of ministry, for the edifying of the body of Christ, till we all come to the unity of the faith and of the knowledge of the Son of God, to a perfect man, to the measure of the stature of the fullness of Christ; that we should no longer be children, tossed to and fro and carried about with every wind of doctrine, by the trickery of men, in the cunning craftiness of deceitful plotting, but, speaking the truth in love, may grow up in all things into Him who is the head—Christ—from whom the whole body, joined and knit together by what every joint supplies, according to the effective working by which every part does its share, causes growth of the body for the edifying of itself in love. (Ephesians 4:11-16)

As members of His Church, you and I need to strive for obedience. We need to seek out His will; We need to submit to His will and do everything we can to sustain the body, to help it grow, and to edify it in love. So, let's look now, at these special instructions Paul gives to Christ's Church.

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. 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. (1 Thessalonians 5:12-15)

The first thing I want you to notice is that Paul is addressing the entire Church here. Verse 12: "And we urge you, brethren ..." Verse 14: "We exhort you, brethren ..." If you are a Christian, you are part of God's own family. That means we are all brothers and sisters in Christ. So, this is written to all of us.

And the first instruction is to recognize those who labor among us.

I want to make something really clear. This doesn't just apply to the pastor, or pastors if you happen to worship in a larger church. He's not just talking about elders, deacons and deaconesses. He's not just talking about the church board. He is talking about everyone who does his or her share of the work and that needs to be all of us. Remember that passage I read from Ephesians chapter 4? We are to be *joined and knit together by what every joint supplies, according to the effective working by which every part does its share*. If you are a Christian, you have a ministry. Really, you do. Every one of you is an indispensable part of the Church. We all need to encourage one another, exhort one another, pray for one another, hold one another accountable.

There is so much ministry that takes place here at Canyon Community Church and I only do a fraction of it. I see some of it, but not all of it: that phone call or a visit to see if someone is okay, an extra hundred dollars given to help someone in need, lending a hand for a church project or clean-up day. I could go on and on. Did you know that someone picks up the bulletins that are left in the pews after Sunday worship? (I know who did it last week. It is so tempting to embarrass her right now, but I'll resist.) As we looked at our 2016 financial statement last week at the congregational meeting, it is clear that many of you have been incredibly faithful in the ministry of giving. Giving to the work of the Church is a ministry.

Many of the vital ministries that take place here are somewhat hidden. You might think nobody notices what you are doing and sometimes, it can be discouraging to work at something when it seems like nobody notices. But Jesus notices. And we all need to do our best to notice and recognize and thank all those who labor among us.

But Paul is speaking especially of those who have been given the ministry of spiritual oversight. These are those who ...

... are over you in the Lord and admonish you ... (1 Thessalonians 5:12-13)

As your pastor, I suppose I do fall into this category but it's not just me. This certainly would include our elders, deaconesses, deacons. We have elders here, but did you know that not all of our elders serve on the Church Board? This is not an organizational position. These are the spiritually mature individuals who serve as examples to others. Those who teach are included because they certainly exercise spiritual oversight over their students.

Understand, though, the Biblical model for spiritual leaders stands in stark contrast to leadership in the secular world. Jesus was very direct about this:

But Jesus called them to Himself and said, "You know that the rulers of the Gentiles lord it over them, and those who are great exercise authority over them. Yet it shall not be so among you; but whoever desires to become great among you, let him be your servant. (Matthew 20:25-26)

We call it servant-leadership. An effective leader in the Church must understand this and take the attitude of a servant. Humility is essential, but so is a sense of responsibility because spiritual leadership is a stewardship. When Paul was on his way to Jerusalem, he sent for the elders in the Ephesian church and he told them this:

Therefore take heed to yourselves and to all the flock, among which the Holy Spirit has made you overseers, to shepherd the church of God which He purchased with His own blood. (Acts 20:28)

You see, this church doesn't belong to the pastor. This isn't my church. It's not your church either. This church belongs to Jesus. He is the Great Shepherd. I am just an under-shepherd as is everyone who is called to spiritual leadership in the Church. Peter said exactly the same thing:

Shepherd the flock of God which is among you, serving as overseers, not by compulsion but willingly, not for dishonest gain but eagerly; nor as being lords over those entrusted to you, but being examples to the flock; (1 Peter 5:2-3)

If you are called to spiritual leadership, you are not to be a despot. You are not to be a petty dictator. You are to be an example. You are to lead the flock, not drive the flock.

But as for the rest of us, Paul tells us that we are to ...

... esteem them very highly in love for their work's sake. (1 Thessalonians 5:13)

You know, that happens here. Kris and I have been so blessed by this congregation! I am so thankful that I have not had to deal with some of the awful, political manipulation that happens in some church bodies. I've prayed with pastors whose hearts are broken by the dysfunction and division they experience in their congregations, where someone gets an agenda, and they feel like they have to go after the pastor, or one of the elders, or the church board and there is whispering, backbiting, gossip and one group or another tries to divide the congregation so they can gain more influence. That sort of behavior has no place among the flock of Christ!

That doesn't mean that we shouldn't be held accountable. As your pastor, I must be held accountable. My job is to equip the saints for the work of ministry (Ephesians 4:11-12) and God left explicit instructions as to how I am to accomplish it. I am to ...

Preach the word! Be ready in season and out of season. Convince, rebuke, exhort, with all longsuffering and teaching. (2 Timothy 4:2)

Village missions tells every pastor that they are to preach the word and love the people and I need to be held accountable to that standard ... in love, of course.

Sometimes, you know, the going can get a little tough. So, I need your support, your prayers, your love. So does Scott, as he serves as the board chairman. So do all the members of the board. So do all our teachers.

Thank you all so much for your prayers and your encouragement.

One thing is for sure, Jesus wants His Church to be unified. He wants us to be one and He prayed for it:

*"I do not pray for these alone, but also for those who will believe in Me through their word; **that they all may be one**, as You, Father, are in Me, and I in You; that they also may be one in Us, that the world may believe that You sent Me. (John 17:20-21)*

Paul's admonishment at the end of verse 13 comes directly from the heart of Jesus.

Be at peace among yourselves. (1 Thessalonians 5:13)

The only way we can really be at peace is if we are all following the same agenda. It cannot be my agenda and it can't be your agenda. It has to be God's agenda. That's why it is so important to be people of the Book. This Bible contains God's perfect will. It is His Book of instructions. As a church, we must get our marching orders from the Bible. We need to identify those essential doctrines that God wrote down for us and we need to agree that we as a corporate body of believers, are willing to die for those essential doctrines, those teachings about God that are absolutely crystal clear in scripture those doctrines that directly impact your salvation. We must not compromise on those core doctrines.

If we are to be a church at peace, we need to hold one another accountable. So, to that end, we need to

... warn those who are unruly (1 Thessalonians 5:14)

You know, some people just seem to thrive on controversy. They love arguments. They will insist that up is down just to keep the conversation going. We need to warn those folks. It's one of the reasons I keep trying to teach the doctrinal target. I want folks to ask themselves, is that point of doctrinal theory worth dividing the church over? Most of the time it's not. The essential doctrines are clearly taught in the Bible, so there should be no controversy there. But for those doctrines that are not quite essential, we can agree to disagree. For example, I can have Christian fellowship with someone who believes in a pre-tribulation rapture even though I don't think that viewpoint is well-supported by scripture. We don't want to be unruly over that because one of the seven things God really hates is ...

... one who sows discord among brethren. (Proverbs 6:19)

Another thing we need to do to maintain a church at peace is to ...

... comfort the fainthearted, (1 Thessalonians 5:14)

This could include all sorts of folks. Maybe someone is struggles with their own assurance of salvation and their wondering "How do I know I'm really saved?" Or perhaps, a person is struggling with the death of a loved one, a personal tragedy. There are many things that become obstacles to faith. We need to come along side those brothers and sisters. We need to be able to show from the Bible how Jesus still loves them and direct them to the sure promises of God.

Then we must ...

... uphold the weak ... (1 Thessalonians 5:14)

We all have certain sins we struggle against, don't we? We all have our weaknesses. We need to lift one another up in prayer. We are not to stand in judgment, pointing our fingers at the sins you struggle with while turning a blind eye to our own transgressions. And we need to understand that it is not at all inappropriate to ask a brother or sister to pray specifically for something we are struggling with. But as we do, we must be very careful to hold

sensitive information with strict confidence. Our prayer requests must never become an occasion to gossip.

In all of these things we need to ...

... be patient with all. (1 Thessalonians 5:14)

It really is important to be patient with one another. The Holy Spirit is working, but He's not done yet. We are all a work in progress.

Verse 15 sums it all up:

See that no one renders evil for evil to anyone, but always pursue what is good both for yourselves and for all. (1 Thessalonians 5:15)

Our job as Christians is to edify the Church, to build it up, to help perfect it. So, with God's help, we need to strive to be other-centered and not self-centered. Paul said exactly the same thing to the Philippians:

Let nothing be done through selfish ambition or conceit, but in lowliness of mind let each esteem others better than himself. Let each of you look out not only for his own interests, but also for the interests of others. (Philippians 2:3-4)

Those are our marching orders. That is Jesus' desire for His Church. It is how He wants His flock to behave. It is how He wants His under-shepherds to lead. Let us be faithful to that calling!