

Intro: Garrison. Pastor. 1 Thessalonians 5:12-15. Mothers Day!

Some of the best moments in my life have come from within the church. Many of you know I didn't grow up in the church, I became a Christian right before college and got plugged into a church that was so good for me. My closest relationships have come from within the church. My first job. My marriage. A laundry list of experiences that have made me the man that I am today. I love the church.

But even though that's true, I'll also say, being a part of a church is really hard.

A couple weeks ago I read an article about community by a pastor named Eugene Park. He was writing about whenever a newcomer comes to his church and he asks what brought them, the most common answer is 'I'm looking for community.' He said he often winces hearing that, afraid that they won't stick around long.

He writes: "It's not that desiring community is a bad thing. The problem is the assumption that community is found, like stumbling upon a hidden treasure. One cannot "find" community, because it isn't something to be discovered. Community is never found, only built."

Which has actually always been the case. This is going to sound like an overstatement, but it's true—For the entire history of the world, you didn't go find a community. It wasn't a choice. You were born and bound to a community. You could say you were actually stuck in a community, forced to forge relationships with your neighbors, family members, and usually church members, which you had for your entire life.

It wasn't until the last couple decades that this changed. Partly due to the ever growing transience of life in our society. But according to many, including pastor Park, the greater impact can be traced back to the dawn of the internet and the inception of social media platforms.

Think about it. Social media was designed to connect us to others. Initially intended to connect you with friends, family and classmates. People that were pretty much already a part of your community. But as more and more people joined these platforms, they transformed. Now the average person on Facebook has 338 friends. And I'd bet that most of us in the room, given the median age, have way more than that, if you haven't already done the holy thing and deleted them.

There are 70 million active facebook groups. And that's just on facebook, which is on average, one of the least used platforms in terms of minutes a day.

We can now pick who we interact with. you can 'find' or 'look' for community anywhere. You can interact with people all over the world from the comfort of your couch. It requires nothing and it's all about what you like or don't like. You have almost unlimited options. You can join a FB group for this. You can message for that. You can follow this person for that. Think about Reddit. A platform designed solely for community based around a specific thing.

The point being, we've been rewired in how we interact with community. Community is no longer something you're bound to at all. It's a choice. And this drastically affects how we view community in real life.

Simply put, community becomes a commodity.

When you bring this mentality into the church, it creates major problems. We evaluate people around us based on what they can bring to us. We are more likely to leave a church for petty reasons, and we don't feel a sense of belonging. Consumers can't create a compelling community. Because they don't stick, and if they do, the people around them are never good enough. And I don't think this is a hypothetical, I think it's plaguing the church today.

Now wherever you're at with all that — Here's something we've got to see:

In first century Thessalonica, the believers didn't have options. They weren't hopping around trying to find community. There was no other church. And bailing definitely wasn't a category for Paul.

When he wrote 1 Thessalonians 5:12-15, our text for today—a passage about specific types of relationships— he views these instructions as absolutely essential. This is how you do it. There's not an alternative.

Which will be tricky for us because the types of relationships we're about to read about are quite possibly, in my experience as a church member and pastor, the 3 of the biggest pain points for Christians in the church trying to relate to others.

3 relationships that I think in our day and age of redefined community, are extremely difficult for us. And 3 relationships that if you get them right, can be a stunning picture of the Gospel taking root in a community.

So I want to address these relationships for you, and then look at Paul's instructions on how to live into them. Let's hop in:

12 We ask you, brothers, to respect those who labor among you and are over you in the Lord and admonish you, 13 and to esteem them very highly in love because of their work. Be at peace among yourselves.

1. Those who lead us

Now before I say another word, we just read the same thing, so I think we just need to acknowledge how weird it is. I-a pastor here- just read a passage that says you've got to respect and love me. Just feels a little like I'm asking for you to love me and respect me—which I am. I feel that tension, but this is the text for us. So we got to talk about it.

What Paul is doing is continuing to speak on this relationship between members of a church and its leaders. In chapter 2, Paul defends his reputation and leadership to this church. But ends by encouraging this church that they were so receptive to his ministry and loved him for it.

And now he's saying, go do the same thing to your leaders. You loved me, go love them. You followed me, go follow them. What we're seeing is this reality all throughout the NT that every church has leaders. Paul doesn't assume that he's their only leader. Every church has established leaders. Let me show you:

Acts 14: 21- 23 21 When they had preached the gospel to that city and had made many disciples, they returned to Lystra and to Iconium and to Antioch, 22 strengthening the souls of the disciples, encouraging them to continue in the faith, and saying that through many tribulations we must enter the kingdom of God. And when they had appointed elders for them in every church, with prayer and fasting they committed them to the Lord in whom they had believed.

So this is the pattern of the NT. Paul and others would come to a city. Preach the gospel. Form a church. Before they leave, they appoint leaders. Paul is saying remember those leaders we set up for you? This is how you treat them.

So for them: apostles, elders and deacons. Specifically in this text, he's most likely talking about elders and deacons. Which, quick aside, we have at Citizens as well. We believe that whenever the NT speaks of elders, or oftentimes overseers, it is synonymous with what we title pastors. The primary leaders and authority in the church.

We also have many people who serve in deacon type roles. In Acts 6, deacons are called to assist pastors in the logistical side of leading ministries and serving the church. Which is how we would think of directors and cg leaders roles. We would consider our directors and Cg leaders to fit into that category for us. Both in shape of their positions and responsibilities as well meeting the character qualifications outlined in 1 Timothy.

His verbiage here for these people are 'those who are over you'.

He gives an outline of what leaders are called to, again connected to what his ministry was among them. They're called to work hard and for God's glory. They're called to be among the people, to know and be known by the members. And they're called to admonish or warn—which we'll talk about more in just a bit.

Because what Paul is highlighting is actually more focused on those being led. He specifically addresses them. He calls them to respect those who are leading, to esteem them highly and to love them.

The actual Greek we see as 'respect', literally reads 'to see' them. To acknowledge the good that they are doing in the church and in your life. And in seeing, to esteem them highly in love. Or simply, to appreciate them.

Now this doesn't mean we are supposed to make leaders into celebrities, or even blindly follow them. But it does mean we are called to recognize the work leaders do and to love them for it.

Our church is great at this btw! I'll give two really clear examples. Every year, during pastor appreciation month—which I didn't even know was a thing before we planted citizens—the amount of encouragement we get is crazy. There's a member, I won't say her name, that gets us like a mountain of chocolate and candy every year, which I'm pretty sure is exactly what Paul intended when he said to 'see them and love them', at least for me. Tim's not here but his request is protein powder and cruise ship coupons.

We've got another member who every year in the fall does a leadership appreciation dinner for staff and pastors and spouses. No one asked her to do it. And I mean she cook-cooks. It's legit. And gives a whole evening together full of great food and good hangs and thanks us for all we do.

So on behalf of our leaders, I'll be the first to say thank you. We really do feel loved.

But I'll also acknowledge another reality. Whenever this dynamic is introduced where there is someone over you, there will be tension. Surely you've experienced this? Maybe in the church, maybe in your workplace. But that tension is felt by leaders too.

I can also say from experience, something changed the day I became a leader, and even more a pastor. Like some of my relationships changed. It's just got a little weird at times. This is a true story. The week after I got ordained I had someone tell me they didn't trust me anymore. I'd been friends with them and led them for years. But as soon as I got that title, something changed.

But I also can acknowledge first hand I get that. I am personally skeptical of authority too. I have a bend towards being a rebel—that's the nice way of saying I don't like being told what to do, or the feeling that someone is looking over my shoulder watching and evaluating me.

And I don't think that's a feeling unique to me. That's very true for a lot of us as Americans. I mean it's literally built into our ethos. Our country was built upon throwing off authority. Over turning the power structures that be. Revolution! Here's a quote from Hamilton, like the actual guy, not Lin Manuel:

"Give all the power to the few, they will oppress the many." Hamilton.

So there's something in all of us that may hear 'respect those who are over you and who sometimes have to warn you. Love them and esteem them highly.' What?? We generally have a natural bend towards skepticism towards leaders.

Now don't get me wrong, many of us have issues with authority because of wounds or stories we've heard, and leaders shouldn't miss what Paul calls them to here.

However, I think all too often, what has happened in our past with other leaders bleeds into our present.

But if I could, I'd love to just put into practice what Paul is calling a leader to do. A pastoral admonishment: we need to be aware that some of our skepticism, bitterness, anxiousness, towards the leaders in this church, have absolutely nothing to do with them. It's from your past. Or from a story you've heard about someone else.

And that warped view can both damage you and your ability to be present here, as well as others, including the leader. That's a warning. It's not good for your soul to have undealt with hurt that is shaping your view of someone that is completely different. It hurts you. And it hurts them.

So let's get practical. We're called to peace. So let's seek that. This week do a self assessment about your treatment of those who lead you. Paul says we're all called to respect, love and esteem highly. Are you doing that?

A great first step towards peace would be name anywhere you're not. Just to name it. Yes, the next step would be to confess and take some steps towards correcting anywhere you're off, I want you to do that too. But first, we need some awareness. We need to wrestle with our hurt. We need to wrestle with any struggles with this.

14 And we urge you, brothers, admonish the idle, encourage the fainthearted, help the weak, be patient with them all.

2. Those who need us.

Now after Paul addresses leaders and members, he then turns to the whole church to address how to deal with those who are struggling. In other words, a couple different types of people who need something from the body.

Which is worth noting, he doesn't say 'and now we urge you, leaders, to admonish the idle etc. No, this is a command for the entire church to step in to care for the struggling. He's essentially giving this entire church a sense of pastoral responsibility.

Now these aren't random categories. Many theologians think what Paul is doing here is readdressing 3 groups that he's already talked to, giving final instructions to the whole church on how to care for them.

Let's break those types of people down and what he says they need.

Those who need us	What they need
'Idle'. The unruly. Out of order. (1 Thess 4:11-12)	Admonishment- Warning, rebuke
'Fainthearted'. 'Small souled'. Those discouraged, grieved or depressed (1 Thess 4:14-17)	Encouragement- Kind and truthful words about who they are and who God is.

'Weak'. Young believers. Those easily tempted to sin (1 Thess 4:2-8)

Help. Assisted with intentionality to help them grow in strength spiritually.

He says 'admonish the idle.' Greek for admonish: **nouthetountas**. It means to 'make mindful'. Or 'to clue in'. The most clear translation would be to warn. To say 'this is where this leads you'.

Clue in the idle. Call them out. The word there for idle can be translated 'unruly', or out of order. I heard one pastor just call it 'immature'. They're stuck in idleness, spiritually. They're not moving forward. Paul addressed them in 1 Thess 4:11-12 as those who are busybodies and not living a quiet life, which is God's desire. They're out of step with what God has for them.

He says warn these people. He says to step in, have the conversation no one wants to have. Show them where they're headed and what their actions could cost them.

But not everyone needs to be admonished. The fainthearted need encouragement. This is the weary. The emotionally and spiritually depressed. The literal translation is 'small souled'. This picture of someone whose soul has shriveled because of the difficulties of life and suffering. Here he is addressing the group we talked about last week, who were grieving the loss of their loved ones.

He says encourage these people. Those weary, tired, doubting—they need words of encouragement. Don't give up. Church family is here for you. We love you. God loves you. Give them truth.

Help the weak. These are those who are weak spiritually. Paul here is addressing those from 1 Thess 4 again, those tempted to sexual immorality. He says lend them your strength spiritually. To help them grow in their faith. To grow in the ways of Jesus, in denouncing the world. Help them stay accountable.

And finally he says, be patient with them all. The reality is all people are going to go through something at some point. Everyone will go through a season where they're not at their best. And as a church, yes we may need to confront some people, yes we need to encourage some people and help them, but in all those situations, we are called to be patient with one another.

Now if I could be honest for a second, I think there's two reasons that these relationships are a pain point in the church. The first is going to sound kind of mean, but I think it's true and I want to invite us into some honesty. And that's we just sort of wish nobody was needy. Like it's just annoying. Like can't church be fun and drama free?

And the answer is... that's contrary to what the church is. We're all needy before the foot of the cross. In your eyes, there may be a great chasm between you and that needy person you know in terms of your health. But it's totally inaccurate. So we have to be careful with how quickly we're bothered by those that just aren't doing well. We're called to bear with and love.

Now the second issue is a little more interesting. It's that, in my experience, no one tends to self select into the idle or weak categories. I think we would prefer to not be categorized as unruly or immature.

Certainly would not sign up for admonishment or help. And so we funnel into the fainthearted category. **Which means -- the only type of corrective we like from other Christians around us is encouragement.**

Which can be great! But it takes some work to figure out what's needed. So let's do a little exercise. I'm going to give a scenario and we'll figure it out.

Wilson is a friend of yours that also is a member at Citizens. You're catching up over coffee and he asks if he can be honest with you for a minute. You say yes, Wilson. He shares he's been having a hard time, he's really down and hasn't read his bible in a month. What does Wilson need?

Well I just say this—our default is going to be to immediately jump to encouragement. That's what he wants to! So Wilson, I want you to know God loves you and always wants to spend time with you. He's never disappointed and always welcomes you. BUT, that is only helpful if he's fainthearted. And further, it only works if he's fainthearted.

So what we need to do is ask some questions. Because really what we need to work on is our discernment. Here's 3 that I think will be game changers:

1. **Do you know why? Do you know how?** Is knowledge lacking? This helps us figure out if they're in the weak category. Because if the answer is no, well, then I can help you. Here's why this matters and here's how you do it. This applies to the Bible. It might apply to prayer. Dealing with anger, or any type of sin.
2. **What's going on in your life?** We're trying to figure out struggles, suffering and sin. If Wilson says, yeah I'm not reading because my grandfather just got diagnosed with cancer and I'm really struggling. That's different than if he says I'm looking at porn every week and don't care about my Bible. So here, you're able to distinguish between fainthearted and idle.
3. **What's your schedule?** Here we're looking at disciplines, rhythms and apathy. We're trying to figure out if there is an idleness problem here.

So here's the deal, everyone needs different things. And we need to ask good questions and discern what's most needed. And there is danger here. We can do real damage to people. We do damage when we encourage the idle. Or admonish the fainthearted. Or weak. Or help the idle. I've seen it.

I've seen people show up to group, confess something where they need a warning and they get a pat on the back. Or they need practical help and get the same thing. It can go the other way too, but honestly I think it's more rare. And then they don't change. And they aren't aware of what their problem truly is.

Different people need different things, and that's what's so beautiful about the church, is that for thousands of years, we've actually had the most nuanced approach to caring for people. So let's follow the direction of the Scriptures. Let's take these questions into group and relationships and apply what we're being called to do.

15 See that no one repays anyone evil for evil, but always seek to do good to one another and to everyone.

3. Those who mistreat us

Paul shifts his focus to how to handle when someone has done wrong to us. And in this case, severe wrong—evil. He's got in mind the reality that this church has endured persecution and suffering since its inception. Remember, when the gospel initially took hold here, there was riot. The Jewish leaders accused them of treason. Members of this church were beaten and dragged out of their homes. The Gospel was not received well in the ancient world. Not just by random people either. By their friends and family members.

Paul says don't don't retaliate. But even more, seek to do good to everyone. Incredibly strong words. This idea of doing good to your enemies is something the NT writers, including Jesus bring up often. This is how he says it in Luke 6:

32 "If you love those who love you, what benefit is that to you? For even sinners love those who love them. 33 And if you do good to those who do good to you, what benefit is that to you? For even sinners do the same. 34 And if you lend to those from whom you expect to receive, what credit is that to you? Even sinners lend to sinners, to get back the same amount. 35 But love your enemies, and do good, and lend, expecting nothing in return, and your reward will be great, and you will be sons of the Most High, for he is kind to the ungrateful and the evil. 36 Be merciful, even as your Father is merciful.

Paul states this idea even more strongly in Romans 12:

¹⁴ "Bless those who persecute you; bless and do not curse them...⁷ ¹Repay no one evil for evil, but ²give thought to do what is honorable in the sight of all. ¹⁸ If possible, so far as it depends on you, ¹live peaceably with all. ¹⁹ Beloved, ²never avenge yourselves, but leave it² to the wrath of God, for it is written, ²"Vengeance is mine, I will repay, says the Lord."²⁰ To the contrary, ²"if your enemy is hungry, feed him; if he is thirsty, give him something to drink; for by so doing you will heap burning coals on his head."²¹ Don't be overcome by evil, but overcome evil with good.

Christians are called to lay down their bitterness, their anger and desire for retaliation towards those who have wronged them. He says, never avenge yourself. Why? Because God is our avenger. Leave it to God. Let the reality that God is the judge and avenger free you up to both let go of your hostility, but to the contrary be able to do good to them. To bless them. To feed them.

But what's even crazier is Paul says this applies to both the people who have hurt us, outside AND inside the church. Which is wild, yeah? Paul assumes that Christians are going to do one another wrong at times. There's no assumption that you're always going to have super easy and life giving relationships in the church. No. If you stick around any church long enough, you're going to get hurt by someone.

Which you may be fine with. When we hear this, I think we often apply it to our future selves. Yeah, I'm called to forgive when I'm hypothetically hurt by someone in the future. But we don't apply to past pain. We think about a future friend, not the past friend who hurt deeply 4 years ago. The person we still argue with in our minds. The situation we replay over and over trying to win and put them in their place.

What Jesus and Paul are calling us to apply to all of it. Past, present and future. To bless that real person that you resent, right now. To pray for them. To give thought to what is honorable to them, not to give thought to how you can give them yet another sick burn in your mind. To forgive. To move past the hurt and wrong and bless them. And although extremely difficult, it's a beautiful invitation

Tim Keller- *To forgive is to deny oneself revenge, to absorb the cost, to not exact repayment by inflicting on them the things they did to you in order to "even the score." Therefore forgiveness is always expensive to the forgiver, but the benefits—at the very least within your heart, and at best in the restoration of relationship and a witness to the power of the gospel—outweigh the cost."*

So again, practically, who do you need to forgive? Who have you withheld forgiveness from? Today, this week, get with the Lord and lay down that hurt and pain and ask for His help in forgiving. And then acknowledging, sin is sin, even if you were sinned against first. Let's look at our lives and see what we need to own.

To boil it all down. To those who lead us, who need us, and who mistreat us. Paul says to love them. In different ways sure, but to love and do good to them.

Now to try to wrap this up for us— I think the thing that comes to mind— is more of a question. Do you ever feel like we talk about this alot? Like at our church. I hear that we do a lot. Talk about how to treat each other a lot. Well I've got an answer. We like preaching the Bible. And the bible talks about it a lot. Most of the NT books are written to a community of people.

I mean one of the most commonly used word, over 300 times, in the NT is Greek term "adelphoi" - translated "brothers and sisters". The writers are almost constantly pointing to the familial and communal nature of our relationships.

Did you know there are 59 commands in the NT addressing how we treat one another? And that's just the commands that use the phrase 'one another.' There are countless others. Many are repeated over and over again. And that's not even including all the relationships outside of the church. It's all about how to deal with people. It's all about relationships and community.

"Love one another." "accept one another". "Don't pass judgment on one another" "have concern over one another". "Serve one another in love". "Be patient with one another". "Submit to one another". "Encourage one another". "Pray for one another". "Bear with one another". "Be kind to one another". "Be compassionate with one another". "Forgive one another". These are just a few.

It's a lot. And all of it is pretty hard. Because we're called to do all of those things without preference. And according to 1 Thessalonians 5, we're called to do it to people that are pain points. We're called to

it when it's someone we don't like, when it's someone way less mature than us, when they're annoying, when it's awkward, and even when they're done us wrong.

Which is why the church is so, so hard.

But it's also beautiful. Because the reason that so much attention is pointed at relationships and community is because it's at the heart of the Gospel. In the Gospel story, Jesus is on a mission to save the world and He does so by laying down His life, taking it up again in His resurrection and sending His Spirit to then dwell in those who believe. His mission was and is to push back darkness and advance His Kingdom through His people! Not just you as an individual person He's saved, but as part of His body, the church.

And this group of people saved by Jesus, aren't just given the duty of being a part of the mission. We're given the privilege, the joy of being part of God's new family! That's what we are as believers in Jesus.

According to the Scriptures, Christians have been adopted into a forever family. When we put our faith in Christ, we get God as Father, but we get a whole bunch of brothers and sisters too. Paul puts it so clearly in Ephesians 2...

Ephesians 2:19 - 19 So then you are no longer strangers and aliens, but you are fellow citizens (great church name) with the saints and members of the household [family] of God.

This is a call to reorient ourselves around who God says we are. And even more than a reorientation, it's actually a reversal. 'Before you were strangers and aliens, but now you are of the household of God.' From aliens to citizens. From enemies to friends. From strangers to family.

That is what Jesus intended for you if you're a Christian. His sacrifice brings us peace, salvation, justification, adoption, future hope— and it brings us a forever family. Jesus thought the church was worth dying for. He thought you were worth dying for, but also all of your brothers and sisters throughout the world. Even those that are major pain points in your life.

So the question then becomes will we take that seriously? Will we take it as seriously as Jesus does? Will you seek peace with your leaders, offer help to your fellow church members in need, and forgive those who have hurt us?

Pray.

