

“The Spiritual Formation of a Community”

Introduction: As we have just heard, but may tend to slide right by, in the very last paragraph of his first letter to the church in Thessalonica Paul slips in this rather interesting invitation: “Greet each other with a holy kiss.” Such a peck on the cheek, or cheeks, typical of a greeting between family members, is called “holy” by Paul because it serves as an important, physical reminder that God’s people—the church—are to think of themselves as family. And many who are inclined to say, “I love Jesus; it’s the church I have trouble with,” are really missing out!

Certainly, as convenient as going it alone may sound, being a Christian is not intended to be a solitary, but rather a shared, form of existence. The one who rescues us from sin as individuals then brings us into his family, a community of followers known as the church, to form us and shape us in order to accomplish his purposes in us and through us. Paul wants to make sure, as he concludes his letter, that the life of the church is so spiritually formed that its faith is not only strengthened in the midst of the challenging circumstances it faces, but in so doing, that it reflects the holy and gracious character of God to a hostile and hurting world.

In this passage, Paul has us consider our formation as a community through our relationships to our leaders, to each other, and to God.

I. Our relationship to our leaders (v. 12)

A. Five times in this passage Paul refers to the followers of Jesus using the family designation, “brothers and sisters.” Paul understands the church to be, in other words, the family of God. As in any family, there are parents, or leaders, whose calling it is to watch over and guide the children. Certainly, children can tend to think how great it would be to live life without parental oversight, but in the end, that only leads to chaos. Children actually thrive much better, and feel safer, with boundaries, boundaries that come out of love.

B. We’re not sure how the leadership emerged in this congregation, but three qualities seemed to be clear about them. They worked hard, they cared for the family, and they were willing to admonish or provide correction. These were not folks who sat around shouting directions and making pronouncements from the top of a pyramid-like structure. John Stott notes that the verb Paul uses for “work hard” normally refers to manual labor and conjures up images of struggle and pouring sweat and rippling muscles (*The Gospel and The End of Time*, 119). I’m not sure you need to picture me, or members of our church council in that light, but the point is that good church leadership is not lazy, nor do we “only work on Sundays” as some jest!

C. The background to the word “care for” is also worth mentioning. Literally it means “over you in the Lord,” which highlights that leadership in this context, when exercised properly, was a self-giving, other-focused leadership, as modeled by Jesus himself. Finally, good and healthy leadership is not afraid to say hard things to the family in order to keep the children on a godly path. Admittedly, this can sometimes feel uncomfortable. Elsewhere Paul calls us to “speak the truth in love” so that the church will grow and mature (Eph. 4:15). The harder thing, I’ve discovered, is to hear and receive, in love, when hard truth is spoken to us. Unfortunately, I’ve had more than one experience of having to say some hard things to people and even though I think I’ve done it in love, most have simply responded by leaving. It’s

actually one of the challenges of having so many church choices: we don't have to stay and try to work things out. But if we can appreciate that hard words spoken to us are coming out of love, are wanting God's best for us, and are intended to protect the character and witness of the church, that might help us to receive them more fruitfully, instead of leaving in anger or frustration.

II. Our relationship to each other (vv. 13-15, 26)

A. Significantly, such care and concern is not only to come from our leaders. It is to be a part of our relationship with one other. Such care actually begins with what a congregation is to give back to its leaders. "Hold them in highest regard in love because of their work," is how Paul describes it. Such high regard does not include what one woman said to me a number of years ago just before I was to leave on vacation. She said, "Pastor Tim, I will pray to you every day that you're away." While I appreciated her confidence in me, I am certainly not worthy of that kind of regard! But you can hold your leaders in high regard by praying *for* them, by forgiving them when you realize they're not perfect, by encouraging them in what they are called to do, by providing them a living wage and time away, and by speaking directly to them (instead of behind their backs) when you may disagree with something they've done. As God calls us to honor our fathers and mother within our human families, in order to build up and strengthen the family, so too is such care an appropriate component of our life within a church family.

B. Then, when it comes to caring for one another within the congregation, words like warn and encourage and help and be patient and refrain from revenge are used by Paul to describe that pastoral care is not just to be provided by the "professionals" but by and to one another. The idle, the disruptive, the disheartened, the weak, all need to be in our caring view; we need to keep a loving eye out for them and to reach out to them in ways that seek to address their particular needs or struggles.

Illustration: In the cycling world, when I get a text from the bike shop informing me of an upcoming group ride, I look for the term "no drop ride." That means that no one is to be left behind, and if you as a rider start to falter and begin to lose touch with the group, then the rider in front of you is responsible for dropping back and helping you, by drafting on him or her, to catch back up with the group. Often, in the group I ride with, I can be the one who begins to falter and I can truly say that it is a great help to have another rider drop back and pull me forward. If that didn't happen, there is no way I'd be able to keep up.

C. "Be patient with everyone" is the exhortation that particularly strikes me in this regard. Patience is a fruit of the Spirit and a characteristic of love. It is what God has been, and still is, toward each of us. So, when we're tempted to become impatient with another, on the grounds that he is too difficult or demanding, or she never seems to change, let's remember God's infinite patience with us as we walk together. At those times when I'm riding well and someone else is faltering, I confess that it is too easy to want to keep going and not drop back! What helps when I'm tempted in that way is to remember all the times others have dropped back for me.

D. The exhortation against seeking revenge is also worthy of mention as it seems to apply not only to those within the family of God, but also to "everyone else" (v. 15). For a community to respond to the hostility it is facing from outsiders by seeking revenge or harm would not be much of a witness! Perhaps we need to learn how to do good to those who have wronged us within the family so that we can then extend that kind of hospitality to those outside. And what a powerful witness that could be!

III. Our relationship to God (vv. 16-22, 27)

A. Finally, as Paul describes how we are formed, he highlights last, but not least, our relationship to God. He describes it in such a way that many think he is picturing the components of the worship life of the early church, which is certainly a predominant way our relationship to God is expressed. It includes rejoicing, praying, giving thanks, being open to the way the Spirit might be speaking through and to one another (“prophesies”), and being intentionally attentive to the apostles teaching so that we might know the difference between what is good and what is evil, what is of the Spirit and what is not (vv. 21-22, 27). This emphasizes that a very real way in which God’s family of faith is formed, is by gathering to worship, regularly, together. To praise together, to pray together, to give thanks together, and to learn together. It is where, and how, our faith is strengthened, and our witness is shaped.

B. If, in looking back on all of what we’ve said it sounds like a lot of work, on the one hand it is. Being, and growing, as a Christian is not for the faint of heart! It doesn’t just happen but calls for an intentional working out of the gift of new life we’ve received. But, importantly, neither is it simply dependent upon our trying hard and hoping for the best. It’s why Jesus told his followers to wait for the filling of the Holy Spirit before they tried to do anything, and it’s why Paul ends this letter with a reminder, in our relationship with God, that God is faithful. While this family thing can be quirky and challenging, it is God’s idea. And God, through the sanctifying (“making holy”) work of his Spirit, promises that he will enable us to grow, for our sakes, for the sake of others, and for the glory of his name.