

1 Thessalonians 5:12-15 (1984 NIV)

Building Up the Church

Introduction

David Aikman, formerly of *Time* magazine, spent a fascinating three months in 2002 to research the state of Christianity in China.

And most startling of all was Chinese President Jiang Zemin's response when asked by David Aikman what one thing he wished he could secure for China's future? His response shocked Aikman and much of the world when he replied—"I would like for my country to become a Christian nation."

When asked why, Jiang Zemin explained how a panel of Chinese scholars had spent twenty years studying why China continually lagged behind the West in science, industry, and culture. After considering every possible explanation, they concluded that it was the Christian heritage of the West that had allowed it to reach such heights.

However, Aikman cautioned that this did not mean that the president was himself a Christian. Rather, Aikman surmised that Jiang had said this on purely utilitarian grounds—he believed that Christians made good citizens, and so a country of Christians would make a great country.

(<https://publications.morningstarministries.org/word-for-the-week/prepared-times-part-33>)

For the Christian faith to be impactful, it must be visible. For it to be visible, it must be practiced by Christians in daily life. And one place to practice our Christian faith so that it can impact the world is to practice in the church itself—in our life together as Christians, in our building up of the Body of Jesus Christ.

Our text today is a very practical, "rubber-meets-the-road" kind of passage. It deals with how the people of the church are to live out their life together, how they are to build up the Body of Jesus Christ. This is how Paul ends his 1st letter to the Thessalonians—i.e. asking them to build up one another because the world is already making it very difficult for them to live as Christians out there. Paul says to them, "The world wants to tear you down. Now, you come together and build up one another."

When we build up one another, we build up the church to be a spiritual home of comfort and encouragement.

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Paul exhorts us to heed some responsibilities that will help in building up one another so that the church can be a spiritual home of comfort and encouragement.

I. Responsibilities of leaders and those they lead (vv. 12-13)

¹² Now we ask you, brothers, to respect those who work hard among you, who are over you in the Lord and who admonish you.

¹³ Hold them in the highest regard in love because of their work. Live in peace with each other.

Paul begins with the church leaders. Please don't restrict church leaders to only the pastors, or elders, or ministry leaders. They apply to anyone who has a leadership role/influence in church.

Paul first speaks of three things about leaders in v. 12:

- They work hard among you.
- They are over you in the Lord.
- They admonish you.

Leaders work hard not because they work better or more than others. This hard work has to do with the nature of the task of leadership. They have to make difficult decisions, speak the truth not in anger but in love, and act boldly in faith.

In the context of the Thessalonian church (even today), their leaders are people who come from the congregation, who work among the congregation, who stand over the congregation. They are one of them, yet they have been given authority over them. However, this standing over is not lording over.

Paul also lays down the responsibilities of people towards their leaders:

- Respect them (v. 12).
- Hold them in high regard (v. 13b).
- Live at peace with them (v. 13b).

The word “respect” literally means to “know” your leaders. It means to recognize them for who they are. To “regard” means to hold in esteem. Living at peace means you don't fight them or speak ill of them as if they are your enemies even if you disagree with them.

Let's beware that the devil can turn these disagreements into malicious criticisms. More churches have been hurt by such malicious words than by the words of doctrinal heresies.

Paul was saying to the Thessalonians, "You don't have to agree with the leaders on everything, but you do have to respect, esteem, and live at peace with them."

Leaders and those they lead honour God when they show mutual concern for each other.

In a book called *The Grace Awakening*, Chuck Swindoll tells about a missionary family who left their work because of condemnation from other missionaries. What was the theological disagreement over? Peanut butter.

The mission field where they went did not have access to peanut butter. So, that particular family arranged for a friend to send them peanut butter from the States every now and then. The problem was that the other missionaries considered it a mark of their true spirituality that they did without peanut butter. They explained, "We believe that since peanut butter is not available here, we should give it up for the cause of Christ."

Well, the new family disagreed. And the end result was that they were pushed out of that mission.

Christians talk with so much passion about reaching out to the lost and showing concern for their salvation. Yet they can find it so hard to reach out to one another and showing mutual concern. It can happen in the far away mission field. It can happen in the church as well.

(<https://www.sermoncentral.com/sermon-illustrations/68927/in-a-book-called-the-grace-awakening-chuck-by-mark-eberly>)

But we are reminded today that church leaders and those they lead honour God when they show mutual concern for each other.

God has given church leaders authority in the church. But it is a different kind of authority than that exercised by worldly lords. How does God expect church leaders to lead rather than lord over their flock?

- Love the flock—show them compassion.
- Lead by example—model obedience rather than demand it.
- Know that the flock belongs to God—tell them to give their allegiance to God.

- Care more for welfare of others (i.e. the flock) than for personal benefit/profit—serve people rather than use people.
- Regard the flock more important than themselves—listen first to their pain before you speak of your passion.
- Build up the flock to do God’s will—edify and equip them to serve God’s agenda, not human agenda.

This is how church leaders are to lead rather than lord over their flock.

Now on the part of the flock, how do they in turn respect, esteem and live at peace with their leaders? Some suggestions:

- One, contend for scriptural truths and not for your own preferences. If you think that something is wrong in the church, then ask, “Does the Bible plainly say that this is wrong or is this merely something that I personally do not like or agree with?” Many church problems arise because of the attempt to exalt personal preference to the place of Scripture.
- Two, guard your heart and attitude. Speak the truth in love. Do it with a cool head and a warm heart, not a cold heart and a hot head! When we attempt to correct others we must guard our own hearts and do so in the spirit of gentleness. The long-term consequences will reveal the secrets of the heart. E.g. those who are merely striving for their own self-will in a carnal manner usually hop from church to church, causing trouble everywhere they go and repeating their bad experience all over again.
- Three, don’t let a church problem to poison your attitude towards the church overall. It is not uncommon that when you discover a serious and legitimate church problem, you gradually become embittered against the church overall. Eventually you see nothing but problems and issues. Everything is wrong. You and I must be careful not to allow the devil to do this in our lives. You and I must resist by NOT totally focussing on the bad things and completely ignoring the good ones.
- Four, keep your eyes focused on Christ rather than on men. Some believers are said to carry permanent “spiritual scars” because of being in churches that are led by leaders who abuse their authority. Others leave church altogether and use this as their excuse. The problem in such cases is that such folks have their eyes and their trust more on men than on Jesus Christ. Leaders are imperfect even at their best. They make mistakes. They sin. They can be selfish, partial, and even political.
- Five, don’t let anything drive you away from the Church of Jesus Christ. There are occasions when we are forced to leave a certain

church over doctrinal and moral issues. But we must not allow anything to keep us out of the Church of Jesus Christ altogether. It is easy to criticize a church, but we need to ask, “If the whole church were like me, what would the church be?” Some people criticize everything but they do not add anything of significance on the positive side. I think it’s not a sin to leave a church, but it is a sin to stay and sow discord in the Body of Jesus Christ. If you have to leave, do it in a spirit of peace and goodwill. This will help you to leave in a position of strength and not weakness—i.e. when the Lord leads you to settle into another church, you will do your best to be a blessing in your new setting, and not let your bad history to repeat itself.

When we build up one another, we build up the church to be a spiritual home of comfort and encouragement.

Paul exhorts us to heed a 2nd set of responsibilities.

II. Responsibilities to one another in body life (vv. 14-15)

¹⁴ And we urge you, brothers, warn those who are idle, encourage the timid, help the weak, be patient with everyone.

¹⁵ Make sure that nobody pays back wrong for wrong, but always try to be kind to each other and to everyone else.

Paul here gives a number of exhortations to challenge Christians to holy living in their body life.

- One, warn the idle (v. 14a). Literally, it means “straighten out the cantankerous”. The word “idle” is a military expression that means to break ranks, to get out of line. It refers to those undisciplined and irresponsible soldiers who are idle because they are out of position.

Paul says we are to “warn” them. A better word is “admonish”. This is an exceedingly strong word. It literally means to “put into the mind”. Instead of joining the grumbling and murmuring, Paul says we are to talk some sense into those who have become unruly.

- Two, encourage the timid (v. 14b). If the first way is severe, this one is the opposite. Not everyone is unruly. Many are fainthearted. They are overwhelmed by stress and burdened with problems. They are discouraged. It especially includes those who shrink before persecution; who fall under great temptation; who face trials at home, at work, at school; who find the Christian life one continual struggle.

Paul says we are to “encourage” them. We are to put courage into them.

- Three, help the weak (v. 14c). There is a third group of people in the church. Paul calls them “the weak”. It simply means those without strength. These are people who are a step beyond being fainthearted. They are completely drained and empty. They are the ones who are exhausted, burned out, and worn out. They cannot go on anymore and any longer on their own.

Paul says to “help” them. It is a very intimate term. It means to cling to someone. Paul says, “Don’t let the weak drop. Hold them tight. Don’t let them drift away. Pick them up and carry them along.”

- Four, be patient with everyone (v. 14d). Paul adds this lest anyone thinks that ministry to people is easy. It’s the last phrase in v. 14—“Be patient with everyone”. The word “patient” means to be long-tempered. It has the idea of being tough and durable under pressure. Be slow to anger, slow to give up. Don’t lose your patience as you help people.

Patience is key because there are two common problems we face whenever we try to help people:

- Many people are slow to respond.
- Some others will refuse our help altogether.

When they are slow to respond, we tend to get discouraged. When they refuse our help, we tend to get disgusted.

If you don’t care and never get involved with people, this doesn’t apply to you. And if you only hang around the beautiful, clean, healthy, you won’t need much patience. But if we get involved with people of all shapes and sizes, patience is perhaps our greatest need.

- Five, repay wrong with kindness (v. 15). Paul tells the Thessalonians, “You will wrong one another from time to time. But don’t pay back wrong for wrong. Rather, repay wrong with kindness.” As God’s church, believers practice holy living as a witness to the world by repaying wrong with kindness to one another. Such kindness is often in the form of forgiveness. An unforgiven wrong will always have a hold on us in some ways. But if we forgive, we are free. The world says, “The best way to rid an enemy is to kill him.” Christ says in Matt. 5:44, “But I tell you, love your enemies and pray for those who persecute you ...” In essence, Jesus Christ is teaching us this—“The best way to rid an enemy is not to kill him, but to make him your friend.” When we repay evil with kindness, we are demonstrating our faith in God defeating Satan; in good winning over evil.

Indeed, the church is God's spiritual classroom where He is using us to smoothen the rough edges of one another.

When I was a student at the Singapore Bible College (SBC), I had many classmates from other countries. I had to learn to relate with and understand people from different cultures.

I must admit that it was not easy at first. E.g. there was this classmate from a rather wealthy family. She came from a country where the ways of government were supposed to be corrupt.

In one class, she was sharing how her family business had two sets of books—one for taxation purpose and the other for keeping track of the real status of the business. When she shared that, I was greatly disturbed. My highly sanitized Singaporean thinking cried out, "How can you do such a dishonest thing!" Of course, I am not from a country where taxpayers' money often finds its way into the pockets of some dishonest government officials.

There were also two students from the same country in my class—a man and a lady. I noticed that whenever an important test or exam was near at hand, the lady would make some very nice food/cookies and gave them to the lecturer concerned.

Again, I was greatly disturbed. My highly sanitized Singaporean thinking cried out, "Are you trying to bribe?"

In fact, I actually asked this lady why she did that. Her reply was, "It is the culture in my country. We respect our teachers."

One day, I asked the man from the same country as that lady whether this was indeed the culture in their country.

His reply was, "No such thing. It is her own culture."

This lady later confided in me that she was actually not very proficient in English and reading theology written in that language was a real struggle for her. I then remembered the woman who broke her jar of perfume to use it on Jesus. She was saying to Him, "Lord, I am sinning in my life. Have mercy on me."

Likewise this lady was saying something like this when she offered the lecturer her food/cookies, "Teacher, I am struggling in my studies. Have mercy on me."

These were my rough edges as a student—i.e. not appreciating the struggles of people in their own contexts or limitations. But the Lord

used the SBC classroom to smoothen my rough edges. Once the Lord had dealt with me, I began to enjoy my classmates more and more.

The church is like God's classroom where He is using us to smoothen the rough edges of one another.

Conclusion

Today, Paul exhorts Christians to build up one another by doing two things:

- Show mutual concern.
- Allow God to use us in the church to smoothen the rough edges of one another.

When we Christians build up one another, we build up the church to be a spiritual home of comfort and encouragement.

The Lord said to us in John 13:34-35, "A new command I give you: Love one another. As I have loved you, so you must love one another. By this all men will know that you are my disciples, if you love one another."

Let's then seek the Lord to so love and build up one another so that we can be a visible and effective witness for Him before the watching world. Amen!