**1 Thessalonians 5:12-13a**

**Love Your Spiritual Leaders**

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***12 But 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, 13 and that you esteem them very highly in love because of their work.***

* For the past two months we have been examining Paul’s eschatological instruction to his friends in the Thessalonian church because he had learned of they had come under false teaching that had resulted in fear and worry spreading through the church regarding the fate of those who had died and that ***the day of the Lord’s* wrath upon the earth** had already begun.
* Now, having completed the section of instruction on eschatology, we come to the final section of Paul’s instruction . . . **practical instruction regarding Christian conduct and relationships within the church.**
* It is significant to note that as Paul begins this section of practical instruction that **he begins with the subject of the relationship between church leaders and the flock they are given watch over.**
* The subject of **the relationship between church leaders and the membership is a significant subject within several of Paul’s letters**. **Why is this?**
	+ The answer to this question is quite simple . . . **it is because of** **sin**.
	+ Because of the sin of our original father, **Adam**, we have all inherited a sinful and depraved nature that causes us all to act in selfish, brutish and sinful ways.
	+ And although we have received salvation by faith in Jesus Christ as our Savior, our salvation has not erased the sin nature that we received from Adam. We all still live in bodies of corrupted flesh that seek their selfish and sinful desires.
* As I have said in the past, **all Christians . . . from the moment we are saved . . . are engaged in a “holy war.”**
	+ Prior to our salvation our unregenerate spirits were in complete agreement with our sinful, fleshly inclinations and desires. Our flesh and our unregenerate spirits were in unison in their desire to give in to the pleasures of sin.
	+ But the moment the Holy Spirit changed us our spiritual desires changed. With out salvation we saw, for the first time, that sin is offensive and disobedient to God, and we now wanted to obey God.
	+ But we have to remember that in our salvation **only our souls were regenerated**. Our physical bodies were not. Our physical bodies still crave the sinful desires they always have. And they always will. That is why the Lord has promised that He will give us new, imperishable and incorruptible bodies when He comes for us. Our current bodies are both perishable and corrupted and unsuitable for heaven.
	+ But until that day, when the Lord comes to take us to be with Him, we are stuck in these bodies of sinful flesh and we are engaged in a daily war as we attempt to restrain and mortify our fleshly desires.
* This “holy war” between our regenerated souls and our corrupted flesh is a daily, continuous battle for control between the part of us that desires to obey God and the part of us that desires to gratify itself in sin.
	+ The apostle Paul will, several years after he writes this letter, very eloquently describe this “holy war” in his letter to the Romans. In Romans 7:14-24 Paul perfectly describes the Christian “holy war” . . .

***Romans 7:14-19— 14 For we know that the Law is spiritual, but I am of flesh, sold into bondage to sin. 15 For what I am doing, I do not understand; for I am not practicing what I would like to do, but I am doing the very thing I hate. 16 But if I do the very thing I do not want to do, I agree with the Law, confessing that the Law is good. 17 So now, no longer am I the one doing it, but sin which dwells in me. 18 For I know that nothing good dwells in me, that is, in my flesh; for the willing is present in me, but the doing of the good is not. 19 For the good that I want, I do not do, but I practice the very evil that I do not want.***

slide 2

* So, we learn from Scripture that despite the fact that we are saved, we all still continue to sin. **And it is because all Christians continue to sin that Paul finds it necessary to constantly teach on the subject of conflict within the church.**
	+ **Unfortunately, because of sin, the church of Jesus Christ is as prone to interpersonal conflicts as any other human organization.**

slide 3

**Paul’s appeal to love the shepherds**

***1 Thessalonians 5:12-13— 12 But 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, 13 and that you esteem them very highly in love because of their work***

* But notice in our passage today that Paul begins his instruction **regarding the flock’s responsibility toward their leaders . . . *12 But 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, 13 and that you esteem them very highly in love because of their work***
* Here in these two verses Paul instructs **two actions that we should take in regard to our church leaders . . .** we are to ***appreciate*** them and to ***esteem them very highly in love***.
* The **first action** Paul calls us to do for our church leaders is to ***appreciate*** them. Once again, I don’t feel that the word ***appreciate*** is the best English word that could be used here.

slide 4

* + The Greek word for ***appreciate*** (*oida*—#1492) literally means “to know” or “to learn about.”
	+ Here in this instruction Paul is telling the members of the church that it is the responsibility of every member to get to know his or her church leaders.
* **It is interesting to note that for as much as he praised the Thessalonians for their faith and faithfulness that Paul would feel it necessary to write such instruction.** But since Timothy had just returned to give Paul a report on the health of the Thessalonian church, Timothy obviously felt that there was some friction and dissension among some in the church that needed to be addressed.
* But this instruction by Paul makes a very important point that **even strong churches can suffer from conflict and controversy.**
* **Why is there conflict and controversy in the church?**

slide 5

* **First**, as I mentioned earlier . . . **there is conflict because of sin**. We’re all infected with it.
	+ And sin causes us all to do some very ungodly things.
* **Second, there is conflict in the church because of petty bickering** . . . one person’s personal preference places him or her in conflict with someone else’s personal preference.

slide 6

* + The color of the drapes . . . the color of the carpet . . . the brand of video projector . . . the menu for fellowship lunch . . . the time of the Christmas eve service.
		- We had a major church split here 7 years ago over whether we were going to repair our broken-down church pews or buy these chairs. Despite the fact that the pew repairs would have cost twice as much as purchasing chairs, people got so upset with the majority’s decision to buy chairs that they left.
* **Third, there is conflict in the church and with church leadership because not all of the people in the church are believers.**

slide 7

* + The most popular form of church government in American churches is **congregational government**. Congregational government is based upon the democratic model of government . . . everybody gets a vote, and the majority rules.
	+ There are two major problems with democratic government in the church.
		- First, and most importantly . . . it is unscriptural. Nowhere in Scripture is democratic church government taught. In every instance where we read in the New Testament of a church being planted, elders are appointed to lead.
		- Secondly, a major problem with congregational government in the church is the fact that a great many of the people who are members of the various churches are unbelievers. Therefore, in using the democratic model of church government **you have unbelievers using worldly decision-making in determining the spiritual direction of the church.** And a worldly decision-making process leads to . . . worldly decisions.
* **And fourth,** as we learn from Paul in this section . . . **there is often conflict in the church because some people don’t know or appreciate their church leaders and how much of their time they give to the care of the flock**.

slide 8

* Unfortunately, it is part of our fallen human nature to question those who are in authority over us.
	+ Teens question their parents’ authority . . . employees question their managers’ intelligence . . . citizens question the soundness of their political leaders’ decisions . . . **and church members question the decisions of their church leaders**. It’s human nature.

**Get to know your spiritual leaders**

slide 9

***1 Thessalonians 5:12— But 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***

* Paul’s first instruction here in v. 12 is found the statement ***that you appreciate . . .* or “get to know” *. . .* your spiritual leaders.**
	+ One of the tasks of a faithful spiritual leader is to get to know the men, women and children he is responsible for leading and protecting, spiritually.
	+ Just as a shepherd knows every sheep in his flock and notices every detail about them, so the shepherds of God’s flock are tasked with knowing the sheep of their flock.
* But as Paul teaches us here in v. 12, the sheep of God’s flock also have the responsibility of getting to know their spiritual leaders.
	+ It is a well-known fact that it takes time for sheep to become comfortable and confident in their human shepherd. Sheep are very fearful and skittish and reluctant to follow a shepherd they are unfamiliar with.
	+ In the same way, the sheep of God’s flock should be equally reluctant to follow a shepherd they don’t know. It is only by observation and personal interaction that sheep place their trust in their shepherd. The sheep of God’s flock should do likewise.

**Three things to “know” about your leaders**

slide 10

***1 Thessalonians 5:12— But 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***

* Therefore, knowing that we are each responsible for getting to know our shepherds and placing our trust in them, the apostle **Paul gives three specific instructions to the church regarding how we should get to know our church leadership.**
* The **first** instruction is that ***you appreciate those who diligently labor among you***.
	+ Here in this first instruction Paul draws attention to the fact that **church leaders *diligently labor* on your behalf and for your good**.
	+ The term ***diligently labor*** means “to toil to the point of weariness.”
* Paul’s point here in this first instruction to ***appreciate or know those who diligently labor among you*** is **that we see and appreciate the amount of time and *diligent labo*r that men voluntarily invest into the care of God’s flock.**
	+ Do you know how much of their time with their families your elders and deacons give to you for your spiritual nourishment and well-being each week?

* + Do you know how much time your Sunday school teachers spend preparing their lessons?
	+ Do you know how many hours the deacons spend caring for this aging facility?

* + Do you appreciate how many hours your pastors spend preparing an edifying and doctrinally sound message for you?

* + Do you remember that these men labor diligently for no other reason than the fact that they have been called by the Lord to serve Him and you?
* I ask these questions of you, not because the elders and deacons feel unappreciated, but because we want you to know that **we choose to serve the Lord and to serve you because we are called to serve and we love doing it.**
	+ **All we ask of you is that you understand that we are merely men. And the best of men are still only men at best.** We are imperfect. We make mistakes. But we genuinely have the best interest of you in mind as we serve.
* **Paul’s second object of instruction** regarding your ***appreciation*** of church leaders is that we submit to the **church leaders that *have charge over you in the Lord***.

slide 11

* + **Church leadership is not a duty taken lightly.** The role of elder or deacon should only be considered after evaluating oneself after studying the biblical qualifications and should only be accepted after seeking the Lord in prayer.
	+ And I can tell you that when I read the qualifications for elder and deacon specified in 1 Timothy 3 and Titus 1 I feel wholly inadequate. There is no man who can perfectly fulfill the requirements specified in Scripture.
	+ But your role, as sheep in the flock, is to examine the men who will be your shepherds, to determine if they are qualified and worthy of being followed, because if the shepherd is not truly called and gifted to lead the flock, the flock will be in danger.
	+ **But if you choose to have a man as your shepherd, then you . . . the individual sheep . . . are agreeing to submit to that leadership.**
* Now, that being said . . . that the sheep have the obligation to follow the leading of their shepherd . . . the shepherds have **the even greater responsibility** to love the sheep and to lead them by faithfully and sacrificially protecting them.
	+ A true shepherd loves the sheep and will place the well-being of the sheep ahead of his own. And the sheep will love their shepherds by willingly and happily submitting to their leadership.
* The **last** of the three instructions of Paul in regard to our appreciation of church leaders is that we **recognize the significance of their role in** ***giving you instruction***.

slide 12

* + Unfortunately, there are a great many unqualified men who are serving as pastors and shepherds who fail in this critical function of feeding the sheep.
* A shepherd who teaches his flock falsely is, at best, feeding his flock garbage . . . and at worst, feeding his flock poison.
	+ Even more important than protecting the flock, physically, is the shepherd’s critical role of protecting the flock spiritually and doctrinally.
	+ It is the shepherd’s duty to the Lord to accurately and skillfully handle and teach the word of God.
	+ Any man who fails in this role to accurately teach the word of God should be rejected as unqualified and removed from his position.

***1 Thessalonians 5:13— and that you esteem them very highly in love because of their work***

slide 13

* Then, having given three specific ways that the sheep are to ***appreciate*** or **know** their shepherds, in v. 13 Paul then adds a final instruction to the flock regarding their relationship to their shepherds . . . ***and that you esteem them very highly in love because of their work.***
* As you carefully read this brief statement you can see that there is a lot contained in it.
	+ The word ***esteem*** means “to have high regard and respect.”
	+ And notice that Paul does not merely say that we are to ***esteem*** our leaders, we are to ***esteem them very highly***.
	+ The superlative ***very highly*** is a double superlative, meaning “super abundantly” and “above all measure.”
* Furthermore, Paul instructs that our ***abundant esteem*** for our spiritual leaders should be ***in love***.
	+ The addition of the prepositional phrase ***in love*** describes how our ***abundant esteem*** should be manifested . . . seeking the good of your leaders as your personal goal.

**How do we *esteem* our leaders *very highly in love*?**

slide 14

***1 Thessalonians 5:13— and that you esteem them very highly in love because of their work***

* One of the questions that arises when we read this instruction from Paul is, **“how are we to *esteem* our spiritual leaders *very highly in love*?”**
	+ The answer to this question is found in Paul’s statement in v. 13 . . . ***esteem them very highly in love because of their work.***
* The qualified men who are in the role of spiritual leaders in the church have voluntarily undertaken the great responsibility to teach and care for the flock of God. **We are serving God by volunteering to care for you. Our “work,” as spiritual leaders, is to care for God’s people in our congregation.**
	+ As under-shepherds of God’s flock, we are accountable to God for the work that we do. If we fail or do a poor job, God will hold us accountable.
* Remember that I have told you on numerous occasions that **love is an action verb. You don’t feel love, you demonstrate it.**
	+ So, if **love is an action, what action can you take to “esteem your leaders very highly in love because of their work”?**
* Here are a couple of ways to demonstrate **love for the work of** your spiritual leaders . . .

slide 15

**1. Be an encourager, not a discourager**

* + Nothing is more disheartening or discouraging to someone who is pouring his heart into ministry than to be told, “I don’t approve of or like what you are doing.”

**2. Help carry the load**

* + It is a well-known fact that in every organization that 20 percent of the people do 80 percent of the work. Instead of standing on the sideline pointing out deficiencies, get in the game and help.
	+ You may find that you have a different perspective when it’s your own sweat that others disapprove of.

**3. Remember Thumper’s Mom**

* + I have been involved in ministry and church service in 4 churches over the past 20 years as a deacon, an elder and pastor. And I can tell you that **some of the most rewarding times** of my life have come from serving in the church. But I can also tell you that **some of the worst times of my life** have also come while serving in the church.
	+ And, unfortunately, most church leaders will echo what I’ve just said. And it has always been this way. Even the apostle Paul experienced great discouragement. In his second letter to the Corinthians Paul had to defend his apostleship because some in the Corinthian church were saying that Paul was not a legitimate apostle.
		- Imagine that. Paul had been suffering at the hands of his enemies for years, laboring for the Lord, and some of God’s people he had been serving were saying that he was a fraud. That would be discouraging.
	+ In his letter to the Hebrews, the write describes the responsibility of the flock of God . . .

***Hebrews 13:17—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.***

slide 16

* + Note in this verse the admonishment of the writer to the flock of God to **“permit the servants of God to keep watch over your souls *with joy and not with grief*.”**
	+ Unfortunately, there is plenty of both . . . ***joy and grief*** . . . in ministry.
	+ And often times the source of ministerial ***grief*** is the person who has forgotten Thumper’s Mom’s advice to her son . . . **“if you can’t say nothin’ nice, don’t say nothin’ at all.”**
	+ Unfortunately, a lot of people fail to heed that advice, creating heartache and discouragement for those who are voluntarily serving them.

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* It is apparent from Paul’s instruction here in 1 Thessalonians 5:12-13 that there was conflict and contention within the church in Thessalonica.
	+ The church in Thessalonica was one of the earliest churches that Paul planted. He would learn of the course of his years in ministry that conflict and petty bickering in the church is an all-too-common occurrence.
	+ Even Paul’s credentials and God-given authority would be questioned by some in the church in Corinth.
* I can also tell you that ministry is difficult. While there are great rewards, there is also plenty of heartache.
	+ I recently heard a statistic that the average ministry career of a modern seminary graduate is **currently 2 years**.
	+ **2 years!** That means that the average seminary graduate spends less time in ministry than he did in earning his seminary education.
* And why is this? I suggest there are 2 primary reasons.
	+ First . . . unfortunately . . . many men attend seminary who are not called by the Lord to ministry. And finding ministry difficult, and not being called, **they lose heart and quit.**
	+ Secondly, many men find ministry difficult and discouraging. Many men enter ministry with great hope and the expectation of serving the Lord. But many soon experience discouragement and quickly become disillusioned and lose heart.
* My final exhortation and encouragement to you is two-fold.
	+ **First**, carefully evaluate the men you choose to lead you in ministry. Test us to see if we are qualified and if you are willing to submit to our leadership.
	+ **Second,** once you have accepted each of us as your spiritual leaders, support us and encourage us. As Paul says in v. 13 . . . ***esteem us very highly in love because of our work* on your behalf.**
	+ Keep in mind that we are making a sacrifice to serve you. We are voluntarily taking time away from our families to serve you.
* Your worship team, deacons, elders and pastors are serving you because we have been called by the Lord to serve Him and you. We serve because we want to serve. But ministry can be hard. Please don’t make it any harder than it is by being a discouragement.