

## **Northwest Community Evangelical Free Church**

(December 5, 2021)

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Sermon manuscript

### **Sermon Series: Taking Our Next Steps into Faithfulness**

(Studies in 1 Thessalonians)

#### **Creating a Healthy Church Culture**

(1 Thessalonians 5:12-28)

Study #6

#### **Introduction: Baseball and church...**

In baseball, there are no double home runs, nobody gets four strikes, and after a hit, a runner has to touch all the bases to score.

These and hundreds of other details are elements that make up baseball's *culture*. Play the game as it was designed to be played, and you have a healthy baseball culture.

Violate the original design and we have an unhealthy baseball culture.

The same is true for any sport and for any organization. The closer that game or organization adheres to its original design, the healthier is its culture. And the healthier the culture, the more it will be able to carry out its purpose.

As in sports and organizations, so in the church. Church culture is healthiest when we abide by the design of the Lord of the church.

When that culture is in place, we have "shalom" - peace - a situation where what should happen for Jesus does happen and what shouldn't happen, doesn't.

Today, we are wrapping up our study of 1 Thessalonians, and we watch as Paul paints a picture of a church with a beautiful, bring-a-smile-to-Jesus'-face culture. He's inviting us, by the power God provides, to create that culture here.

The first of many instructions that lead to healthy church culture concerns the relationship between a congregation and its leaders.

#### **A Culture of Grace and Love (vv. 12-15)**

##### **Esteem Hard-Working Leaders (vv. 12-13)**

*How should we then lead?*

Leaders diligently labor

***[12] But we ask you, brothers and sisters, to recognize those who diligently labor among you...***

"*Diligent labor*" is a term that was used in other contexts to refer to hard, manual labor,<sup>1</sup> serious study, and athletic training.

Paul uses it here to describe service for God. His point is that providing leadership to a ministry in a church can be emotionally draining, mentally taxing, and physically exhausting.

There are men and women here at our church who "***diligently labor***" to serve Jesus and others.

They work energetically, stay up late, get up early, and sacrifice time. They work while they are weary.

And in what do they labor diligently? Well, leaders lead.

Leaders are "over" the members of the church

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<sup>1</sup> Jesus told Peter to cast his net on the other side of the boat to catch fish. (Luke 5:5) Peter told Jesus that they had already toiled (diligently labored) all night.

***[12] But we ask you, brothers and sisters, to recognize those who diligently labor among you, and are in leadership over you in the Lord<sup>2</sup>...***

When Paul refers to these people who are ***“in leadership over you in the Lord...”*** (Literally, *“stand before you”*) he isn’t saying that church leaders get to stand up and boss other Christians around. No, Jesus is the Boss of the church.

Jesus gave the church’s marching orders in the Great Commission. Every Christian’s mandate and every church’s mandate is: MAKE DISCIPLES.

But leaders of a ministry in a church have the assignment to give some direction as to how that ministry will fulfill Jesus’ mandate.

Here at our church, Elders give prayerful oversight to the various ministries of the church. Deacons carry out their well-defined roles and service.

Leading some of the ministries and activities of our church are paid staff members, while many activities are led by non-paid staff, volunteers, the so-called “laity.”

There are lots of leaders here, and leadership is hard work.<sup>3</sup>

Paul says that the leaders at the church at Thessalonica worked hard in their leadership stewardship. The leaders here at Northwest labor diligently as they lead and manage a lot of what goes on here.

In addition to working hard and giving direction to ministries, leaders in a church are charged with engaging, relationally, at a *very* personal level.

Leaders give instruction / admonition

***[12] But we ask you, brothers and sisters, to recognize those who diligently labor among you, and are in leadership over you in the Lord and give you instruction<sup>4</sup>...***

My Bible translates this last word ***“instruction.”*** However, nearly every other time this Greek word is used in the New Testament it is translated ***“admonish.”***<sup>5</sup> The more normal meaning of this word (*noutheteo*) is *admonish*.

What do leaders do? At times and as needed, they admonish. They reprove. They warn us against moving in a wrong direction. They remind us, lest we forget something crucial.

Admonition is giving direction to a soul, guidance into deep discipleship, counsel to the confused, coaching to a team member.

Paul says that servant leadership - marked by diligent labor, conscientious management and personal admonition - is best responded to by servant followership.

*How should we then follow?*

***[12] But we ask you, brothers and sisters, to RECOGNIZE those who diligently labor among you, and are in leadership over you in the Lord and give you instruction, [13] and that you REGARD THEM VERY HIGHLY IN LOVE because of their work.***

We would all agree that it is important for leaders in a church to know the people in the church. Here, Paul urges the reverse.

Members are to know, to recognize, to acknowledge the leaders. Church members are to appreciate their leaders.

<sup>2</sup> Acts 14:23 indicates that the Apostle Paul’s practice from the earliest days was to appoint Elders in every church.

<sup>3</sup> In 1 Peter 5, the Apostle Peter told Elders to shepherd generously, eagerly, humbly, being good examples to the flock.

<sup>4</sup> Note The Message, which renders this, *“those who have been given the responsibility of urging you and guiding you along in your obedience.”*

<sup>5</sup> *Noutheteo* as translated by the New American Standard Bible: *Admonish* - Acts 20:31; Romans 15:14; 1 Cor. 4:14; Col. 1:28; 3:16; 1 Thess. 5:14; 2 Thess. 3:15. *Warning* - Titus 3:10; *Instruction* - 1 Cor. 10:11; Ephesians 6:4; 1 Thess. 5:12.

Leaders are to be above reproach, but they sure aren't above questioning. Leaders are people and will occasionally / often be wrong. And leaders are certainly not to be placed on pedestals.

BUT those who are led should aim to overwhelm their leaders with appreciation for what they do. And it's tough to follow the leadership of someone you don't know. So, here's a thought...

Is there a leader of a ministry here at church you don't know? You've benefitted from his or her leadership in some way - but you don't know them.

Soon, go and introduce yourself. Express your appreciation for their leadership.

- Gush your thanks to the Children's Ministry servants who lead your child to know Jesus better in Sunday School or in the Nursery.
- Thank those who are leading us into involvement with the world through Missions and Local Outreach.
- Thank any of the staff who may have helped you or your family recently.
- Thank those who lead us in worship through song, Deacons who serve so well, Ministry Coordinators who lead ESL and Citizenship and Men's and Women's Ministries and Care Groups and ABFs.
- Thank an Elder.

Pray for your new leader-friend. And...

*How should we then live together?*

**[13]...Live in peace with one another.**

In so many leader / follower arrangements in our world, the relational dynamic is distant and impersonal and formal.

It is not to be so in the church.

Here, there is to be peace, God's *shalom*. There is to be a culture that honors Jesus by leaders who work hard at managing and engaging and by appreciation and constructive criticism from those who are led.

Now, if thoughts about leaders have prompted us to think about the church as an *organization*, what follows brings us back to the thought of the church as a living, breathing *organism*.

### **Serve Well by Engaging Wisely (v. 14)**

**[14] We urge you, brothers and sisters, admonish the unruly, encourage the fainthearted, help the weak, be patient with everyone.**

Henry Ford revolutionized industry with the assembly line approach to automobile manufacturing in the early 1900's. Then, in 1955, Ray Croc founded MacDonal'd's and applied Ford's assembly line to burgers and fries. Today, thanks to Ray Croc, we Americans are as efficient in our eating as we are in our driving.

The assembly line concept works great with cars, and marginally OK with food. It does NOT work with people.

Each person is unique. Sensitivity to that uniqueness is required when any of us deal with each other. What follows is not to leaders or to followers. It is to all of us.

*Some are unruly - admonish them*

**[14] We urge you, brothers and sisters, admonish the unruly<sup>6</sup>...**

In the church, you will sometimes run across a brother or a sister who is out of step with what God wants them to do. They are "**unruly**." When you encounter this man of woman, you are to "**admonish**" them.

You might be tempted to go another direction.

You may be drawn to withdraw, to avoid, or to tell some good friends about the unruliness of your brother. Resist that temptation.

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<sup>6</sup> Greek: *ατακτος* - referring to a soldier who is out of step with the other troops.

Rather, engage. Call them to follow Jesus. Go to that brother or sister in love and admonish. Pray before you go. Pray with them. Keep praying after you part.

This is risky stuff. It isn't safe. But we are called to love each other too much to leave unruliness unaddressed.

We admonish the unruly, but all who are troubled aren't unruly. Some are troubled and tempted to throw in the towel. How do we deal with these?

*Some are fainthearted - encourage them*

**[14] We urge you, brothers and sisters...encourage the fainthearted...**

The word we translate "**fainthearted**" literally is "*small of soul.*" Encourage<sup>7</sup> the shrinking soul.

The fainthearted person doesn't need someone yelling at them from a distance. They need someone to be with them, up close and personal. You, sidle up alongside of them and offer them your presence. That's a gift as good as gold to a discouraged brother or sister.

At other times, you will be with someone at church who is at a point of weakness. We all know what that's like. It's that time when we just don't have the get up and go to keep on keeping on.

*Some are weak - help them*

**[14] We urge you, brothers and sisters...help the weak...**

There are all kinds of reasons why someone might experience weakness.

We can be weakened by relational fractures and by unfair criticism. Persecution can weaken the strongest.

Repeated failure in an attempt to break a bad habit invites weakness. Disease can cause weakness. So can a job loss or a career setback or the death of a loved one.

Whatever the cause, after a prolonged period of hardship or failure, this Christian is so wounded that he's staggering. She's not going to make it across the finish line without help.

They are weak. And, while this won't always be their condition, it is NOW. They need help.

They might need material assistance from you to make it from paycheck to paycheck. They might need your help in mapping out a strategy to avoid temptation.

Those who are in seasons of weakness need those who are in seasons of strength to come alongside and give assistance.

And realize that you who are strong *now* may well *soon* see the roles reversed. You may be in a season of weakness and will be helped by the one who was formerly weak but became strong by your help.

Admonish the unruly, encourage the fainthearted, help the weak. Three different gifts given to people in very different situations.

So, how do we know what it is that this or that person needs?

After all, faint-heartedness can look like weakness. Some forms of weakness can be mistaken for unruliness. I've known some thinly veiled unruliness that appeared at first to be discouragements.

If we misdiagnose the problem, we will certainly mis-medicate.

If I'm not discerning in seeing what someone's condition is, I could end up encouraging the unruly and admonishing the weak.

How do we know what this or that person needs? Relationship.

The effectiveness of your service - as measured by *admonition* and *encouragement* and *help* - will be directly proportional to how well you KNOW the person you want to serve. The key to effective ministry is relationship.

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<sup>7</sup> A very different word than Paul usually uses. Here, not *παρακαλεω*, but *παραμυθηισθε*.

When you listen to your friend's stories, you understand them better. When you understand them better, you see them as the made-in-the-image-of-God, multi-dimensional, intriguing person they are.

Hearing this or that part of their story equips you to know if they are unruly, discouraged, or weak.

Here at Northwest, we have Care Groups and Sunday morning Adult Bible Fellowships and Women's and Men's Bible studies, all designed to foster healthy relating.

It may well be that the big take-away from this morning for you will be to get plugged in to relationships through these ministries. We want to see God use us in each other's lives. But we have to KNOW someone to know how to serve them.

As you engage, relationships will develop. Change will come - but not instantly. Change takes time. Which is why Paul says that patience is the need of the hour.

*ALL are in God's image and likeness - be patient*

**[14] We urge you, brothers and sisters...be patient with everyone.**

Patience is what I long for people to give me. I don't want you to believe that my failures define me. I want you to believe that there is hope for me, despite the fact that I'm often a mess.

Paul calls us all to give all the beautiful gift of patience.<sup>8</sup>

He follows up these thoughts about personal ministry with another remark or two about dealing with each other, especially when there might possibly be a relational fracture.

First, he mentions non-retaliation.<sup>9</sup>

<sup>8</sup> God's characteristic posture toward us is patience (see Romans 2:4; 9:22; 1 Peter 3:20). He continues to bear with us - even when we are blatantly disobedient, discouraged, or about to fall through weakness.

<sup>9</sup> See Matthew 6:12; Romans 12:17; 1 Peter 3:8-9, for examples of this.

## **Choose Non-Retaliation; Choose to BLESS (v. 15)**

*Non-retaliation (v. 15a)*

**[15a] See that no one repays another with evil for evil...**

The fact that this teaching was circulating in a community that was so often wronged, as the first century church was, is remarkable.

It is even more remarkable that it was practiced - but it was. This was how the early church - and today's persecuted church - lives. Healthy Christ-followers practice the grace of non-retaliation

So, it may happen that someone here at church hurts you - inadvertently or intentionally. It's happened before and it'll probably happen again.

If and when that happens, it'll sting. At the moment of injury, quick, look to Jesus.

Remember that for us, He endured insults and injuries. He, the just, died for the unjust. And as the servant is not greater than the Master, so we are called to the same response when we are mistreated.

Not repaying evil for evil is a Christian distinctive. But we don't only refuse to retaliate.

*Our utmost for each other's highest (v. 15b)*

**[15b]...always seek what is good for one another and for all people.**

We look to do whatever we can to care for the one who has fallen into sin - even if that sin was against us. And when we love each other like that, well, just like the old song says, "...they'll know we are Christians by our love."

When we refuse to retaliate AND seek to bless, we create a culture of grace that honors Jesus.

Paul's counsel for culture creation continues.

## A Culture of Spiritual Zeal (vv. 16-24)

### Each One, Knowing and Doing God's Will (vv. 16-18)

*Always rejoice! (v. 16)*

#### **[16] Rejoice always**

At first blush, that might appear to be impossible, or even a bad joke. But Paul wrote those two words with a straight face. We are left to conclude that there is something so powerful about life in Christ that this command is both reasonable and doable.

And Paul wasn't an armchair practitioner when it came to rejoicing.

Paul rejoiced and worshiped while spending the night in a Philippian jail just like the first disciples rejoiced that they were considered worthy to suffer shame for the Name of Jesus after they had been beaten for preaching the Gospel. (Acts 5)

Rejoicing when things are pleasant is reasonable. Rejoicing when life goes sideways is distinctively Christian.

So, imagine a church in which we are all regularly rejoicing. No complaining or griping or grumbling. We are all so wrapped up in Jesus and so jazzed about what He is doing that we instinctively rejoice.

The picture of a beautiful church culture is coming into sharper focus. Now imagine a church where everyone is praying consistently.

*Unceasingly pray! (v. 17)*

#### **[17] pray without ceasing**

It is impossible for anyone to be always uttering prayers. Paul himself wasn't always on his knees.

Maybe he was urging that we always be in a spirit of prayerful dependence, that we're always ready to pray, always conscious of our need for God to do what only He can do.

The culture of the healthy church is filled with rejoicing and praying - and giving thanks.

*Continually give thanks! (v. 18)*

#### **[18] in everything give thanks**

When we come to know God through faith in Jesus, "**everything**" changes.

We see that God's purpose is being worked out in our lives by "**everything**" that comes our way. This includes "**everything**" enjoyable and "**everything**" unpleasant.

We believe Paul when he wrote, **[Romans 8:28] God causes ALL THINGS** (i.e. - "**everything**") **to work together for good to those who love God, to those who are called according to His purpose.**

So, while trials are unpleasant, we can "**give thanks**" to God in the midst of them, because our Heavenly Father loved us enough to send His Son to die so that we would live AND that He will use this or that tough time to help us grow.

Have you ever wondered what God's will is for your life? Well, "**this is the will of God for you in Christ Jesus**": Rejoice always. Pray without ceasing. Give thanks in everything.

We keep reading and get a better view of the church culture Paul is inviting us to create. It's a beautiful culture of intentional acts of worship, regardless of "**everything**" we are experiencing.

We listen as Paul next urges us to an openness to the ministry of the Spirit of God.

### Each One, Open to the Spirit (vv. 19-21a)

*The Spirit do not quench*

### **[19] Do not quench the Spirit**

On the Day of Pentecost, the Spirit made His presence known in the form of tongues of fire resting on the heads of the disciples.<sup>10</sup> So *quenching* is an appropriate figure for whatever might hinder His work.

The Spirit wants to fill us with His power for service, make us holy witnesses, and produce His fruit within us. He wants us to be on fire for Jesus - and it is possible that we just might “*quench*” the Spirit. We might pour cold water on His fire.

That cold water might consist of any action that goes against what Paul has said in this letter: The cold water of immorality (4:1-7) or lovelessness (4:9-10) or laziness (4:11-12) will all quench the Spirit.

Practicing holiness and love and doing honest, hard work are like throwing logs on to the Spirit’s fire.

*Prophesyings do not despise*

### **[20] do not utterly reject prophecies**

To prophesy is to speak to people on behalf of God.<sup>11</sup>

When someone speaks in whatever context - in church, in a small group meeting, in a conversation with a friend - and seeks to represent God to other believers, he or she is filling the role of prophet.

Not in the sense that he is giving new revelation from God, but in the sense of communicating God’s message to someone else.<sup>12</sup>

We who hear that message are to take it seriously. We don’t dismiss it lightly. But we don’t automatically swallow it, either. We consider it carefully.

*Discern! Discern! Discern! (v. 21a)*

### **[21a] but examine everything**

Despite what I just said about not dismissing the words of a fellow Christian, we don’t accept them gullibly, without examination.

We are to practice discernment. Measure any message you hear against the standard of Scripture.

- Examine everything you hear me or anyone else say on a Sunday.
- Examine what you hear your ABF teacher says.
- Examine what you hear on podcasts and on the radio.
- Examine what you read in books.
- Examine what you read or hear or see on the Internet.

And if what you are listening to or reading does not measure up to the standard of truth as revealed in the Bible, reject it.

Finally, pursue purity.

### **Each One, Pursuing Purity (vv. 21b-22)**

***[21b]...hold fast to that which is good; [22] abstain from every form of evil.***<sup>13</sup>

There are many forms of evil.

In fact, evil’s complexity makes it stand in stark contrast to the simplicity of good. A culture of *shalom* requires that we cling to the good and reject evil.

Have nothing to do with it. Don’t play with it. Don’t coddle it or cuddle it. Be done with it.

Whew!

<sup>10</sup> The baptism of Jesus was “*with the Holy Spirit and with fire.*” (Matthew 3:11; Luke 3:16)

<sup>11</sup> Just as to serve as a priest is to act or speak toward God on behalf of people.

<sup>12</sup> Look through the books of the prophets in the Old Testament and you will see that far more attention is given to preaching holiness than to predicting the future.

<sup>13</sup> The King James version translates 1 Thessalonians 5:21 with this, “*Abstain from every APPEARANCE of evil.*” And while that was a very appropriate way to render it in 1611, those words give a different sense in 2021. They imply that we should avoid any activity that might appear to be evil to someone. That is NOT what Paul is saying.

If a Christ-honoring culture grows at our church, it will be, in part, because we are embracing the path Paul lines out for us in this passage about leading well, appreciating leaders, engaging with each other wisely and lovingly, seeking to bless even those who have hurt us, rejoicing and praying and giving thanks, and being open to the Spirit AND discerning.

But, thus far, Paul hasn't given us the whole story on how to create a healthy church culture. If we were thinking that our actions were sufficient to the task, here's another thought.

**A Culture of Dependence on God to do What Only He Can Do**  
**(vv. 23-24)**

***[23] Now may the God of peace Himself sanctify you entirely; and may your spirit and soul and body be kept complete, without blame at the coming of our Lord Jesus Christ. [24] Faithful is He who calls you, and He also will do it.***

And to that, I say, what better way to end our time together this morning than by talking about gardening.

I was listening to a gardening show on the radio on the way up to church yesterday morning.

Bob Webster hosts this show about gardening, and his caller was bragging about his tomato crop from the summer and into the fall. He is still harvesting tomatoes - in December!

After he finished, Bob was quiet for a couple of seconds, and then he spoke.

*"I commend you for your fertilizing and weeding. But the more crucial factors in your tomato crop were things out of your control. The moderate summer temperatures and lots of rainfall made you a successful gardener."*

In the same way, a culture that honors Jesus is not wholly up to us or solely dependent on our effort. Yes, it is required that we expend energy and work hard and love and serve.

But our hope for a healthy culture is ultimately dependent on God's work in our midst.

He is the One who sanctifies us - body, soul, and spirit. He is the One who calls us to faithfulness, and He is the One who changes us, shapes and molds us, refines us from the inside out.

So, to Him be all the glory - AMEN!

***[25] Brothers and sisters, pray for us. [26] Greet all the brothers and sisters with a holy kiss. [27] I put you under oath by the Lord to have this letter read to all the brothers and sisters. [28] May the grace of our Lord Jesus Christ be with you.***