

Gospel Shaped Church (18) – Being A Healthy Church

Six times in this letter we read the popular NT phrase *one another*. It's a phrase that echoes through the teaching of the NT & it is a phrase which should echo in every Christian heart. In 3:12 Paul prays; **“may the Lord make you increase & abound in love for *one another* & for all, as we do for you.”** In 4:9 he writes that they **“have been taught by God to love *one another*.”** In 4:18 in the context of Christ's return he writes; **“Therefore encourage *one another* with these words.”** In 5:11 he writes; **“Therefore encourage *one another* & build one another up, just as you are doing.”** Then in 5:15 Paul writes; **“See that no one repays anyone evil for evil, but always seek to do good to *one another* & to everyone.”**

The church Paul initially wrote this to was not perfect. There is no perfect church this side of Christ's return, but there are plenty of imperfect churches God can use to help perfect us. But while the young Thessalonian church was not perfect it was healthy & he wanted to ensure it continued to be so. That is what I believe these closing verses are about. Paul was able to recognise this church had been taught by God to love one another & he was able to acknowledge they were already encouraging one another & building one another up. He sees much health in this very young church but he wanted to ensure this health continued. Gordon Fee suggests these verses may also be Paul's way of passing the mantle of leadership to those referred to in verses 12-13. If this is true, & I think there is reason to believe it is, then he is giving this young church responsibility for its own health. He is writing these instructions to the whole church in order to show them how to stay & grow in good health as a local church.

The title of this message is *Being a Healthy Church* & I believe this is a word for us today. Do we want to be a healthy church? I believe each one of us by our decisions & attitudes decide in part whether or not we are a healthy church. Let me make this clearer. In the NT there are not only positive 'one another's' like the ones I noted in this letter there are also negative 'one another's' which are acts of sin & therefore a welcome mat for the devil to do his worst among us. Romans 14:13 tells us; **“Therefore let us not pass judgement on one another any longer.”** Galatians 5:26 warns us against becoming **“conceited, provoking *one another*, envying *one another*.”** Colossians 3:9 warns; **“Do not lie to one another.”** James 4:11 NIV says; **“Brothers & sisters, do not slander *one another*”,** & 5:9 says; **“do not grumble against *one another*.”**

Perhaps Galatians 5:15 is the most graphic of these negative one another's; **“But if you bite & devour *one another*, watch out that you are not consumed by *one another*.”** This verse reminds me of 1 Peter 5:8; **“Be sober-minded; be watchful. Your adversary the devil prowls around like a roaring lion, seeking someone to devour.”** Whose nature are we reflecting if we bite & devour one another? What Paul is talking about in Galatians 5:15 is the dangerous consequences of devil like behaviour in the church. When Christian's do on one another what the devil seeks to do & when a person acts in such a devil-like way they end up doing the devils work for him. Paul's words to the Galatians give us a glimpse of what a terminally

sick church looks like, one that has become the opposite of everything a church should be – a church displaying the opposite of Jesus’ new commandment to love one another as he has loved us! A church reflecting the character of Satan instead of the character of the Saviour! A church full of devil-like people instead of Christ-like people. Since the church is made up of individual members, Satan gets in when we as individual members of Christ’s church give him a foothold. When devil-like things like envy, bitterness, slander, grumbling, gossip & deception are given a foothold in our life we play the role laying out the welcome mat for Satan. Oh we might pray “*come Holy Spirit*” with our mouths but if we are tolerating any of these things in our lives then our lives we are in reality an open invitation to Satan.

There isn’t time for such things because we are on a mission. For this reason there is only time to do the one another’s that reflect the forgiving, gracious & loving nature of Christ. This church was making an impact for the gospel in their region & Paul didn’t want attitudes or people in the church to hinder the health of the church & progress of the gospel. Paul’s closing section gives us some instruction which will help us in being a healthy church & which I also believe will help fortify us against giving the devil a foothold or stronghold.

Remember Paul is writing to an already healthy church. I just want us to see the contrast so that we choose health over unhealthy & that choice is made through a million micro decisions in our everyday Christian lives. This church was a healthy because of their work of faith, labour of love, & steadfastness in hope. They knew who they were, they had received the gospel joyfully in spite of persecution, they welcomed it as the word of God & they experienced the power & assurance of the Holy Spirit. They were impacting their region & beyond, they had turned from idolatry to serve the living God & were living in view of Christ’s return even though they did need some correction about what that meant for everyday living. They also needed some teaching around holiness & sexual purity but for the most part they were in good health. They were loving one another, encouraging one another & building one another up. All these things are evidence of health & therefore they are things we should long to see in our own fellowship, but I believe these closing instructions are given to help them maintain & excel in being a healthy church. This is how a healthy church stays healthy. This is the kind of church I want to be a part of!

1. HEALTHY LEADERSHIP

In order for a local church to maintain, grow & excel in health it needs healthy leadership & there are two sides to this. First we need we need a healthy example of leadership & second we need a healthy view of leadership. We assume Paul is talking about elders here because his instruction matches the common practice of appointing elders to care for local churches. However no title is used, only a brief description of what these leaders do. Paul writes; **“We ask you, brothers & sisters, to respect those who labour among you & are over you (or care for you) in the Lord & admonish you, & to esteem them very highly in love**

because of their work.” This is the earliest teaching we have on church leadership. There are no titles given in these verses but rather there are three practical things we learn about church leadership: Church leaders are those who labour among God’s people, those who oversee or care for God’s people & those who admonish God’s people. Paul is also not talking about three separate roles he is talking about a team of leaders who work together within the local church.

The phrase **“labour”** indicates hard work. 1 Timothy 5:17 says; **“Let the elders who rule well be considered worthy of double honour, especially those who labour in preaching & teaching.”** We find the same ideas here in this verse – labour & oversight. Leaders lead by working hard among the people & at what God has called & gifted them to do. Their labour is what is important to them not position or recognition. The phrase **“over you”** can also be translated **“care for”**. The Greek conveys both authority & providing care so both are appropriate. That this leadership is **“in the Lord”** is important to note. Jesus teaches us that kingdom leadership is very countercultural. We don’t lord it over like the gentiles we view ourselves as servants of all (Matt 20:25-28; Luke 22:24-27; 1 Peter 5:3). It is not a hierarchy; it is overseeing, being an example & caring. We can so easily view things through hierarchical lenses because almost every system in this world is so. Church leaders lead among equals, as fellow children in God’s family. Their authority comes through their call, work & example in Christ not through title or position.

According to Ephesians 4 Christian leadership is all about equipping others to do the work of ministry. If anything it is bottom up not top down. It’s so much about having a role but helping others find theirs. So overseeing is not doing everything or lording over everyone but equipping the saints to do the work. The more a leader matures the less it becomes about his or her ministry & the more it becomes about others being equipped for ministry. The heart is to see others flourishing like a father longs to see his children flourishing. This is a reflection of Father God’s heart & it should be reflected in church leaders. Perhaps equipper would be a better general description for Christian leaders, since all members of Christ’s Church are ministers. **“Admonish”** is the third phrase & it has to do with warning, but is it warning with a heart that is for the person being warned. *“Correcting while not provoking or embittering...”*

As well as learning something about church leaders we also learn something about how these leaders were to be viewed. Paul uses the words respect & esteem very highly in love because of their work. Again the emphasis is on work not title or office. In verse 12 Paul asks the church **“to respect”** leaders. This carries with it the idea of knowing & acknowledging those who have responsibility for them in the Lord. They are to recognise the activity of leadership among them. Paul is likely affirming the leaders here in light of the following instruction... In verse 13 he says; **“esteem them very highly in love because of their work.”** This is not about exalting leaders but highly esteeming them in love because of the work they do. The phrase **“in love”** indicates loving them as fellow believers. This is a relational thing not a hierarchical thing – we are a family of God. So this is not putting leaders on a pedestal but loving them as those who labour among us,

care for us in the Lord & admonish us with hearts which reflect our loving heavenly father. This is about getting behind them, gathering around them & working with them. There is no clergy & laity divide in the kingdom only leaders who work among, oversee & admonish every believer to be all it can in Christ.

2. HEALTHY COMMUNITY (13b-15)

In verse 12 Paul makes a request, in the last phrase of 13 he gives a command. **“Be at peace among yourselves.”** Relational harmony is vital in the church of God. This is why Paul wrote to Titus; **“As for a person who stirs up division, after warning him once & then twice, have nothing more to do with him, knowing that such a person is warped & sinful; he is self-condemned.”** According to Proverbs 6:19; **“one who spreads strife among brothers”** is one of the seven things God hates. So this command to be at peace among ourselves is no light matter, but a sobering command. A healthy church is a church at peace, an unhealthy church is one divided into factions. With this in mind Paul gives instruction regarding how to handle difficult people. Even though this was a healthy church Paul seen the possibility of division & we need to discern & recognise this possibility so we can avoid it at all costs.

It is the responsibility of each Christian to admonish the unruly, encourage the fainthearted, help the weak & be patient with all. However it is part of the work of the leaders to care & oversee that these things get done. That the unruly are not left unchecked, the fainthearted get the encouragement they need & the weak get help. This responsibility is given to all but the fact it comes up just after acknowledging leadership is no mistake. The fact Paul uses the word **“admonish”** again so shortly after highlights this. It is the leaders work to make sure these things happen, to make sure no one repays anyone evil for evil... that rejoicing & prayer are given priority in all occasions... that the Spirit is not quenched, that prophecy is not despised yet is tested etc... All of us should care about all these things, but it is the leader’s work to care & oversee these things. To not care is to not lead.

The phrase **“unruly”** is a military term referring to those who are out of line. Those out of line need to be not followed but brought back into line for the peace of the church... The fainthearted are those who are easily discouraged or disheartened, they need gentle encouragement. The weak are those who need more help than others. We must be patience with all these people. Our hearts are to be for them. To see them in line, full of courage & strong. *Some need warned. Some need encouraged. Some need helped. All need patience.*

Paul says **“See that no one repays anyone evil for evil, but always seek to do good to one another & to everyone.”** This is how to treat one another & handle difficult people not through pay back but by seeking out opportunities to do them good. It was while we were yet sinners that Christ did the ultimate good thing for us – died in our place on the cross - & we ought to reflect this is how we treat one another & everyone. Repaying evil for evil never works, it never changes hearts, it never fixes anything, it is

demonic... Genuinely seeking to do people good is much more effective & Christ-like & that has to be our heart even in the most difficult conversations with the most difficult people.

3. HEALTHY HABITS (15-22)

Paul then goes on to list some of the habits for maintaining health in a church.

- Doing good to all
- Rejoicing always
- Praying continually
- Give thanks in all circumstances
- Not being cynical or gullible about spiritual fire or gifts
- Abstaining from evil

These are habits which help us guard our hearts against the enemy & therefore help us be at peace among ourselves.

4. HEALTHY PEOPLE (23-28)

The best way we can play our part in being at peace as a church is by letting the God of peace sanctify us completely, so that every part of our being becomes healthy. It's healthy Christians that make a healthy church. Paul writes; **"Now may the God of peace himself sanctify you completely, and may your whole spirit & soul & body be kept blameless at the coming of our Lord Jesus Christ. He who calls you is faithful; he will surely do it."**

We are called to be a healthy church... We have God's power to make us so... Our community needs a healthy church... We are not to be a church where the vultures are allowed to gather make other members their prey... We are a church always on the lookout to do good to one another & everyone... Our primary part in this is the health of our own spirit & soul & body – our whole person. God is our sanctifier, Jesus is coming & he who has called us will do it. Look to the faithful one for he & he alone can keep up blameless. His grace with us is enough to make us healthy.