

June 10, 2001 by Steve Brandon



Relationships with Spiritual Leaders

1 Thessalonians 5:12-13

1. The Work of Spiritual Leaders (5:12b, 13b)

2. Your Response to Spiritual Leaders (5:12a, 13a)

As you all know, we have been marching through the book of 1 Thessalonians. This happens to be the 24th sermon I have delivered on this great epistle of the apostle Paul. (Calvin delivered 46 sermons, so I don't feel as if my pace has been too slow).

May I tell you all that it has been a joy for me to study this letter in such depth. Its value to me has already become apparent. I trust that over the years, its value will extend to you all as well. Its value will not merely be the opportunity to hear the Bible explained, but it is also an opportunity for you to build an exegetical mind.

My goal in preaching the Bible verse by verse in the manner I have is that you might become more and more comfortable understanding the Bible for yourself. My goal is to come each week and make the passage clear, so that you aren't trusting Steve Brandon for his interpretation, but that you can see that I am explaining to you the very words of Scripture. I remember John MacArthur talking about the long-term fruit of continuous exposition in the life of the church. Those who sit under it begin to approach the Bible within the context of the scriptural writers and can take the scriptures into their own hands.

Additionally, I also see the value of preaching slowly through books like this, particularly when my counsel is sought - I trust that as the years go by, my Biblical knowledge and wisdom will only increase as I have the opportunity to continue to step through the pages of Scripture.

Tonight, once again, we begin a new section in this epistle. This again, is marked off clearly in the Greek text using the particle, *de* (de). The other sections began in 4:1; 4:9; 4:13; 5:1. The last will begin in 5:23.

Paul has just finished instructing the church of the Thessalonians in matters pertaining to the return of Jesus Christ. But now, He is turning his attention to life in the church - how it is that true believers in the Lord Jesus Christ ought to act. As such, I have entitled this section (5:12-22), "Life in the church."

Now, this section breaks down quite nicely:

In verses 12,13, Paul deals with how the people of the church ought to relate to the leaders of the church.

In verses 14,15, Paul deals with how the people of the church ought to relate to each other.

In verses 16-22, Paul deals with how the people of the church ought to relate to God.

Tonight, we will simply look at the first two verses of this section, which deal with the relationship that exists between the leaders of the church and the people of the church. I have entitled this first section we will look at tonight, "Relationships with Spiritual Leaders."

Now, before we get into this section, let me first say that it is a very difficult section for me to preach on tonight. Its difficulty doesn't lie in understanding its message (for, in practice, it is quite easy to understand). It is difficult because I am the one preaching it.

It is difficult, because the passage tells you (as a people) how to respond to me (as one of your leaders). There are basically two requests, which Paul gave. The first is found in verse 12, "that you appreciate [your spiritual leaders]." The second is found in verse 13, "that you esteem them very highly in love."

The NASB has two verbs which describe how you ought to relate to your spiritual leaders: "appreciate" and "esteem" them. The NIV uses slightly different words. It says, "respect" and "hold in high regard." The KJV and ASV say, "know" and "esteem." The NKJV translates these as, "recognize" and "esteem" I quote all of these so that you get a flavor of what Paul is addressing.

So, here I am tonight, the message to you, from the word of God is this: "You need to appreciate and esteem ME as one of your spiritual leaders."

Perhaps it would be better if we had somebody else come and speak to us pertaining to this passage. It would be far easier for me to have somebody from outside our group to come and make these statements to us this evening. That is what Paul did. When Paul wrote, he didn't tell the Thessalonians to appreciate and esteem him, but rather, he was an outside source telling the Thessalonians to appreciate and esteem their spiritual leaders.

Beloved, it is very difficult for me to command you all to do these things, because it seems like a self-serving statement and my attitude and heart before you all is NOT a self-serving attitude. I would love for you to appreciate and esteem me. However, the path to this type of relationship with me isn't by me commanding you to do this, but rather by earning your love and respect. (See what is meant by "because of

their work" below).

I am glad to report that I don't believe that this is an issue with any of you. I have no bone to pick with any of you because you don't appreciate and esteem me. In fact, I feel as if you all have responded appropriately toward me over the several years I have been coming to Rockford.

Additionally, this passage is difficult for me to teach because of the abuse that passages like this have caused. Many church leaders have taken verses like this and have arrogantly demanded such behavior from the people under them that they have actually alienated them and estranged them from the church.

Whether cults or highly-legalistic churches, there are many leaders out there who have abused their authority.

In fact, in preparing for this sermon, I found more than forty books that deal with this topic of leaders abusing the people in the church. It is a wide-spread problem today. There are many people who can easily come to passages like this and inflict upon people an oppression that binds them to the leadership of a particular church. They are controlled, manipulated, and intimidated into staying within their church.

This isn't a new phenomenon. It isn't as if we are here in the 21st century and we have just discovered this way of destroying the church of Jesus Christ. Even churches that at one time had godly leadership ... You remember when Paul was saying farewell to the Ephesian elders in Acts 20:29-30? He told them, "After my departure savage wolves will come in among you, not sparing the flock; and from among your own selves [i.e. among the elders] men will arise, speaking perverse things, to draw away the disciples after them."

You remember in Galatians, chapter 1, Paul says that some came into their churches and began to preach a different and thus, false gospel (1:6). Paul says that even if he would return and speak a different gospel, Paul, himself should not be followed, but rather accursed (1:8). Later, in that same epistle, Paul says that those who have preached another gospel, "seek you, not commendably, but they wish to shut you out, in order that you may seek them" (4:17).

In 1 Corinthians, (chapters 1-4) Paul spoke against the personality cults - those who were following men, rather than following Christ. Additionally, Jesus spoke against the Pharisees, who did the same thing: "Woe to you, scribes and Pharisees, hypocrites, because you travel about on sea and land to make one proselyte; and when he becomes one, you make him twice as much a son of hell as yourselves" (Matt. 23:15).

That being said, the Bible still calls for a response from spiritual followers to their spiritual leaders. And this response is one of appreciation and esteem. But notice, the grounds upon which their appreciation and esteem must rest. Look at the end of verse 13, "... appreciate ... and ... esteem them very highly in love because of their work."

I believe that this is the key to it all: "because of their work."

Notice how these church leaders are described in verse 12. "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."

This is "their work" - Their labor, their oversight, their instruction. Notice that Paul doesn't tell those in Thessalonica to appreciate and esteem those who have the title of "elder," but rather, those who are laboring for you. It is not those with the title, but those with the function, who are to be appreciated and esteemed. (Some have postulated that the church in Thessalonica didn't yet have formal elders in place, since the church was so young. Which would account for Paul describing these leaders by their work, rather than their title.)

The great thing about Paul's admonition, here in this context, is that he doesn't request those in the church to blindly appreciate and esteem those in spiritual leadership, merely because of their position. Rather, those in spiritual leadership, who properly labor in the ministry, will earn the respect and esteem of those allotted to their charge. Thus, in this passage, the responsibility for those in the church to give high regard to those leading them is in response to the work that is done on their behalf.

The employer pays his employee, not simply out of good will, but out of labor rendered. So also, those in the church, don't give esteem and appreciation out of good will, but out of the services rendered for the cause of the gospel of Jesus Christ. The one drives the other. The work drives the respect.

With that in mind, I would like for us to look at the work of those in spiritual leadership and the response that is required from those under their direction. Or, if you prefer, we look tonight at ...

1. The Work of Spiritual Leaders (5:12b, 13b). Then ...
2. Your Response to Spiritual Leaders (5:12a, 13a)

1. The Work of Spiritual Leaders (5:12b, 13b).

Indeed, the ministry is a labor. The ministry is not an easy chair. The reputation of many clergy is that they are invisible for 6 days and incompressible on Sunday. Too often, I am afraid, people have the perception of the ministry as something that is a cushy job. I think that the reputation has been rightly brought on by some who have been rightfully lazy and inactive in their "ministry."

But, Paul gives a three-fold description of those who are in Spiritual Leadership, which ought to wipe away any thoughts of this.

1. They labor
2. They oversee
3. They instruct

If you would attempt to systematize these descriptions, the first characteristic is more of a general term (i.e. they labor), while the others are more specific in their application (i.e. their particular tasks). By the way, these three descriptions of the ministry are not exhaustive, they merely give a flavor of what those in spiritual leadership do.

For this very reason, I am excited and committed to continuous exposition of the Scriptures: we will speak of the things of God in the perfect balance in which God has given it. If this is what God emphasized with respect to spiritual leaders, this is what we will emphasize.

So, with that in mind, let us look at three activities of the work of those in spiritual leadership.

1. Spiritual Leaders Labor

Paul says that Spiritual leaders ought to "labor." The NASB adds that they labor "diligently." This is because the word translated "labor" here is often understood to mean, "labor to the point of fatigue."

For such type of labor, Paul set the model for the Thessalonians. You remember in how he spoke in 2:9 of "his labor [kopoV] and hardship, who working night and day so as not to be a burden to any of you, we proclaimed to you the gospel of God." Particularly, here, Paul was employed in some type of secular job (perhaps he was plying his trade of making tents) and at all other opportunities, he was preaching the gospel.

Even when Paul wrote second Thessalonians, he referred to his example before them. "For you yourselves know how you ought to follow our example, because we did not act in an undisciplined manner among you, nor did we eat anyone's bread without paying for it, but with labor and hardship we kept working night and day so that we might not be a burden to any of you; not because we do not have the right to do this, but in order to offer ourselves as a model for you, that you might follow our example" (2 Thess. 3:7-9).

Those in spiritual leadership ought to lead by example. They ought to set the pace. They ought to set the standard, so that others will see how to follow. In fact, their example needs to be the best example. J. Oswald Sanders brought this out when he said, "No one need aspire to leadership in the work of God who is not prepared to pay a price greater than his contemporaries and colleagues are willing to pay. True leadership exacts a heavy toll on the whole man, and the more effective the leadership is, the higher the price to be paid" (Spiritual Leadership, p. 141).

In the past three weeks, we have visited three churches. Did you know that in two of them, I spoke with people of the congregation who told me how hard their pastors worked? May that be true of my ministry as well.

How can a spiritual leader have any integrity in admonishing people to work and labor, when he, himself, is idle and lazy? It just won't work. A spiritual leader, must be one who labors in his work. The ministry is no place for lazy, undisciplined people.

Al Martin has written, "Let your people suspect you of laziness, and though you may have an occasional all-night prayer-meeting to plead for pulpit power, it will not be your experience. Let your people suspect you of laziness, and the respect that is a part of pulpit power will be gone" (What is Wrong with Preaching Today?, pp. 15,16)

The actual work and labor of the ministry is shepherding the church. The task of ministry is to "shepherd the church of God." This involves ...

1. Overseeing the flock

- directing those in the church.
- guiding them.
- managing the people of the church.
- administrating the flock.

2. Guarding the flock

- against cults
- against rebellions and disunity
- against heresy

3. Feeding the flock

- teaching
 - exhorting
 - discipling
- (Much time in prayer and in the word is needed to prepare for this).

4. Building up the flock

- encouragement (individual and corporate)
- training
- reproducing themselves (building the church at large)

This list is by no means exhaustive. But it gives you simply a small flavor of what there is to do in spiritual leadership - with respect to the labor that is to be done. I remember one man saying that the ministry is sort of like that guy at the circus who spins plates on poles - you have to keep all of the plates spinning.

2. Spiritual Leaders Oversee

The text says, "they have charge over you." (verse 12) Literally, this word means "to stand before, put before, set over" As a result, it means, "to preside, rule, govern, direct, maintain."

The best place to understand this word is how it is used in 1 Timothy 3, where it talks about the overseers and the deacons, who are called to "manage their households" - "keeping their children under control with all dignity." (3:4,5,12). The argument goes something like this. If they cannot manage, direct, govern, rule their own house, with their own children, then how will they be able to manage, direct, govern, and rule the church of God?

I think that the picture here with the church is an excellent one.

The home is a place that ought to be filled with harmony, happiness, and good will. The children of the home ought to enjoy being in the home. The wife of the home ought to enjoy her submission to her husband, because of her respect for him. It comes about -- not through harsh intimidation and dictatorial rule of the father, but through the loving service of dad, who will genuinely love and serve his children and his wife.

So, likewise the spiritual leader is given the responsibility of managing, directing, governing, and ruling the church with the purpose that those in the church would be filled with harmony, happiness, and good will. The church is to be an enjoyable place for the people of God. The church will be enjoyable place when it is lead properly and the people of the church respond properly.

Spiritual leaders aren't to be dictators. But, spiritual leaders are to have authority, just as a father has authority over his house. Spiritual leaders aren't to lead the church like the father in the movie, "The Sound of Music." In that movie, the father was a military man who had each of his children trained to obey with the use of a whistle. He would whistle and the children would obey.

Rather, Jesus spoke to how this leadership should be executed.

"You know that those who are recognized as rulers of the Gentiles lord it over them; and their great men exercise authority over them. But it is not so among you, but whoever wishes to become great among you shall be your servant; and whoever wishes 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" (Mark 10:42-45).

Spiritual leadership is not for the purpose of "lording it over" the people. Jesus says that spiritual leadership is better called, "servant leadership," which is exactly what Peter said.

"Therefore, I exhort the elders among you, as [your] fellow elder and witness of the sufferings of Christ, and a partaker also of the glory that is to be revealed, shepherd the flock of God among you, exercising oversight not under compulsion, but voluntarily, according to [the will of] God; and not for sordid gain, but with eagerness; nor yet as lording it over those allotted to your charge, but proving to be examples to the flock" (1 Peter 5:1-3).

3. Spiritual Leaders Instruct

That is, spiritual leaders "give instruction." More accurately, they "admonish" you.

This activity deals mostly with the corrective ministry of those in spiritual leadership. This word is also used in 5:14, "We urge you, brethren, admonish the unruly." I don't know why the NAS used different words here to translate this word. Even the other major translations do the same thing (NIV, KJV, NKJV), but they use different words. They all use "admonish" in verse 12, but "warn" in verse 14.

Perhaps the difference here is that they are in a different context. Verse 12 is dealing with the general teaching ministry, while verse 14 deals with the particular application to one individual. Paul summarized his entire teaching ministry using this word, "Remember that night and day for a period of three years I did not cease to admonish each one with tears" (Acts 20:31).

At any rate, the idea here is the "correcting" ministry of the leaders of the church. It is the ministry of directing people to think properly about matters of life. It is the ministry of correcting people and steering them in a life full of godliness. Literally, this word means, "to set in the mind."

It involves the teaching of others. Paul gives us a great picture in Colossians 1:28, "And we proclaim Him, admonishing every man and teaching every man with all wisdom, that we may present every man complete in Christ."

This admonishment ought to take place publicly and privately. This addresses the speech of the pastor at all times. In the pulpit to all and in the homes to individuals.

2. Your Response to Spiritual Leaders (5:12a, 13a)

Your response is found in verse 12a and 13a: "we request of you, brethren, that you appreciate [your spiritual leaders] ... [and] ... that you esteem them very highly in love."

Let me remind you again, it is their labor that earns this respect. I heard a pastor this week describe the congregation where John Newton was pastor. It was said that he was not merely respected, but, he was loved and cherished. This is what pastors ought to be for their people - loved and cherished.

Look at the text: "esteem them very highly in love." This comes about when the spiritual leaders convince the people of their love for them. The shepherd of the field exists for the sheep. The sheep don't exist for the shepherd. Pastors are here for the people, not the people for the pastors. Any man in spiritual leadership for selfish gain has corrupted the office and is not a true spiritual leader (1 Pet. 5:2 - "not for sordid gain.")

A great picture of wrongfully motivated shepherds is found in Ezekiel 34:1-10:

1. Then the word of the LORD came to me saying,
- 2 "Son of man, prophesy against the shepherds of Israel. Prophesy and say to those shepherds, 'Thus says the Lord GOD, "Woe, shepherds of Israel who have been feeding themselves! Should not the shepherds feed the flock?"
- 3 "You eat the fat and clothe yourselves with the wool, you slaughter the fat [sheep] without feeding the flock.
- 4 "Those who are sickly you have not strengthened, the diseased you have not healed, the broken you have not bound up, the scattered you have not brought back, nor have you sought for the lost; but with force and with severity you have dominated them.
- 5 "And they were scattered for lack of a shepherd, and they became food for every beast of the field and were scattered.
- 6 "My flock wandered through all the mountains and on every high hill, and My flock was scattered over all the surface of the earth; and there was no one to search or seek [for them.]""
7. Therefore, you shepherds, hear the word of the LORD:
- 8 "As I live," declares the Lord GOD, "surely because My flock has become a prey, My flock has even become food for all the beasts of the field for lack of a shepherd, and My shepherds did not search for My flock, but [rather] the shepherds fed themselves and did not feed My flock;
- 9 therefore, you shepherds, hear the word of the LORD:
- 10 "Thus says the Lord GOD, "Behold, I am against the shepherds, and I shall demand My sheep from them and make them cease from feeding sheep. So the shepherds will not feed themselves anymore, but I shall deliver My flock from their mouth, that they may not be food for them.""

Spiritual leaders will give an account to God for their sheep. "Obey your leaders, and submit to them; for they keep watch over your souls, as those who will give an account. Let them do this with joy and not with grief, for this would be unprofitable for you" (Heb. 13:17). This sort of "unconditional respect" sounds scary for us self-ruling Americans. As John Piper said, "Americans (as most humans) have a love affair with individualism and do not like being told to submit to anyone" (from a sermon entitled, "Obey Your Joyful Leaders," delivered October 5, 1997 at Bethlehem Baptist Church).

But, we also need to see spiritual leaders as appointed to us by God. If we sincerely take the qualifications for overseers seriously and are convinced that those in spiritual leadership are not only qualified, but also approved of by God, several things should follow ...

1. Their counsel and direction ought to be considered strongly. If God ordains these men to such a work, these men ought to be sought. Unfortunately, these men are often sought for counsel only as a last resort, or when things are really bad.
2. They should be trusted. Men of this sort of character ought to be trusted counselors.
3. They should be treated like parents. Children don't choose their parents and yet, God has set them over the children for the good of the children.

May God be merciful to Rock Valley Bible Church and provide for those in spiritual leadership, who earn their right to be recognized and esteemed for their great work.

This sermon was delivered to Rock Valley Bible Church on June 10, 2001 by Steve Brandon.
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