

Sometimes We Get It Right (ZCC 7/7/13) I Thessalonians 5:12-15

*12 But we beg you, brothers, to know those who labor among you, and are over you in the Lord, and admonish you, 13 and to respect and honor them in love for their work's sake. Be at peace among yourselves. 14 We exhort you, brothers, admonish the disorderly, encourage the faint-hearted, support the weak, be patient toward all. 15 See that no one returns evil for evil to anyone, but always follow after that which is good, for one another, and for all.*

I've heard a lot of negative things from the pulpit during my lifetime. I've heard warnings about hellfire and brimstone. I've heard every kind of sin condemned from the largest to the smallest. From the sermons I've heard through the years, I can tell you that Christians are against almost everything. It seems that it changes over time and with changes in geography, but over the years I've been told that we are against drinking and we are against mixed bathing (lots of you are too young to even know that phrase) and we are against dancing and actors and movies and we are against Democrats--but we are also against Republicans (I guess it depends on where you live) and we are against beards and we are against smoking and against men's earrings and we are against short dresses and makeup and going out to eat on Sundays and against fishing on Sundays for that matter and we are against men with long hair and women with short hair and we are against sinning and evil in general and a whole lot of other things I can't think of right now.

You may have noticed three things--(1) you probably didn't agree with all those things. (2) Some of these things are at least somewhat contradictory. (3) The list was almost totally negative in scope.

As Mother Theresa once said, "Why simply stand against evil when you can march forward for good?"

Did you hear about the elder who was hard of hearing--and also had a hard time staying awake in church? The church was having a long and difficult business meeting and he had slept through most of it. Just as someone made a motion and second to adjourn, he woke up. The moderator called for a vote and since almost everyone was tired, they voted "yes." The elder, said, "no!" in a loud voice. Since he was outnumbered the meeting was adjourned--and as they were leaving, the moderator asked why he had voted to not adjourn after such a long meeting. "Well, I didn't know what we were voting on and I figured 'no!' was a safe bet."

I believe there is a time for negative preaching and there is a time for correction from the Bible. Still I think that sometimes we come up a bit short on congratulations and "attaboys" in the church. We sometimes forget to look at what we do right and what we have done that is good and positive.

A couple of things I noticed about this church is that you take the needs of others seriously. Your circle of caring extends much wider than just this church. The person in need doesn't have to be a member of the church--you care because of the need and you act. The WHEAT ministry sprang from your love and care. Your building of wheel chair ramps comes from your care for others.

So "attaboy" to Zion Christians Church--you are working hard to meet the needs of others. You are reaching out in love to this community and also in a much wider world.

This passage from Paul is about relationships--mainly between the church and the pastor. Paul gives some very specific instructions. From my own experience, I want to congratulate you on a job well done and encourage you to continue as you relate to me as your interim and to pastors in the future. In a sense, Paul is giving specific instructions on how a church and a pastor can live in harmony--to have a

solid relationship with each other.

First notice how Paul begins this passage. Paul often gives commands like someone who is in charge but here he begins humbly and asks--"please do this thing..." and then goes on to make requests of the people and of their ministers or pastoral leadership.

The way Paul lays this all out, there is mutual responsibility to each other and with each other.

Notice that Paul says that a pastor has a responsibility to "be among you" and that seems to carry with it the idea of becoming one of you or becoming part of you. Just a few years ago, there were lots of evangelists who traveled and who preached at revival services in churches all over the country. Being an evangelist has no appeal to me--I had rather minister through relationships and Paul seems to be saying that a true pastor is with the congregation much as a shepherd is with the flock or a farmer is in the field.

It would be a very difficult to minister well to a church and a community from the outside--but I think being "among you" is more than that. The church I pastored in Smyrna, North Carolina is right on Core Sound and when we went there, commercial fishing was still the way many people made a living--and even more of them had a family history of fishing. The first thing I wanted to do was go out on a boat and learn to set nets and crab pots and trawl for shrimp--and since it was an older community with a long history, I wanted to learn how it "used to be." In my mind, that is was what it meant to be among them. That is why I want to know your stories and the stories of your families.

When Paul talks about diligently laboring, the Greek carries with it the idea of laboring even when you are weary. The expectation is that a pastor works on many fronts--studying constantly so that they are able to understand how God's word applies today--where we are and as we are--and then it is the pastor's responsibility to preach those truths to the congregation. A pastor is also required to dispense the ordinances and perform other duties of the office--that might include teaching and counseling and encouragement and prayer and even helping individuals discern God's will in their lives. All of this is to be done in the will of God and in the love of God and for the glory of God. In addition, a pastor is responsible for their own family and responsible for keeping their own spiritual life intact.

So those are some of the responsibilities of a pastor.

Wow--no wonder burnout is a problem--no one can possibly do all those things perfectly--and even if you did, you would never get finished. It is kind of like all the repairs they are making on I95 in Richmond--by the time they are finished with what they are doing, the rest of it will need work.

Even in that first verse, Paul begins to lay out some of the congregation's responsibilities. To "appreciate" carries with it the idea of knowing. Just as the pastor should seek to know each of you, the church is to "know" their pastor--to know who they are and what they are about--where do they come from and what are their interests. This mutual responsibility creates and grows a relationship--a strong bond between the pastor and the people.

It also means the congregation is responsible to make themselves known to the pastor. Share your stories and open up you lives to them. Tell them about your family history and your husband or wife and share what concerns you and what brings you joy. As you share those joys and concerns, it makes it easier for your pastor to do their work--and it makes them feel a part of you.

In this knowing there is a sense of affection and respect--acknowledgement that the person you call here as being called of God to be here. I can feel called by God to be here, but it is in your acceptance and acknowledgement that helps create genuine relationship and community that bears spiritual fruit.

“Knowing“ your pastor means to understand that they are trying to grow in their own understanding of the mysteries of God as they try to help you do the same thing. To know your pastor means to understand they are imperfect but are still a blessing from the hand of God as the church seeks to do God’s work in this place.

Verse 13 says that the congregation is to esteem their pastor in love because of their calling and because of the work they do--speaking well of them in the community and loving them.

Zion does these things and does them well. As an interim--standing between what was and what is to be, I can say that you have accepted us more and better than I imagined that you would. You are sharing yourselves with me. You are telling us your stories. You have been patient and respectful and have acknowledged my calling to this place for this time.

You have listened to what I have to say as well as any group I’ve ever preached to. Only three of you sleep through the sermon every Sunday--now you are trying to figure out who it is and I’m only kidding. Though our relationship hasn’t been that long, you have spoken well of me to your friends and family and in the community--and real fruit will come from that as we work together in this place. Thank you for your acknowledgement and acceptance.

There is more to Paul’s job description for all of us--we have a responsibility to work together to get the rest of our work done.

We are to be at peace among ourselves--this means congregation to pastor and pastor to congregation as well as member to member. This means we are not to have family squabbles that hurt our relationships to each other. We are to see each other through the veil of the love of Christ. That said, we are also to do our best not to offend each other. We are to be at peace--the peace that the Angels spoke of in Bethlehem--the peace that Christ brings. The church is to exist in a peace and harmony that passes all understanding. We are to love each other in spite of our warts--and make no mistake, we all have warts.

Notice that Paul also says the church is to speak to those in the congregation who are disobedient to the word of God. Given the context, I think it is safe to say that Paul is speaking of being disobedient as it pertains to relationship and to living in peace with one another and to loving one another--to speak to those who create disharmony within the church. We are to speak gently to them--in love and concern for them as well as the church. Notice also that it says we are to speak to THEM--not each other and not people in the community--just them.

In verse 14 Paul says all of us are responsible to comfort those who are struggling--encouraging those who are weary--physically, mentally, or spiritually. Strengthen those who are weak--doing what it takes to make them strong again. We should never allow someone to slip from the fold without notice and concern. We should go those who are struggling and let them know that we care and that we love them.

Paul also tells us to be patient--LONG-suffering, in some translations. We are to forgive. How many times did Jesus say that we are to forgive? [Seventy times seven.]. I might add that we are to forgive without complaining about it.

You and I are not allowed to return evil for evil--be it in word or deed. We gave up that "right" when we became children of the living God.

We are to seek what is good--good for the church but also good for one another and when we know what that is--when we have found it, we are to pursue it. I am to seek what is good for you and you for me and you for you and you and you. Positive ministry is important--we need to be against some things, certainly, but as Christians, we don't just stand against evil, we march forward for good.

As the people of God in this place, we are to seek the good for each other and out in the world--we are to seek good for all we come in contact with. If we would do this and do it consistently, people would drive from all over to worship with us. When we really act like people of God people take notice, I promise you.

I'm working to meet the requirements Paul has laid out for me. You are doing a wonderful job of meeting the requirements he has laid out for you--especially those that have to do with our relationship and ministry together. Thank you!

I think we are also doing a good job with our joint responsibilities in the church and community-- BUT--we must always remember how important our fellowship and our relationships within the body of Christ really are. Without a healthy fellowship, no one will want to come and be a part of us. Without healthy relationships in the body, no one will believe we are really children of the King. Churches that don't love one another are irrelevant to the world and irrelevant to the kingdom of God-- and they often die a long and slow and painful death.

I think you are doing a great job, but there is always room for improvement--on my part, on your part-- and jointly. We can never let our guard down--we have to continually seek to refresh our relationships to God and to each other as we work in this place. Relationships are sometimes hard--and sometimes harder than that. They take effort. They require "give and take." They require commitment. Today, I ask that we make a joint commitment to those relationships--ours with God and yours and mine and yours and yours and yours--because all we are and all we do as a church flows from that.

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