

Patience unto Peace (Part 2)

Living out 1 Thessalonians 5:14 within the Covenant Family of God

Introduction

The Text

“And we urge you, brothers, admonish the idle, encourage the fainthearted, help the weak, be patient with them all” (1 Th 5:14).

Wise Love in Action (From Part 1 to Part 2)

- A. As we saw last week, because of what Jesus has done for us—in His life, death, and resurrection—we have been adopted in as God’s covenant family and together we are called to pursue God’s comprehensive shalom.
 - 1. And one of the ways we pursue this peace is by living out 1 Th 5:14 with one another.

- B. This verse is about wise love. And one of the first things we learn is that wise love is flexible, it’s customizable, it’s tailor-made to its object. If I am to love you truly I must know you rightly.
 - 1. Consider biblical counselor Mike Emler as he comments on our text: “Paul differentiates between those who are purposely stirring up trouble [the idle]..., those who are primarily fearful [the fainthearted], and those who are...helpless [the weak], and urges a different ministry priority for each...As you get to know someone, clarity develops about which of these aspects is...most prominent.”
 - a. I gave us just two simple steps last time to help us along in this “as-you-get-to-know” process—a process I called Humble Diagnostics: (1) Avoid Assumptions; and (2) Ask Questions.
 - i. “Am I dealing with the unruly, the fainthearted, or the weak?” Each person calls for a different expression of love. If I don’t avoid assumptions and ask questions, then, in all my attempts to love you, I may come to find I’ve actually been hurting you more than I’ve been helping.

- C. This was the beginning of what I was calling “Wise Love in Action”. This morning we continue in that line by diving deeper into the individual couplets Paul gives us here—“admonish the idle, encourage the fainthearted, help the weak”. I’m moving towards you, I’m getting to know you, now I want to know how to actually walk out what Paul says here with you.

1. We'll explore each couplet in the context of the Thessalonian church—which will hopefully put some flesh on these terms for us; and we'll draw out implications for us as a covenantal family here at Mercy Hill.

(1) Admonish the Idle

Fleshing out the Terms

- A. We remember the “idle” are not just those who are lazy but insubordinate, not just apathetic but rebellious. They are those who see the line that God has drawn and cross it willfully.
 1. Such people Paul calls us to “admonish” or warn.
- B. These terms here start to take on flesh when we consider the context of the Thessalonian church.
 1. We get hints at the particular issue Paul’s dealing with in 1 Th 4:11-12, but it becomes much clearer in the second letter Paul writes to this church: “⁶ Now we command you, brothers, in the name of our Lord Jesus Christ, that you keep away from any brother who is walking in idleness and not in accord with the tradition that you received from us.⁷ For you yourselves know how you ought to imitate us, because we were not idle when we were with you,⁸ nor did we eat anyone’s bread without paying for it, but with toil and labor we worked night and day, that we might not be a burden to any of you.⁹ It was not because we do not have that right, but to give you in ourselves an example to imitate.¹⁰ For even when we were with you, we would give you this command: If anyone is not willing to work, let him not eat.¹¹ For we hear that some among you walk in idleness, not busy at work, but busybodies.¹² Now such persons we command and encourage in the Lord Jesus Christ to do their work quietly and to earn their own living.¹³ As for you, brothers, do not grow weary in doing good.¹⁴ If anyone does not obey what we say in this letter, take note of that person, and have nothing to do with him, that he may be ashamed.¹⁵ Do not regard him as an enemy, but warn him as a brother” (2 Th 3:6–15).
 - a. It seems that “some church members were selfishly and lazily exploiting the charity of wealthier members to avoid having to work” (ESVSB, p. 2302). And Paul says, essentially, you need to admonish them.
 - i. Here then is a perfect example of the church encouraging and helping people they should be admonishing. They are trying to love but they aren’t loving wisely. It’s not loving these brothers to keep the handouts coming. It’s unnecessarily perpetuating their sin.

Three Observations

- A. I want to make three observations regarding admonishment as it is presented in this text:

(1) Admonishment Requires Clear Lines

- A. Paul had given the church a “tradition” to walk in (v. 6); “an example to imitate” (v. 9); and a clear command to follow: “If anyone is not willing to work, let him not eat” (v. 10). But these guys didn’t care. This was disobedience the church could see. And therefore it is disobedience the church must do something about.
 - 1. We don’t admonish for every little thing that we think might possibly be sin. Admonishment comes into play when the transgression is clear.

(2) Admonishment Rises in Severity

- A. The admonishment in 1 Th 4:11-12 is firm but low-volume. But when Paul gets word that things haven’t changed since his first letter, the volume rises as he pens the second.
 - 1. We read this and it sounds harsh, even unloving, to us: “keep away” (v. 6); “let him not eat” (v. 10); “have nothing to do with him, that he may be ashamed” (v. 14). But it is precisely what love calls for on this occasion.
 - a. These brothers were taking lightly the things of God, living for the here and now, exploiting Christian charity, deceiving the family, and deceiving themselves. Love pushes into that and says we can’t let you go on this way. Either turn back or we’ll have to turn you away.

(3) Admonishment Is Family Business

- A. To make this case even clearer, Paul closes Paul his instruction in v. 15 with this: “Do not regard him as an enemy, but warn him as a brother.”
 - 1. Paul is aware of what the church might be tempted to do with this severity. “Get rid of the enemy! Harden your hearts against them. Get them out!”
 - 2. But Paul says, “warn him as a brother.” This isn’t purge the church of people that annoy you, or hurt you, or get in your way. This is covenant family work here. It is not an “us” vs. “them” thing. It is a “we” thing. Even if we have to exclude someone for their unrepentant sin, our ultimate hope is to include them in the end!

Charting a Course down the Middle

- A. How are we doing at this? Do we know how to speak a hard word in love? We want to avoid either extreme on this point right? We don’t want to be that guy who constantly feels it’s his job to call out everyone else. But we don’t want to be that guy who avoids the hard word at all costs either.
 - 1. Against the former extreme, we remember: “Good sense makes one slow to anger, and it is his glory to overlook an offense” (Pro 19:11). We’re not trigger happy, calling out everything we see, as if we’re God’s gift to the church. We’re slow in

this. We don't even want to do this. We pray God convicts by His Holy Spirit before we ever even have to. But, if it comes to it, we're pressing in, because we love.

2. For against the latter extreme, we remember: "Faithful are the wounds of a friend..." (Pro 27:6a). Saying the hard word is often the most loving thing you can do for a person.

B. The wise love that admonishes the idle charts a course down the middle.

(2) Encourage the Fainthearted

Fleshing out the Terms

- A. We remember that "fainthearted", in the Gk., literally means: "small-souled". These are people who feel like their souls are just shriveling up under the weight of life's burdens.
 1. Such people, Paul calls us to "encourage" or console.
- B. Let's turn again to the context of the Thessalonian church to put some flesh on these terms.
 1. We read in Act 17:1-10 that the Thessalonian church was born in adversity. When Paul and Silas rolled in, people got saved, but things got so hairy so quickly that they were run out of town. And even though they were gone, the persecution continued in that city against all these new believers who had just come to Christ. (cf. 1 Th 1:6; 2:14; 3:1-5).
 2. And then in 4:13, though it is not totally clear, it would seem that the persecution they were facing had left many of their brothers and sisters dead.
 - a. And they were grieving! And it seems they were doubting. "Where is God? Are we just abandoned here. I don't think I like this God. We came to Him and everything just got worse." And their souls were just shriveling inside of them.
- C. So what's Paul going to do with these fainthearted family members? Encourage them: " ¹³ We do not want you to be uninformed, brothers, about those who are asleep, that you may not grieve as others do who have no hope. ¹⁴ For since we believe that Jesus died and rose again, even so, through Jesus, God will bring with him those who have fallen asleep. ¹⁵ For this we declare to you by a word from the Lord, that we who are alive, who are left until the coming of the Lord, will not precede those who have fallen asleep. ¹⁶ For the Lord himself will descend from heaven with a cry of command, with the voice of an archangel, and with the sound of the trumpet of God. And the dead in Christ will rise first. ¹⁷ Then we who are alive, who are left, will be caught up together with them in the clouds to meet the Lord in the air, and so we will always be with the Lord. ¹⁸ Therefore encourage one another with these words" (1 Th 4:13-18).
- D. I don't know how you try to encourage others, but here's what Paul does: he walks with these hurting people to the cross and shows them afresh what Jesus did for them there.

1. And there in the light of the cross, he tells them how their story is going to end. Jesus suffered, died, and rose again for you. Your sins, done away with! So that when He returns, it will not be wrath for you. No! *“We will always be with the Lord!”* (v. 17).
 - a. He has not left you. He has not forsaken you. He’s holding onto you even now. Hold onto Him!
- E. This is what the fainthearted, the small-souled, need to hear more than anything.
1. They don’t need to hear us whistling, “The sun will come out tomorrow...”, because it just might not. Persecution is going to continue for this church, and, based upon Paul’s second letter to them (cf. *2 Th 1:4-12*), it seems like it’s only getting worse.
 2. So we don’t whistle platitudes. We proclaim promises. God has not said that the sun will come out tomorrow and we will have our best life now. But He has said that the Son is coming back soon and He will rescue us from this evil age and bring us safely into the world that’s to come!
 - a. When these words are received through the Spirit by faith they take the small-souled and give them wings.

(3) Help the Weak

Fleshing out the Terms

- A. We remember that the *“weak”* here refer to those who suffer from some incapacity or limitation. It would cover anyone from an infant to the elderly; from the autistic to the handicapped; from the orphan to the widow; from the raped to the robbed, from the kid with ADD who can’t seem to get his homework done, to the man who in spite of working two jobs can’t seem to provide for his family.
 1. Such people, Paul calls us to *“help”*—to cling to, to hold onto.
- B. We actually can’t be sure who these people are in the context of the Thessalonian church. But this provides a very nice counterpoint to the first couplet, does it not?
 1. I imagine some in the church who aren’t working, who are relying on Christian charity, not because they’re lazy, unruly, or deceptive, but because they’re unable.
 - a. This couplet encourages us to press into each person, avoiding assumptions, asking questions. Those who we think are idle might truly be unable—he’s handicapped, he’s got a mental disorder, she just got out of an abusive relationship.

- i. These people don't call for our admonishment, they cry out for our help!
- C. With this call to "help the weak" we are reminded that the church is not just the mouthpiece of Jesus but His hands and feet as well.
 - 1. We don't merely proclaim to others of the world to come, we bring something of that world back into this one. We don't merely tell others to be warmed and filled (Jam 2:15-16), we invite them out of the cold and into our home, and we sit them down at our dining room table and feed them like family. We don't just pray or preach the miracle, we act the miracle.
 - a. "Those whom society walks over and puts down are lifted up and given support by the church" (PNTC, 254). O let's be a church like this!

Two Observations

- A. Let me pause and make two important observation at this point.

(1) These Are Fluid Categories

- A. These categories are helpful guidelines and starting points but they are not meant to be hard lines. In fact, every person you ever try to love will fit, in one way or another, into all three of these categories.
 - 1. Now, to be sure one will probably present itself as the leading category, but we must not so pigeonhole a person that we miss the true complexity of their heart and life.
 - a. Consider Emlet again as he softly warns us against this pigeonholing: "I counseled one man struggling with long-term unemployment whose church elder concluded he was simply lazy ['He's in the idle category. Admonish him!']. As I got to know him, I certainly saw issues of laziness and selfishness requiring attention. He needed to see a God who called him to live sacrificially on behalf of others. But I also saw a lot of fear of failure and fear in social contexts. Here he needed to experience a patient Father who is near him and who strengthens him with grace and mercy in the midst of his fear. I also discerned that he was weak in executive functioning (skills such as multitasking and prioritizing). Here an acceptance of probable brain-based limitations, along with "common grace" organizational strategies was warranted. Was he unruly at times? Yes. Fearful? Yes. Weak? Yes. Holistic ministry required patient attention to all aspects of his experience."
 - i. This brother needed the full array of wise love, not just one hue. And so it will be with the person you are trying to love. Let the categories of 1 Th 5:14 guide you forward, but don't let them box you in.

(2) We Have Personal Tendencies

- A. We must recognize that we all have particular expressions of love that come more naturally to us.
 - 1. Some of us are ready for the conflict, the tough love of admonishment. We have no problem speaking our minds, calling others out.
 - 2. For others of us, the thought of admonishing another person makes us sick to our stomach. And yet, we could spend all day sharing encouraging words with the downcast.
 - 3. Still others of us would rather not say a word at all. We prefer to be in the background serving—making meals, working with our hands, helping.
- B. Wise love has many faces, but we tend to wear only one or two comfortably. We need to be careful we aren't always playing the same cards.
 - 1. As David Powlison points out: “A hammer thinks everything is a nail [admonish the idle]; a blanket treats everyone as shivering [encourage the fainthearted]; a wheelchair thinks everyone needs a lift [help the weak]. But wisdom sees people for what they are and gives what is needed.”
- C. This is yet another reason why doing this as a covenantal family is so important. You're personal tendencies will challenge and balance out mine. Together we can learn and grow to love others more wisely.

Be Patient with Them All

- A. Whatever our personal tendencies, there is one particular expression of wise love that Paul says ought to characterize them all: patience: “Be patient with them all.”
 - 1. Loving others is going to take us to the end of ourselves. It's going to be hard. It's going to test our patience.
- B. The unruly will test our patience because turning from sin is often a long, messy road. We will be prone to look down our nose at them. We will be tempted to admonish from the hip in a harsh tone because we're tired of dealing with it.
 - 1. Patience with the unruly says: “Even though I'm admonishing you, I'm not beating you up here, I'm hoping for you. I'm ready to walk with you through this. I'm not shooting at you from a distance like an enemy, I'm warning you with my arm around you like a brother.”
- C. Dealing with the fainthearted and depressed can be draining. We might come out of the gate with a lot of hope for them, but when our words don't immediately seem to fix things, when they're still struggling with the same despondency weeks, months, years later, the temptation is just to pack it up and leave: “Just get over it already!”

1. Patience with the fainthearted says: "I'm ready not just to proclaim promises to you from a distance but to walk with you through the valley. I know there is no silver bullet in the fight of faith! If it takes a lifetime, I'm here, let's keep walking to the cross together."
- D. The weak will test our patience because their need is often incessant and they are often unable to grow beyond their limitations. We might start to see them as a nuisance. Like they get in the way of our happy little lives.
1. Patience with the weak says: "My help doesn't have a shelf life. There are no strings attached. I'm here, holding onto you as long as you have need."

Doing for Others What He Is Doing for Us

- A. Now, we must never complain here as if God is asking us to do something unfair, something overbearing, in all of this. No! He is not asking us to do anything for others that He is not already doing for us.
1. Who in this room doesn't deal with the unruliness of the flesh on a daily basis?! And when we start crossing lines that we shouldn't, what does He do?
 - a. He gets in our face and admonishes us like a Father: "[The Lord disciplines the one he loves](#)" (Heb 12:6). He won't let us get away!
 2. Or who in this room hasn't dealt with the despair of life in a fallen world? Some of you are in it right now. You're so fainthearted you feel like you're all but drowning in the air. You're waiting for the doctor to call back and the hammer to drop. And where's God?
 - a. He's coming towards you with scarred hands. He's entering into your pain. He's a safe place for you. He doesn't think you're stupid for being afraid. He's not going to give up on you.
 3. Or who in this room isn't weak and needy and impoverished? It is the mark of fallen man to think he needs nothing from God. But it is the mark of a Christian to happily admit he needs everything from Him—from our daily bread to the forgiveness of sins.
 - a. And God delights to help us in our weakness: "[While we were still weak,...Christ died for the ungodly](#)" (Rom 5:6).
 4. He admonishes, encourages, helps with the utmost patience to the end, even to death on a cross.
- B. In [1 Th 5:14](#), God is not asking us to do anything for others that He is not already doing for us. It is ours to learn from Him, and lean on Him, and let the momentum of His love move through us.

1. We have everything we need to love others wisely because we have the One who has so wisely loved us.
 - a. As Paul writes in 1 Th 4:9: “Now concerning brotherly love you have no need for anyone to write to you, for you yourselves have been taught by God to love one another” (1 Th 4:9).