

Pastoral Care

1 Thessalonians 5:14–15

Having spent the last two Sunday mornings on just two verses, we are going to continue our study of 1 Thessalonians this afternoon. As you may recall, 1 Thessalonians is most likely Paul's first epistle. It was written to the church at Thessalonica not too long after the Christians there sent Paul and Silas away by night for their safety. Paul loved the church in Thessalonica and earnestly desired to see it grow and flourish.

Our theme this afternoon is "Pastoral Care." I have three points: (1) We are fallen creatures, subject to misery. (2) We should shepherd one another. (3) We should practice what we preach. First,

1. We are fallen creatures, subject to misery.

Paul writes, "Now we exhort you, brethren, warn those who are unruly, comfort the fainthearted, uphold the weak, be patient with all. See that no one renders evil for evil to anyone, but always pursue what is good both for yourselves and for all."

Note the words "unruly," "fainthearted," "weak." Here are signals that there were problems in the church there. People had come to Christ, but everything was not rosy.

And things are not rosy in the twenty-first century church either. Why? Because we are fallen creatures, subject to misery. Our Shorter Catechism (Q. 17) teaches that "the fall brought mankind into an estate of sin and misery." The following Scripture proofs are cited:

Gen. 3:16–19, 23. Unto the woman he said, I will greatly multiply thy sorrow and thy conception; in sorrow thou shalt bring forth children; and thy desire shall be to thy husband, and he shall rule over thee. And unto Adam he said, Because thou hast hearkened unto the voice of thy wife, and hast eaten of the tree, of which I commanded thee, saying, Thou shalt not eat of it: cursed is the ground for thy sake; in sorrow shalt thou eat of it all the days of thy life; thorns also and thistles shall it bring forth to thee; and thou shalt eat the herb of the field; in the sweat of thy face shalt thou eat bread, till thou return unto the ground; for out of it wast thou taken: for dust thou art, and unto dust shalt thou return.... Therefore the LORD God sent him forth from the garden of Eden, to till the ground from whence he was taken. **Rom. 3:16.** Destruction and misery are in their ways. **Rom. 5:12.**

Wherefore, as by one man sin entered into the world, and death by sin; and so death passed upon all men, for that all have sinned ... **Eph. 2:1.** And you hath he quickened, who were dead in trespasses and sins.

Childbearing and childbirth would not be pain- and sorrow-free. The husband would rule over the wife. The soil would produce thorns and thistles. Man would eat bread by the sweat of his brow. At death, his body would decompose and return to dust. He would be banished from the Garden of Eden. He would experience

“destruction and misery,” pain and loss. The greatest loss, however, would be spiritual death. Man, who was created to live forever in fellowship with God, would ultimately die and be separated from the life of God forever.

“The sinfulness of that estate whereinto man fell consists in the guilt of Adam’s first sin, the want of original righteousness, and the corruption of his whole nature, which is commonly called original sin; together with all actual transgressions which proceed from it” (SC 18).

“All mankind by their fall lost communion with God, are under his wrath and curse, and so made liable to all the miseries in this life, to death itself, and to the pains of hell forever” (SC 19).

“The fall brought upon mankind the loss of communion with God, his displeasure and curse; so as we are by nature children of wrath, bondslaves to Satan, and justly liable to all punishments in this world, and that which is to come” (LC 27).

Such misery! The only answer is the gospel!

So Paul exhorts the church: “warn those who are unruly, comfort the fainthearted, uphold the weak, be patient with all. See that no one renders evil for evil to anyone.” Here are descriptions of some of the people in the church in Thessalonica: “unruly,” “fainthearted,” “weak”—even vindictive.

Clearly, the church was not problem-free!

“Unruly”: not readily ruled, disciplined, or managed

“Fainthearted”: lacking courage or resolution

“Weak” might mean something like *emotionally debilitated*

Vindictive: disposed to seek revenge

These are not descriptions of Christian character!

Think of Christ! Paul wrote: “I beseech you by the meekness and gentleness of Christ” (2 Cor. 10:1). Or the words of Peter: “‘Who committed no sin, Nor was deceit found in His mouth’; who, when He was reviled, did not revile in return; when He suffered, He did not threaten, but committed Himself to Him who judges righteously.”

What a wonderful place church would be if all of us were Christlike! And shouldn’t we be? The Spirit of Christ dwells in our hearts by faith. Yet because of indwelling sin we do not always live like Christians. How each of us needs to put off the old man and put on the new—to submit to Christ and put others ahead of ourselves. Of course this is difficult—actually impossible to do in our own strength—but is possible by the power of Christ. The first point is: We are fallen creatures, subject to misery; second,

2. We should shepherd one another.

Remember, the title of this message is “Pastoral Care.” The adjective “pastoral” is related to *pasture* and relates to the work of a shepherd (Latin: *pastor*). Peter

writes, “Shepherd (KJV: “Feed”) the flock of God which is among you, serving as overseers, not by compulsion but willingly, not for dishonest gain but eagerly; nor as being lords over those entrusted to you, but being examples to the flock; and when the Chief Shepherd appears, you will receive the crown of glory that does not fade away.” (1 Pet. 5:2–4). Notice the pattern: Christ is the Chief Shepherd, the only King and head of his church. In his church he installs undershepherds—elders and pastors—to serve as examples to the flock. The job of these undershepherds is to feed the flock, that is, preach and teach the word of Christ, administering the sacraments of baptism and holy communion. “The cup of blessing which we bless, is it not the communion of the blood of Christ? The bread which we break, is it not the communion of the body of Christ?” (1 Cor. 10:16).

In the Psalms Jesus is called the Shepherd. “The Lord is my shepherd; I shall not want” (Ps. 23:1). There is also Psalm 80: “Give ear, O Shepherd of Israel, You who lead Joseph like a flock; You who dwell between the cherubim, shine forth! Before Ephraim, Benjamin, and Manasseh, stir up Your strength, and come and save us! Restore us, O God; cause Your face to shine, and we shall be saved!” Jesus is the shepherd of his flock. He feeds and saves us.

A few moments ago we sang from Psalm 80, “O Shepherd of Israel, hear us, give ear.” Christ is the good Shepherd, the true Shepherd of Israel, the chief shepherd who calls undershepherds to serve in his church. Undershepherds are accountable to the chief shepherd and duty-bound to obey him implicitly. One of the undershepherd’s duties is to equip the saints for the work of the ministry. Ephesians 4:11ff. says, “He Himself gave some to be . . . pastors and teachers, for the equipping of the saints for the work of ministry, for the edifying of the body of Christ.” There are two different ways of punctuating this text. The KJV has: “for the perfecting of the saints, for the work of the ministry” (comma after “saints”), as though these are two tasks committed to the church’s pastors: perfecting the saints, and doing the work of ministry. The NKJV, along with the ESV, NASB, and most of the modern translations, has “for the equipping of the saints for the work of ministry,” as though one of the pastors’ jobs is to equip the saints to do the work of ministry. But our present text is addressed to the “brethren,” not just elders and ministers. Under her elders and ministers all the church is being trained to do the work of warning those who are unruly, comforting the fainthearted, upholding the weak, being patient with all.”\ This is pastoral care.

Pastoral care is spiritual care and support, based on the word of God. Spiritual care is primarily the responsibility of pastors and elders, but gifted and committed church members can provide this care as well. They provide a valuable service; sometimes perceptive lay people become aware of needs within the congregation before the pastor and elders find out. Paul elsewhere writes that the members of the body “should have the same care for one another” (1 Cor. 12:25). This is perfectly

consistent with our text this afternoon: Paul writes, “Now we exhort you, *brethren*, warn those who are unruly, comfort the fainthearted, uphold the weak.” This exhortation is not for the pastors and ruling elders only, but for the “brethren.” Qualified lay people can certainly help, not in an official capacity, but coming alongside their hurting brothers and sisters to care for them.

Those who are unruly are those who are not readily ruled. How is the Christian to be ruled? By Christ! Christ is the only King and head of his church. His word is law and is to be obeyed. His word is perfect, applicable to every age. His word is truth and never becomes obsolete. It does not need to be improved upon. The Christian says with the Psalmist, “I esteem all thy precepts concerning all things to be right; and I hate every false way” (Ps. 119:128). Christ’s word is right, and everything that contradicts it is error, and must be rejected. Would you really want to stand before Christ and say, “Sorry, Lord, I thought I was wiser than you.”

It is always frustrating to read of Roman Catholic politicians justifying their support of the murder of unborn babies. They claim to be loyal Catholics, but they reserve the right to deviate from what they call “church teaching.” Now in Roman Catholicism the church claims to have the right to make up new teachings. Reformed Christians reject that. The Bible alone carries unconditional authority, the Bible alone is the word of God. “Sanctify them through thy truth; *thy word* is truth.”

Christian, you do not have the right to be unruly. Rather, your Christian duty is to bring every thought into obedience to Christ. Jesus said, “If ye love me, keep my commandments” (John 14:15, 15:10).

We are to comfort the fainthearted. The fainthearted are those who fear the crowd more than Christ, who cannot stand up for their Lord. The enemies of God try to isolate Christians and make them think they are crazy for wanting to stand up for Christ. For this reason every follower of Christ needs the weekly preaching of the gospel. We need the comfort of the gospel: “Comfort ye, comfort ye my people, saith your God. Speak ye comfortably to Jerusalem, and cry unto her, that her warfare is accomplished, that her iniquity is pardoned” (Isa. 40:1–2). When non-Christians want to isolate you and make you feel weird and all alone for trying to stand up for Christ, then you need to be reminded that he will strengthen you for every good work and will never leave you, nor forsake you.

When someone has gotten into the habit of backing down and not standing up for Christ, he needs his spiritual brothers and sisters to encourage him. Will you be an encourager, encouraging your fellow Christians to be strong in the faith? You may have to try again and again, many times. Do not give up. Keep doing what is right. Uphold the weak. God will be glorified.

(1) We are fallen creatures, subject to misery. (2) We should shepherd one another. Third,

3. We should practice what we preach.

Again, consider our text: “See that no one renders evil for evil to anyone, but always pursue what is good both for yourselves and for all.” “Always pursue what is good” means essentially “practice what you preach.”

We are saved “by grace,” “through faith,” “unto good works.” Pursuing what is good is a good work.

The Christian should always pursue what is good. He should never cut corners. He should never say, “Don’t do what I do, just do as I say.” What he does and what he says should match. He should practice what he preaches.

What is Christ doing in the present age? Building his church. Good old-fashioned horse sense tells us that if you want to have a good result, you have to use good ingredients. If you skimp on the ingredients, you will have a substandard product.

But in the case of the church, God has chosen to build it using *imperfect* people—even broken vessels. Yet his word assures us that the result is going to be “a glorious church, not having spot, or wrinkle, or any such thing; but . . . holy and without blemish” (Eph. 5:27). How can this happen? By the sovereign, powerful working of Almighty God. Why does God work this way? So that all the glory will go to him, and not to the creature. He says, “‘My grace is sufficient for you, for My strength is made perfect in weakness.’ Therefore most gladly I will rather boast in my infirmities, that the power of Christ may rest upon me. Therefore I take pleasure in infirmities, in reproaches, in needs, in persecutions, in distresses, for Christ’s sake. For when I am weak, then I am strong” (2 Cor. 12:9–10).

At the final day, when the glorious church appears, surrounding the throne of the Lamb in the courts of heaven, the brilliant plan of God the master builder will come to light. The saints and angels will be overwhelmed with its majesty and beauty: rebels, converted by Christ’s Holy Spirit, saved by grace, made into willing disciples, becoming like our glorious Savior.

Pastoral care is the ministry of shepherding God’s people by teaching and applying God’s word of grace.¹

In 1 Thessalonians 5:14–15 God’s people are exhorted to “warn those who are unruly, comfort the fainthearted, uphold the weak, be patient with all. See that no one renders evil for evil to anyone, but always pursue what is good both for yourselves and for all.” This is pastoral care in the context of the church: God using his people in the process of sanctifying and building his church.

Jesus said, “Take my yoke upon you, and learn of me” (Matt. 11:29). This is a universal duty binding on every Christian. All who belong to Christ must enroll in

¹ Adapted from <https://duckduckgo.com/?q=what+is+pastoral+care&atb=v314-1&ia=web> accessed 6-8-24

his school and learn from him, receiving his teaching and conforming themselves to his example of faith and godliness.²

Let us pray that we might be sanctified, growing in grace, displaying more and more the character of our Christ as we live as lights, shining in this needy world. Amen.

² Adapted from "Christian Discipleship," *Reformation Heritage KJV Study Bible* (Olive Tree Bible Software).