

Harmony with your Leaders

1 Thessalonians 5:12-13

Halifax: 12 November, 10:30 AM

Introduction:

For the last few Sunday mornings,

- our gracious Lord has been urging us to abound in our walk with Him.

In His providential care of us,

- He has brought it about that you have been hearing sermons about this from the Holy Scriptures that He has given to His church.
- As the one that He has called to preach His word here,
 - I do not claim to have any special prophecy to direct me about which passage to preach from,
 - but God in providence sovereignly works all things according to His plan...
 - And He has a special care in directing the lives of His people...
 - And especially when it comes to what they receive through His ordinances in answer to their prayers for His blessing on them.

So that is why I say that our gracious Lord has been urging us to abound in our walk with Him...

- He saw to it that you were urged to abound in walking in the ways of holiness that please Him on October 8,
- And that you were pled with to abound in sexual purity on October 15,
- And that you were called in His name to abound in brotherly love on October 22,
- And on the 29th, to abound in hope of the glorious appearing of Christ,
- And last Sunday, to abound in preparing for the Day of the Lord.

Today, we have come to a new section, in which the Holy Spirit continues to call us to abound in our walk with God.

- In this section, we are told how live in harmony with others in the church.
 - This week will be about living in harmony with the elders.
 - Next week, we will plan to look at living in harmony with each other.
 - And the week after that at living in harmony with God and His ordinances.

The portion I will be preaching from is 1 Thessalonians 5:12-13.

- But for our scripture reading, I want to begin by reading the first two and half verses of chapter 4—and then I will read our text in 1 Thessalonians 5:12-13.

So please give reverent attention to the reading of God's word, beginning with 1Thes 4:1:

1 Thess 4:1-3a: Finally then, brethren, we urge and exhort in the Lord Jesus that you should abound more and more, just as you received from us how you ought to walk and to please God; for you know what commandments we gave you through the Lord Jesus. For this is the will of God, your sanctification:...

And now from our text, 1 Thessalonians 5:12-13:

1 Thess 5:12-13: And we urge you, brethren, to recognize those who labor among you, and are over you in the Lord and admonish you, and to esteem them very highly in love for their work's sake. Be at peace among yourselves.

Thus far the reading of God's holy Word.

- May He add His blessing to it and also to the preaching of it.

You can see how He is still urging us in walking with God—in living our lives in the beauty of holiness in Him and with Him and for Him.

- Let's get in to our text.

I. I want you to see first of all that the elders of the church are spoken of here.

- They are the ones that you are called *to recognise, those who labour among you and are over you in the Lord and admonish you.*

A. Paul, as instructed by Christ, made diligent efforts to appoint elders in every place he planted churches.

1. It is important for God's people to understand the kind of government that Jesus has appointed for the church.

a. Failure to follow the government that He instituted has caused much trouble and division in the church through the ages.

- From very early on, there have been many individuals like Diotrephes, mentioned by John the Apostle in 3 John 1:9: **who loves to have the pre-eminence among them, and does not receive us.**

- Instead of following government by elders, these men have elevated themselves as sole authority over all the congregations in a city—

- They take to themselves the authority that Jesus has given to a plurality of elders—things like church discipline or ordination.
- Once you have men leading the church in their own way instead of according to scripture, you are going to have all sorts of different ways!

b. Clearly, the government that was established in the church by the apostles was rule by a plurality of elders or presbyters (the Greek word for elder is *presbuteroi*).

- Certainly, there is room for some various understanding as to the details, but we are clearly given a pattern of government by a plurality of elders at every level of church from the individual congregation to the whole body.

- One of the reasons (certainly not the only one) that the church is so divided today is because of a refusal to follow this pattern.

c. In studying this passage, I was reminded about how many biblical scholars deny that Paul established churches ruled by elders in his lifetime.

- They typically accept Paul wrote Thessalonians in AD 50...
 - but they do not believe that the leaders spoken of here are church officers because they believe that church government evolved slowly.

- They typically agree the church at Jerusalem was governed by elders, but they reject that Paul planted churches with elder rule in Gentile regions.

- You might wonder how they deal with the fact that Paul's epistles to Timothy and Titus speak about how to select elders which he also calls bishops or overseers (*episkapoi*)... well I will tell you...

- They get around it by claiming that Timothy and Titus were not written by Paul but by someone using his name after he was dead.
 - They do struggle with Philippians because they believe that it was written by Paul—but it has that pesky salutation where he includes the bishops and deacons.
2. For we who believe that the scriptures are not the word of men, but as they are in truth, the word of God and so without error; it is easy to show that as soon as Paul started planting churches, he was establishing them with Presbyterian government...
- following the pattern of the church at Jerusalem which followed the pattern of the Jewish church in the Old Testament which had elder rule.
- a. Someone could argue that there might not have been elders established at Thessalonica yet because they are not called elders in our text...
- But since the congregation is called to recognise certain persons that are over them in the Lord, what else should we think these leaders are?
 - If they are not officers, why are they called to recognise them?
 - Paul even uses the same word that he uses to describe the rule of these leaders that he uses to describe the rule of elders in 1 Timothy 5:17 when he speaks of *the elders that rule well*.
 - In our text, the word *rule* is translated *those who are over you*.
 - When you couple this with the fact that Paul has already established the practice of ordaining elders in the churches he planted,
 - there is no reason to think that these who are to be recognised as over the Thessalonians are not elders.
- b. Here is the evidence from scripture that Paul established churches with elder rule from the very start of his ministry.
- 1) In Acts 14, we have Luke's account of Paul's first missionary journey with Barnabas in the mid 40's.
 - This is long before Gentile churches were supposed to have elder rule.
 - But Acts 14 tells us that after going through and preaching the gospel in many cities in Asia Minor,
 - Paul and Barnabas retraced their steps.
 - Acts 14:23 summarises what they did: **Acts 14:23: So when they had appointed elders in every church, and prayed with fasting, they commended them to the Lord in whom they had believed.**
 - The word *appointed* means to elect by a show of hands...so they led the way in establishing each church with its own elders!
 - 2) That government by elders was already established at Jerusalem is not usually denied—and it can also be supported from scripture.
 - In Acts 11:30, it refers to an offering being sent to Jerusalem, and it says that it was **sent...to the elders by the hands of Barnabas and Saul**.
 - This was the government that God appointed for his people in the Old Testament, and it remained the way of the Lord in the New Testament.

- The main difference was in the priesthood—
 - Jesus became the only priest, and as His sacrifice was the only one, elders were appointed to preach Christ crucified in place of priests offering sacrifices.
 - Now, instead of priests and elders serving together as the elders of the church, you have ministers of the gospel and elders labouring side by side to rule the church.
- 3) In Titus, we see that Paul did not consider churches to be fully established until they had their own elders...
- We speak of church plants as mission churches before they have elders and once they do, we refer to them as organised churches.
 - In Titus 1:5, Paul shows that churches are not established until they have elders.
 - He says to Titus, Titus 1:5, **For this reason I left you in Crete, that you should set in order the things that are lacking, and appoint elders in every city as I commanded you—**
 - And then he begins to describe the qualifications for these elders and refers to them by their other name—bishops or overseers...
 - **Titus 1:6... if a man is blameless, the husband of one wife, having faithful children not accused of dissipation or insubordination. 7 For a bishop must be blameless, as a steward of God, not self-willed, not quick-tempered, not given to wine, not violent... and so on...**
 - So you see that something is lacking until churches have elders.
 - In some cases, the elders may have overseen more than one congregation in a city, but there was always a plurality to govern together.
3. It is most probable that at Thessalonica, Timothy did what Paul told Titus to do at Crete—to appoint elders.
- You will remember in chapter 3 how Paul writes that he had wanted to return to the Thessalonians, but as he was not able to do so, had sent Timothy (v. 2): “to establish you and encourage you concerning your faith.”
 - For Paul, establishing the church meant catechising them in the basics of the faith and ordaining elders.
 - Now that Timothy has returned, Paul is writing to encourage them to treat these new officers with proper love and respect.
- I will have a lot more to say about that in a little while...
- But first...
- B. I want you to see how these elders are described.
1. First of all, that they are referred to as **those who labour among you**.
 - a. This becomes a statement with a punch when it is noted that the word *labour* refers to *labour to the point of exhaustion*.

- It is the same word that was used to describe the love of the Thessalonian church in chapter 1:3—that Paul remembered how they wore themselves out loving each other.
 - Of all who are in the church, the elders ought to be doing this for their fellow members in the church...
 - wearing themselves out for them.
- b. When there is a great cause and you know it, what else can you do but labour?
- 1) When elders consider how Christ came from heaven to seek and to save that which was lost...
 - And how His love did not stop until He had completely poured out His life on the cross,
 - When we see how much He loved us all—how we are His precious heritage...
 - what constraint there is—
 - what necessity is laid upon us to pour out our lives for the flock.
 - 2) And when on top of that we see the great needs within the congregation...
 - for spiritual instruction, for nurture, for correction, for encouragement, for prayer—
 - And when we see how important it is that they abound in the word,
 - who can be idle?
 - who can be negligent?
 - 3) This word that means to labour to the point of exhaustion is used to refer to the work of ministry repeatedly in the Bible...
 - for example, in 1 Cor 3:8, 15:10, 2 Cor 6:5, 11:23 & 27, Col 1:9, 1:29, 1 Thess 3:5, Gal 4:11, Phil 2:16, 1 Tim 4:10, 5:17.
- c. The call to labour in love for the flock of God actually falls upon all of you...
- But the elders are to set the example—
 - Husbands are to labour to nurture their wives...
 - Parents are to toil for their children...bringing them up in the nurture and discipline of the Lord...
 - And one member is to toil for another in love to Christ and to each other.
2. The next thing Paul says about the elders is that they are those who preside over you.
- a. He calls them “those who are over you in the Lord.”
 - We already saw that the same word is used in 1 Tim 5:17 where it speaks about the elders who rule well...
 - The word carries the idea not only of ruling and governing, but also of protecting and caring for.
 - b. Probably the best way to describe it is that they are to take responsibility for their souls.

- Hebrews 13:17 describes elders as those who **rule over you...** who **watch out for your souls, as those who must give account.**
 - They are responsible, in particular, to watch out for the souls of others.
 - I heard about a young man who told a seasoned minister that he only had a small congregation of 35, and the veteran replied that 35 was quite enough souls to give an account for on the day of the Lord!
 - This is certainly the way of Christ!
 - He saw us lost in our sin and unable to recuse ourselves, and He took responsibility for us—
 - He joined Himself to us so that He might be punished and condemned in our place.
 - c. If ever there was a day when men do not want to take responsibility, it is our day!
 - Some may want to control others, but that is not at all what taking responsibility for others is all about.
 - Note well that Paul says that they are over you *in the Lord*.
 - This means that the care they are responsible to exercise is not their own, but His care!
 - They are the ministers of Christ.
 - It is His people whom He dearly loves that they are to lead and care for.
3. And the third description that Paul gives of the elders is that they are those **who admonish you.**
- a. There is a progression here in what Paul is saying...from the general to the specific...
 - He began with the general fact that they are those who labour among you to exhaustion...
 - Then that they are over you in the sense of taking responsibility to lead you and to care for you...
 - And now he gets to the specific task of the elders—that they admonish you.
 - b. This word *admonish* is *noutheteo* in the original—
 - Some of you have heard of nouthetic counseling.
 - Jay Adams coined this term to represent Biblical counseling...
 - He says: **Nouthetic confrontation has three ideas inherent in it. There is something in the counselee that needs to be changed. This change must take place by verbal confrontation. The confrontation always occurs out of concern for the counselee. Nouthetic counseling, then, is confrontation out of concern that leads to biblical change.**
 - This is very much what discipleship is all about.
 - You confront others with the word of God to bring change in their lives—to help them abound in their walk with God!
 - The word literally means *to put them in mind*.
 - You put them in mind of what the Word of God says to them.

- c. There are two kinds of elders that scripture describes.
 - There are those who are called to the public admonishment—the preaching of the word and the sacraments—
 - And then there are other elders (as there were in the OT) who admonish privately among the flock.
 - Those who preach also engage in private admonition.
 - In both cases, the elder is there to put the people in mind to what God calls them do and be.
 - The elder is to go in search of them when they go astray, to correct them when they err, to spur them on when they are slack, to guide them, to instruct them, to comfort them, to encourage them...
 - Above all, he is to point them Christ and His call upon their lives as the one who restores them to God the Father.
 - Love the Lord your God! Trust Him! See His glory and faithfulness! Walk with Him!
 - That is their admonition.

TRANS> What a blessing they are to be to God's people!

- Jesus calls them to speak for Him to His sheep!

II. Now let us look at how the Lord urges you to live in harmony with the elders of the church.

- And let me just comment here...
 - I started to say, "Let us look at how you *as members of the church* are to live in harmony with the elders of the church,"
 - but then I corrected myself by taking out the words *as members of the church* because the truth is that everyone ought to live in harmony the elders the of some faithful church of Jesus Christ.
 - If you are not a member of His church, then you ought to become one.
 - If it is because you have not trusted in Jesus for salvation, then you ought to do that—God almighty calls you do that...
 - And in doing that, you ought to unite with His church and come under the care of the elders that He has appointed and live in harmony with them as much as it depends on you.

➤ Okay, so what are we all called to do with the elders?

A. First, you are urged to recognise them.

- Of course this does not mean that you should be able to identify them and say, "Oh, that is one of the elders,"
 1. It means that you are to recognise their place of authority in the church of Jesus Christ.
 - a. Leon Morris says it means that you are to know the worth of them and to appreciate their value.

- Matthew Poole says that it means that you are to own them in their office, to have regard to their teaching, to submit to their government, and to reward their labours.
 - In 1 Corinthians 16:18, Paul speaks of leaders as those who ought to be acknowledged (or recognised—same word) and in parallel with that in 1 Cor 16:16, he says that you should submit to them.
- b. You are to recognise that the elders represent Christ and His rule in the church.
- They are the ministers that He has appointed to watch over you and to admonish you in His name.
 - Their authority is not their own, but it is His authority that they exercise as His agents in the church.
 - Hebrews 13:7 says: **Remember those who rule over you, who have spoken the word of God to you, whose faith follow, considering the outcome of their conduct.**
 - And Hebrews 13:17 says: **Obey those who rule over you, and be submissive, for they watch out for your souls, as those who must give account. Let them do so with joy and not with grief, for that would be unprofitable for you.**
 - Because He sent them, they have to answer to Him for what they do or don't do.
 - And you are to submit to them!
2. This is not easy!
- a. We have a hard enough time submitting to God Himself...
- We don't trust Him even though He has never given us any reason to question His goodness and His integrity.
 - Satan has poisoned our minds with notions that God is not good and that He is not faithful...
 - We are so warped by our sin that we don't even trust the living God, even when He has given us His only Son to redeem us!
- b. If you have a hard time trusting Him, how much more will you have trouble trusting and submitting to men that are sinners like you?
- Mere men who, though they may stand out as examples in the church, are still full of flaws and imperfection—
 - whose motives are often impure and whose pride and selfishness can often be seen...and of course we all know that what lies beneath the surface is always even worse!
- c. But part of trusting the Lord and submitting to Him is learning to submit to the elders that He has appointed without fear.
- 1) When you know that the Lord is control it makes all the difference if you know anything of His love and faithfulness to you!
- It is not that you blind yourself to the flaws of your leaders, but you recognise that God has appointed these men and you trust Him to even use their flaws for your growth in grace.
 - The Lord Himself is looking out for you!

- 2) Wives are called to trust God in this way with their husbands, even when their husbands are disobedient to God.
- You don't have to try to control them and manipulate them.
 - God had put your husband over you and God knows all about his disobedience and his foolishness and his selfishness.
 - As God has made him your head, he is responsible to speak into your life and to lead you and correct you in the Lord,
 - but you are not responsible to try to fix him or to be all fretful about what he does.
 - Certainly, if he does something that is legitimately criminal or if he is a member of the church and he does not repent of sin—such sin that calls for church discipline,
 - then you have a duty to address that—but otherwise, you are to trust the Lord without fear.
 - Peter says it beautifully in 1 Peter 3:1-4: **Wives, likewise, be submissive to your own husbands, that even if some do not obey the word, they, without a word, may be won by the conduct of their wives, ² when they observe your chaste conduct *accompanied by fear*. ³ Do not let your adornment be *merely* outward—arranging the hair, wearing gold, or putting on *fine* apparel— ⁴ rather *let it be the hidden person of the heart, with the incorruptible beauty of a gentle and quiet spirit, which is very precious in the sight of God.***
 - The quietness he is talking about that is so beautiful to God is the quietness that comes from trusting in your loving heavenly Father in such times...
 - from having such confidence in Him that you aren't all fretful about things...that you are able to leave it to the Lord to work it out.
 - Understand that this does not work in reverse.
 - Wives are supposed to leave it with the Lord—but husbands are called to admonish their wives—they are over them in the Lord.
 - And so with elders—they are responsible for the flock and must give an account for them—but the flock is not responsible for the elders...
 - unless what they are doing is criminal or worthy of church discipline.
 - Members and wives and children are to have that quietness, not sullenness, but calmness that comes from knowing that the Lord will deal with it all.
 - That brings us back to where we started...
 - You are to recognise those who are over you in the Lord—to recognise the place of leadership that the Lord has given them in your life to admonish you!

TRANS> But Paul goes on...

- Not only are you to recognise the elders—

B. You are also **to esteem them very highly in love for their work's sake.**

1. **Esteem them very highly**—the adverb “**very highly**” is a triple intensive, so you might say, esteem them very, very, highly!
 - When you esteem someone you hold them in high regard—you treat them as if they are very important—you put tremendous weight on what they say.
 - You treat them as valuable—and again, this is a triple intensive—so your esteem is to abound and super-abound toward them...
 - And not only are you to respect them, you are also to love them!
 - You are to cherish them just as you cherish anything that you love.
 - You look out for it, you speak well of it, you treat it with love.
 - Angus Macleay says:
 - How should the respect and love be conveyed?
 - And he answers: **It may show itself in many different ways but it will first be an underlying commitment to those in leadership, followed by personal support and encouragement, as well as a willingness to listen to and engage with their preaching of the Word of God.**
2. But why should you have such love and high esteem of them?
 - The answer is right in our text:
 - **esteem them very highly in love for their work's sake.**
 - a. What is their work?
 - It is to promote the honour of Christ within the church!
 - To admonish everyone—put everyone in mind of what a perfect and trustworthy Saviour He is—what a gracious and glorious Saviour.
 - To see that everyone is trusting Him and serving Him—
 - That is the work that they are labouring in to the point of exhaustion.
 - That is why they have been placed over you to admonish you.
 - b. Calvin describes their work like this:
 - **Now, this work is the edification of the church, the everlasting salvation of souls, the restoration of the world, and, in fine, the kingdom of God and Christ. The excellence and dignity of this work are inestimable: hence those whom God makes ministers in connection with so great a matter, ought to be held by us in great esteem.**
3. O brothers and sisters,
 - If you love Christ, you will see how important this work really is.
 - You will pray for the elders of your church—you will pray earnestly.
 - You will be very glad to have elders to care for your soul.
 - You will esteem them not for their persons—because they are such great persons—but for their work!
 - That means that if they admonish you in the Lord, you will take it to heart—as if Christ Himself has admonished you—because He has!
 - You will not dismiss it or sluff it off.

- And you will be eager to be admonished!
 - You will hang on the words that are preached to you.
 - You will welcome them and implement them.
- And you will pray for the elders and for their work in building Christ's kingdom and helping His people.
 - It will be more important to you than necessary food and water.
- I don't mind saying this to you because although I am an elder, it is not about me—it is about the work that Christ has given me and Dave to do.
 - If we (as elders) would esteem this work the way we ought to, we would be better elders—a humility that pretends our work is not important is a pushing off of the responsibility that Christ has given to us.
 - He is the Lord and He is the Saviour—and it is His work we must do!
 - What a grand and glorious Saviour He is—if only all of us could see it! It is our task as elders to constantly put you in mind of Him!

C. Our text ends with the admonition to **be at peace among yourselves.**

1. You promote peace in the church when you live in harmony with the elders.
 - When the elders and the members of the church are in conflict with each other, it disrupts everything.
 - It is one of Satan's greatest devices to prevent the elders from doing the work that Christ has given them to do so that Christ will not be exalted in the church.
 - Both elders and members have to exert themselves to maintain peace with one another...
 - Elders must not be harsh and overbearing.
 - They are to do their work with meekness as those who truly love Jesus and want others to love Him too.
 - And members must be patient with all the infirmities of the elders and with those times when they show impatience and speak harshly.
 - The elders shouldn't do this, but if they do, you will only bring harm to yourself and to others if you make a big stir about it.
 - Besides, remember that they may not have even erred—it is hard to receive admonition—
 - I am sure when Jesus denounced the moneychangers or pronounced his sarcastic woes upon the Pharisees, they thought Him harsh—but He spoke exactly as He ought.
 - We must all strive to maintain unity of the Spirit and the bond of peace.
2. Next week, we will look at some of the things that elders and really everyone ought to do to maintain peace.
 - This admonition to be at peace among yourselves is a transition from what we just saw about living in harmony with elders to verses 14-15 where we are instructed about how to live in harmony with all of our brothers and sisters in the church.

Conclusion:

For this week, let us go away remembering how important our Saviour is and how important the elders are whom He has given to us to keep us in mind of that.

- Let us recommit ourselves to welcome the admonition of the elders and to pray that it will do much good in our lives and in the lives of the church all over the world.
- And let us give thanks to our precious Saviour for providing those who labour among us and over us in Him and admonish us.
 - It will truly delight Him if you do this.
 - He loves you much more than you think and it makes Him very pleased when you cherish His provision for you in the church.