

## **Northwest Community Evangelical Free Church**

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Dave Smith

Sermon manuscript

### **SERMON SERIES: Well done, good and faithful CHURCH**

(studies in 1 Thessalonians)

#### **Go Team!**

(1 Thessalonians 5:12-15)

Study #10

#### **Introduction: To all the role players...**

The New Testament offers several metaphors to help us think about the church Jesus established.

Bride. Vine. Body. Family. Flock. Temple.

Each image brings to mind one or more aspects of the church's nature and ministry. We are brothers and sisters in the family of God. We are branches in Jesus' vine. We are sheep, trusting in our Good Shepherd's care. We are each individual parts of the Body over which Jesus is the head.

And each metaphor highlights the central truth that there is One who rules over the church (Jesus), while all of the rest of us are under His authority.

This past week, I allowed myself freedom to ponder what images Jesus (or Paul) might have employed if they had been speaking to the church of 2008.

Of course, the only inspired metaphors are those we find in the Bible.

But, given that Jesus took images from common, everyday first century life and pressed spiritual meaning into them, is it not possible that if He were speaking today, He might take a common, everyday image and press spiritual meaning into it?

I wonder...

If Jesus was speaking to an American audience, would He possibly liken the church to a sports team?

After all, every team has one head coach and lots of players. The coach is in charge. What He says, goes. The players all have roles to fill. And when a good coach leads skilled, cooperative players, the team does well.

In this extended metaphor, you and I are the players on the team coached, directed and guided by the King of kings and the Lord of lords - Jesus!

Of course, every metaphor breaks down at some point. Even the biblical metaphors break down. And toward the end today I'll call your attention to the most glaring breakdown of this church-as-team metaphor.

But today we will see the Apostle Paul (one of Jesus' choice assistant coaches?) give us - role players all - instruction as to how to live in such a way that the team (the church) wins the only game that counts - bring maximum glory to Almighty God!

For the past two Sundays, you and I have considered events that haven't happened yet. Our themes have been events that the Bible says are coming: the rapture of the church, the nature of Heaven, "The Day of the Lord" and Jesus' return. Scripture calls us to be awake and to live ready!

Today, we backtrack to the present and focus on the here and now. And for the next few minutes, we're going to consider how we on this team are supposed to play/work/live together. This morning, we're thinking about the **relationships** we sustain with each other in the church.

As Paul might remind us that we're all on the same team, we teammates are going to work at getting on the same page.

The verses in front of us mark the homestretch of our book. And, at the head of the homestretch, we are drawn to think about the church as an **organization**.

On any team, each player has a distinct role. First, we'll consider those who fill the role of leader in the church.

### **Paul, on Leading & Following (vv. 12-13)**

#### **The High Call to Leadership**

*Church leadership is hard work!*

**[12] But we request of you, brethren, that you appreciate those who DILIGENTLY LABOR AMONG YOU...**

The defining description of leaders in the church is that they engage in "**labor**."

"Labor" is the term a first century speaker would use to describe someone who engaged in hard, manual work.

For instance, when Jesus told the apostle Peter to cast his net on the opposite side of the boat to catch fish (Luke 5:5), Peter told Jesus, **[Luke 5:5]... "I will do as You say and let down the nets."**

Peter actually didn't see any point to it. After all, as he reminded Jesus, they had already *toiled* (there's our word) all night long.

Fishing with nets all night long on the Sea of Galilee was sweat-popping, backbreaking, bone-wearying work. Physical training for an athletic competition will have the same effect.

And this is the word Paul uses to describe the activity of church leaders.<sup>1</sup>

It's the kind of activity that can exhaust a person. Providing leadership to a church ministry can be emotionally, mentally, and physically exhausting.

Perhaps you've seen some men and women in this church or in another church who have "**diligently labored**" in ministry. They've worked hard, stayed up late, gotten up early, sacrificed time, given money, expended energy. They've sacrificed for the team.

I know quite a few here at Northwest whose involvement would be best described as "**diligent labor**." They know - and you know, too - that church leadership is hard work.

Why is it hard work? Listen.

*Leaders "have charge" over the members of the church*

**[12] But we request of you, brethren, that you appreciate those who...HAVE CHARGE OVER YOU IN THE LORD<sup>2</sup>**

Paul is not saying that church leaders get to boss other Christians around! Remember, the Head Coach is Jesus. Not Paul. Not anybody but Jesus.

He is saying that church leaders (and translated into our context here at Northwest, we are talking about Elders) are charged with the weighty responsibility of giving direction and guidance to how ministry is carried out in the church.

Just as there are many ways to organize a team, you can choose from a variety of ways to **organize** a church and its leadership.

The major ways are represented by the Roman Catholic, Orthodox and Episcopalian Churches (episcopalianism), the Presbyterian Church (presbyterianism) and the Baptist Church (congregationalism). Our church is, as are many Evangelical Free Churches, something of a hybrid between congregational and Elder rule.

Likewise, there are all sorts of ways to **select** the leadership of a church.

<sup>1</sup> It can also refer to diligent mental work. And, it was sometimes used to describe the training undertaken by an athlete for competition. Significantly, Paul uses it a lot to refer to service for God.

<sup>2</sup> Acts 14:23 indicates that the Apostle Paul's practice from the earliest days (First Missionary Journey) was to appoint elders in every church (and those being referred to in 1 Thessalonians 5:12-13 are probably elders).

Leaders might be elected by the congregation. They might be selected by the current leadership. They can rotate on and off the board or be made an Elder for life.

At Northwest, the membership selects, from a qualified slate of candidates in September, men who will serve a two year term as an Elder. And the Elder Board is charged to manage (not “micro-manage”) the ministries of the church.<sup>3</sup>

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 \*\*\*NEWS FLASH! Do you know how Northwest selects men to serve in the role of Elder? We’ve recently changed our procedures. Pick up one of the handouts that describes the new procedure on the black credenza in the entryway this morning!  
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Paul affirms here that the leaders of the First Church of Thessalonica worked hard in the exercise of their leadership.

I can assure you that the Elders who have been elected to lead at Northwest Community Church (Rich Bartholomew, Neil Bute, Rick Clayworth, Todd Havekost, Barry Miller) work hard, too!

And so do the dozens of other team leaders at Northwest. At this church and most any other church you can think of, not only do Elders lead, but a host of others provide leadership to the ministries we carry out.

And, in addition to working hard and giving direction to the Body, leaders in a church are charged with engaging the congregation at a very personal level.

*Leaders “engage”!*

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<sup>3</sup> In 1 Peter 5, the apostle Peter, speaking to elders, wrote, *[2] shepherd the flock of God among you, exercising oversight not under compulsion, but voluntarily, according to the will of God; and not for sordid gain, but with eagerness; [3] nor yet as lording it over those allotted to your charge, but proving to be examples to the flock.*

*[12] But we request of you, brethren, that you appreciate those who...give you INSTRUCTION<sup>4</sup>*

Significantly, the word that my version renders “*instruction*” is not the word that is normally used to describe teaching *content*.

Almost every time this particular word is used in the New Testament it is translated *admonish*.<sup>5</sup>

Leaders in the church are willing to admonish their teammates when it is necessary to do so. They will **remind** a fellow Christian of something that has been forgotten. They will **warn** them if there seems to be a danger of forgetting.

Admonishment is intentionally giving direction to a soul. It is guiding into deeper levels of discipleship. It is giving correction to someone who has strayed. It is giving counsel to the confused.

So, the picture you’re getting of church leadership is one of hard workers who think through process and structure to ensure the proper working of the team AND - even more! - take the time and have the heart to develop iron-on-iron, redemptive relationships.

In light of the fact that leaders are called to this kind of role in the church, those who follow are called to a certain response.

### **The High Call to Followership**

*People, get to know your leaders!*

*[12] But we request of you, brethren, that you APPRECIATE those who diligently labor among you...*

Everybody knows how important it is that church leaders know the people in the church. We hear that frequently and it is very true! Here, though, notice that Paul urges the reverse.

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<sup>4</sup> NIV has “who admonish you”; The Message has “those who have been given the responsibility of urging you and guiding you along in your obedience.”

<sup>5</sup> As it is here in the King James Version and in the NIV.

He wants the congregation to know (literally “to know”) and to express appreciation to the leaders.<sup>6</sup>

It’s tough to follow the leadership of someone you don’t know. So, here’s an assignment:

Identify a leader in the church whom you don’t know. You’ve benefitted from his or her leadership in some way - but you don’t know them. Get to know them! Greet them in the hall or the Hospitality Center. Introduce yourself. Give them a call.

I am confident that any overture you make to get to know an Elder, a Deacon, a Ministry Coordinator or any other leader here at Northwest will be welcomed. We need to get to know each other. We want to get to know each other. We’re in this together!

The followership given by the congregation is to be personal, just as the leadership given by the leaders is to be intensely personal.

Now, as you get to know leaders, you’ll see that they are making certain sacrifices to lead.

Paul knew that this was happening in Thessalonica, just as it is happening here. And that is why he gives the second piece of instruction we find in this passage directed at followers.

*The invaluable ministry of affirmation*

**[12] But we request of you, brethren... [13]...that you ESTEEM THEM VERY HIGHLY IN LOVE because of their work.**

You would not be at all out of line if today you went out of your way to express your appreciation to any of the Elders for the leadership they provide to our church.

But don’t stop there.

- If you have youth in Middle School or High School, try looking for some way to honor those who teach Youth Sunday School or accompany them on outings or support them in a dozen different ways.
- Take a minute to gush your thanks to the Elementary School servants who are leading your children in the Word through Sunday School and AWANA and other activities.
- Thank those who are leading our church into deeper and deeper involvement with a lost world through Missions and Local Outreach.
- Say “Thanks!” to any of the staff who may have ministered to you or to your family in meaningful ways recently.
- Let those who lead us in worship through song, Deacons who serve so well and with such great attitudes, Ministry Coordinators who lead Men’s and Women’s ministries and others know that you are truly grateful to them for their leadership.

Honor anyone you know who is “*diligently laboring*” here at church!

Of course, a human leader is never to be put on a pedestal. But, there is to be love and honoring and respect and appreciation flowing between those led and those leading in the church.

When this reciprocity is in place, the team enjoys peace.

**How Should We Then Live (together)?**

*[13b]...Live in peace with one another.*

So, the goal of every leader in the church is spend and be spent as he or she serves God’s people to God’s glory. And the goal of every follower (and we are all followers at some point in the church) is to overwhelm the leaders with appreciation for their work.

When that’s happening, the team wins!

Now, if these thoughts have prompted us to think about the church as an **organization**, what follows brings us back to the thought of the church as a living, breathing **organism**.

What Paul has to say in verses fourteen and fifteen is not directed at church leaders. It is directed to every believer in the church.

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<sup>6</sup> My version translates the word “appreciate”; others have “honor” or “respect.” But the word literally means “to know.”

## One of a Kind Ministry - the Uniqueness of YOU (v. 14)

### Some are UNRULY - Admonish Them

*[14] We urge you, brethren, admonish the unruly...*

In this and every other church you are sometimes going to run into folks who are out of step with what God wants them to do, with how He clearly wants Christians to live.<sup>7</sup>

When you encounter this person, you are to admonish him.

That may not be your first inclination when you hear someone lie or use filthy language, when you see someone mistreat a child or a spouse, or when you find someone involved in some other sin.

You might be tempted to withdraw, to avoid, or to tell three or four good friends of your discovery. Resist those temptations.

Go to that teammate and, in love, admonish them. Call that person to follow the Lord. Pray before you go. Pray with them. Pray afterwards.

But you'll notice that this one brief line - "*admonish the unruly*" - calls you and me to ramp up the intensity of our interactions with each other. Such engagement is risky. It isn't safe.

But on this team, we are to love each other too much to leave unruliness unaddressed.

That's one way to deal with one situation. Every person and every situation doesn't get treated identically, though.

We are not cookie cutter people, so a cookie cutter formula isn't appropriate.

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<sup>7</sup> Greek: *ατακτος* - referring to the soldier who is out of step with the rest; to the army retreating in disarray; anything out of order.

Some people need to be engaged who are not unruly. Some are troubled and tempted to give up, to throw in the towel. What do you do when you encounter someone in that condition?

Paul says we are to sidle up close to them and give them the gift of **proximity**.

### Some are FAINTHEARTED - Encourage Them

*[14] We urge you, brethren...encourage the fainthearted...*

These brothers and sisters are discouraged and despondent. They are about to give up because the load life has put on them seems overwhelming.

The word we translate "*fainthearted*" literally is "*small of soul*." And what a "small-souled" brother or sister needs is your encouragement.

"*Encourage*"<sup>8</sup> is one word formed by combining two Greek words - "beside" and "to speak."

The particular need of the fainthearted, discouraged Christian is to know that someone cares enough to get up close and speak with them.

They don't need someone yelling from a distance. They don't need rebuke or admonition. They need YOU, up close and personal.

At other times, you will happen upon folks in the church who are, to use Paul's word, weak. In one area of life or another, at a given time, they just don't have the get up and go to keep on keeping on.

### Some are WEAK - Help Them

*[14] We urge you, brethren...help the weak...*

There are all kinds of reasons why someone might experience weakness.

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<sup>8</sup> A very different word than Paul usually uses. Here, not *παρακαλεω*, but *παραμυθησθε*.

A man might have recently taken a hit from someone else, relationally. A woman might have been unfairly criticized. Repeated failure in an attempt to lead a God-honoring life can cause weakness. Disease can cause weakness. So can a job loss or a career setback.

Whatever the cause, after a prolonged period of attack or failure, this Christian is so wounded that he's staggering. She's not going to make it across the finish line.

This Christian is weak. And while this won't always be their condition, it is now. And this Christian needs your **HELP**.

They might need your material help to make it from paycheck to paycheck. The help might come in the form of a strategy to avoid places of temptation - on the drive home or on the Internet.

Help could look like meals, baby-sitting, tutoring, transportation, car repair, home fix-ups, Bible study, prayer support - you name it!

Depending on the form of weakness, help could take dozens of shapes and forms. But, believers who aren't making it need the assurance that there is someone in the Body - namely, YOU! - who will not abandon them.

(And you who are strong now should know that there will likely come a time when roles are reversed and you are in a season of weakness. At that time, you may well need to depend on the strength of the one who used to be weak, but who became strong by your help!)

### To KNOW and to BE KNOWN

So, we are to **admonish** those who are acting out; **encourage** those who are about to lose heart; **help** those who are at the end of their strength.

Three powerful words that all speak to the theme of ministry in the church. But three different aids given to people in quite different situations.

So, how do we know what it is that this or that person truly needs?

In the early 1900's Henry Ford revolutionized industry with the assembly line approach to automobile manufacturing. Because of Ford's innovation, cars were put within reach of the average household.

In 1955, Ray Croc founded MacDonal'd's and applied Ford's concept to burgers and fries. Today, thanks to Ray Croc, we Americans are nothing if not efficient at eating out.

Crank 'em out. One driver needs what the other drivers need. One consumer will eat what all the other consumers eat.

The concept works well with cars, and marginally OK with food. But a cookie-cutter approach won't cut it when we are dealing with people. Each soul is unique. Sensitivity to that uniqueness is required when we are dealing with people.

After all, faint-heartedness can look like weakness. Some forms of weakness can be mistaken for unruliness. I've know some apparent discouragements to be nothing but masked unruliness and rebellion.

And if we misdiagnose the problem, we will certainly mis-medicate.

If I'm not discerning in seeing what my brother or sister's real condition is, I could end up encouraging the unruly and admonishing the weak!

Here's the deal.

I'm confident that you want to be an effective member of Jesus' team. You want to contribute. You want to help the team bring maximum glory to God.

The effectiveness of your service - as measured by *admonition* and *encouragement* and *help* - will be directly proportional to how well you KNOW your friends here. The key to effective ministry is **relationship**.

We have to **KNOW** someone to know how to help them. There is simply no substitute for a genuine relationship if you are looking to know how to serve someone in Jesus' Name.

When I don't know someone, or don't know them well, I may pigeonhole them as a certain "kind" of individual.

But, when I get to **know** them, when I listen as they tell their story, I find that I was very often wrong in my original assessment. (What I've actually learned is that there are no "kinds" of people. They are people. Everybody breaks the mold!)

When you listen to your friend's history, you understand them better. And then you are able to see them as the fascinating, complex, made-in-the-image-of-God, multi-dimensional person they are.

That knowledge equips you with insight to know whether to apply admonition, help, encouragement, rebuke, counsel, or advice!

So, friends, if you want to be a change agent in the life of your brothers and sisters here, you simply have to get to know them.

Here at Northwest we have Care Groups and Sunday School classes and Men's Bible studies and Women's Bible studies and Interface, all designed to foster deep, genuine relating.

It may well be that the big take-away from this morning for you will be to get involved in one of these ministries!

Or, you may just decide to show up every Thursday and/or Sunday evening and hang out at Community Blend and have a cup of coffee in Jesus' Name. Or you may take initiative to have lunch or breakfast with friends. Or... - you get the idea!

The fact of the uniqueness of each person (after all, we are all made by in God's own image and likeness) requires that we have to get to know someone before we take up the scalpel and perform soul surgery.

And you can do this thing! Don't think you can't! You, YOU, can be an agent of change, by the power of the Holy Spirit in the lives of your friends.

Not that change will come immediately. Change takes time. That's why Paul ends this one packed verse with a call to patience. Patience is the need of the hour.

**ALL are in God's Image and Likeness - Be Patient!**

*[14] We urge you, brethren...be patient with everyone.*

Patience is what I long for people to give me. I don't want you to believe that my failures and my weaknesses define me. I want you to believe that there is hope for me, despite the fact that I'm sometimes a mess.

And God's Word calls me to give you that gift, too - the gift of patience.

To deal with someone patiently means that we don't consider failures fatal; that just because your friend has blown it (yes, even time after time after time!) you know that God isn't finished with them; that, in fact, there's still all the time in the world - the remainder of our lives - to work out character flaws and imperfections.

God's characteristic posture toward me is patience (see Romans 2:4; 9:22; 1 Peter 3:20). So I should be patient with you and you with me and all of with each other.

Bottom line? Here, just as on any winning team (in sports, in business, at church), we are FOR each other. That's the message we find at the end of this section.

**Here, We are FOR Each Other! (v. 15)**

**The Forgiveness Factor**

*[15a] See that no one repays another with evil for evil...<sup>9</sup>*

Evil may well be done. Someone here may do you dirty - inadvertently or intentionally.

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<sup>9</sup> The New Testament often calls on Jesus' followers to forgive injuries. The Lord's Prayer includes, "*and forgive us our debts as we forgive our debtors.*" Similarly, Romans 12:17 reads, "*Never pay back evil for evil to anyone.*" and 1 Peter 3:8-9 says, "*To sum up, let all be harmonious, sympathetic, brotherly, kind-hearted and humble in spirit; not returning evil for evil, or insult for insult, but giving a blessing instead; for you were called for the very purpose that you might inherit a blessing.*"

When that happens, it'll hurt. And at the moment of the injury, look to Jesus.

For our salvation, He endured the insults and the injuries of enemies and never retaliated. He, the Just, died for the unjust, while the unjust were casting insults.

And we here in the church are NOT each other's enemies! We're on the same team.

You and I all have a standing assignment to see to it that the practice of retaliation doesn't gain a foothold. Not repaying evil for evil is a distinctive of Christianity. We forgive each other as we have been forgiven by Jesus!

But, that is just the **negative** side of the command. As stern a test of character as non-retaliation is, the **positive** side requires the power of God.

After we have been wronged, we move on to the next step. We don't let it drop.

### **Our Utmost for Each Other's Highest**

*[15b]...but always seek after that which is good for one another and for all people.<sup>10</sup>*

Instead of trying to get even, we engage (there's that word again). We pursue.

Leaving thoughts of retaliation behind, we PASSIONATELY seek the good of the one who has wronged us. We look to do whatever we can to care for the one who has fallen into sin - even if that sin was against us!

See, in the church the care of souls is not delegated to one person or to a special office. It is a work to which each member of the team is called.

### **Conclusion:**

I hope that the image I've employed today to illustrate our life together in the church has been helpful.

There are ways in which we truly should function as a team. And it is certainly true that whatever our Coach, Jesus!, says, goes!

But the metaphor breaks down. The team analogy I've used speaks of a sport, games. And life in the church is not a game. We are not playing church.

That doesn't mean that it isn't fun and that we don't laugh and that we don't have joy! It just means that at the end of the day, when Green Bay wins or loses, it doesn't REALLY mean anything.

But in the church, the issues are of staggering importance. At stake is the condition of souls, the care of people, the development of spiritual health, and the eternal life of those without Christ.

The old song says, "...they'll know we are Christians by our love."

Yep. And when forgiveness and loving admonition and sincere encouragement and helpful help and hard-working leadership and respectful followership marks our church, they'll see the love we talk about and be drawn to the Savior who made it all possible.

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<sup>10</sup> From The Message: And be careful that when you get on each other's nerves you don't snap at each other. Look for the best in each other, and always do your best to bring it out. (v. 15)