

## *Providing for People with Problems • 1 Thessalonians 5:14*

Sometimes we have terribly unrealistic views of reality, particularly within the life of the church. Try this exercise with me. Take a look at people around you. Some people are very good looking, some are very well dressed, some have smiles on their faces and some, though not smiling, have that placid look of tranquility that says, I have life under control.

Our sensors are always tuned in to other people and we develop perceptions about them. Often we come to the conclusion, either consciously or unconsciously, that most of these other people we see are perfect. We think they are pretty much put together — handling life fairly well, basically healthy and perhaps affluent. And we think to ourselves, “That doesn’t quite measure up to the way I perceive myself. I don’t think of myself as perfect. At times I hardly think of myself as even adequate.” But then we realize that to others we probably appear to look the way they look. Generally, we all speak, dress and behave in a way that communicates that we have life together.

But as St. Paul looked around the church of Thessalonica, he didn’t perceive that it was a gathering of perfect people. To the contrary he perceived that the people he saw were people with problems. He looked out and saw some with severe financial difficulties, not just a current crisis but a chronic situation they had been experiencing all of their adult lives. Some had too much money, some had too little money and some merely mismanaged their finances whether they had too much or too little. He looked at others and saw that they suffered from addictive behaviors. He looked at couples and recognized that, while at times there was the appearance that everything was just fine, in truth there was constantly a stress between them that occasionally blew up. It was so painful that they didn’t want to speak of it to anyone else.

Then there were those that, while they professed to be believers, had serious doubts about God and

about Scripture. They had some fundamental reservations that hardly could be spoken to other people who seemed to believe everything so easily. He looked and he saw other people who came to the church desperately looking for friendship and not necessarily finding it. He looked and saw some with the fabric of their family tearing apart, some who had chronic pain. He saw all kinds of people with all kinds of problems and he was burdened for them.

Paul looked beyond the seeming appearance of togetherness and perfection on the outside to the reality of the problems that he understood everyone to have on the inside. He wanted to offer some type of solution. I suspect that he thought to himself, “What can I do to help all of these people with all of their problems? I can give them some promises from God that they can hang onto like a piece of wood after a shipwreck.” And so he did. He wrote promises to his friends and to the churches of the first century. He also thought, “I could pray for them and talk to God about them. I could talk to this God who has so helped me in my life, about their lives.” And so he did. Repeatedly he tells the Thessalonians and other Christians that he talked to God about them. Then he thought that he could offer some practical advice about the management

of money, issues of employment, family and marriage relationships. And he did.

But on one particular day, as

he thought of the Thessalonians and all of their problems, God’s Holy Spirit spoke to him and gave him a revelation, an insight that he may not have had until that time. It was an insight as to what the church of Jesus Christ is all about. The church of Jesus Christ is not a gathering of perfect people; it is not even a gathering of adequate people, but rather it is a coming together of people with problems and weaknesses, with stresses and struggles. It is a gathering of people who do not have the answers but who come together in the name of Jesus Christ seek-

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ing those answers together. It is a group of people who gather together to experience God — to be helped and to help, to be healed and to heal. It is a group of people who, by Paul's understanding of what the church is all about, provide for one another by meeting their problems.

And so, having been inspired and having received a revelation from God, Paul urged them in a single sentence in 1 Thessalonians 5:14, to provide a context for the solution of problems: "*We urge you, brothers, warn those who are idle, encourage the timid, help the weak, be patient with everyone.*"

He lays out before them four specific actions that they can take. He starts the list by saying, "*Warn the idle.*" He uses a Greek word of military origin for it referred to a soldier who was out of step with the rest. While others were taking a left, that soldier was taking a right. That soldier was to be warned that he was not in step with all the rest. When he's talking to the Thessalonians, though, he's talking specifically about those who have their lives out of order not with the rest of Christians, but with the rest of what God wants for Christians to have. And he says that they have to be warned.

The examples of this are many. There are some who are out of step with God in their financial lives. There are others who are out of step with what God wants in their sexual behavior. There are some Christians who are out of step with God's will as far as the things they speak. They are quick to criticize and sometimes caustic in the words that they speak. These people are not to be condemned, but to be warned. They may not even realize that they are out of step. We are to warn others when their lives are out of order and to warn them about the possible consequences.

The word that St. Paul uses here not only refers to being out of step, but it's meaning also evolved to refer to those who wouldn't work — those who were idle. Some people are out of step with what God wants in terms of their employment. He is not talking here about leisure, but about loafing. He is talking about people who refuse to get regular jobs, who refuse to provide for their families and specifically to those who turn to other Christians and expect them to provide in a way that they are not providing for themselves. We need to understand clearly who is being spoken of here. It is not some-

one who has been laid off; it's talking about someone who simply refuses to work.

The refusal to work may have all types of guises. It may be someone who speculates on a get-rich-quick scheme and says, "Don't worry, my ship is going to come in; I'm going to be loaded," but refuses to work in the meantime. Or it may be someone who will someday have an inheritance and borrows against that future inheritance while refusing to be productively employed in the meantime. God is saying that such persons are to be warned that their lives are out of step with what God wants. That is hard to do. It is a difficult thing to walk up to somebody and tap that person on the shoulder and say, "Let me warn you, you are lazy and you need to get to work." How do you say those things? How do you say those things when you hardly know someone? It may be even more difficult to say it to someone that you know very well.

A friend of mine had chest pains and was admitted to the hospital one afternoon. He went through a whole battery of tests. Late that evening he was in the cardiac care unit talking with the cardiologist who said, "We need to schedule you for heart surgery first thing tomorrow morning. In fact, we are reordering the surgical schedule for the day so that you can be on the top of the list." He then handed my friend a consent form to be signed.

My friend replied, "This is all new information to me. I need some time to process it. I need to take a few days to think about this, to pray about it and to talk with my family and decide what to do." Just as he was saying this, his family physician and personal friend, who had been informed of the results of the tests by the cardiologist, stepped into the room to see him and overheard this conversation. He interrupted my friend by saying, "Darrell, you don't have time. You must have the surgery first thing tomorrow or it will be too late." And so my friend went ahead with the operation and has recovered marvelously — all because he had a friend who cared enough to warn him, to tell him where he was in relationship to where he needed to be.

That is what we're to do as fellow Christians. Within the life of the church, within the Christian community, there are others who need to be warned about idols or other areas of their lives that are out of order and out of step with God. For us to fail to

warn them makes us guilty of spiritual malpractice. We need to tell them what they need to hear so that they may be able to get back in step as a result of the warning we give. That is Paul's first action in providing for those with problems among fellow Christians.

The second action is to "*encourage the timid.*" Although it doesn't quite make sense to English readers, it literally means "those who have small souls." What it really means is those who are discouraged — very discouraged. It seems to me there are two basic reasons why people could be described as small souled or timid. One is that some individuals are born that way. Their make-up is such that they are frequently discouraged and they live all of life that way. They are often down in the pits and have extreme difficulties coping with life. It is hard for them to get up the courage to go on another day or even another hour. They have small souls; they are timid; they are discouraged.

Other people experience such discouragement because of specific circumstances. Perhaps they've gone through the death of parents, the struggles of a divorce, sudden unemployment or a frightening diagnosis and for that day or for that year have become timid or fragile. The apostle tells the Thessalonians that it is those who are continually fragile—or at least fragile for this season of their life—those in discouragement, that we are to encourage. They need to be lifted up. They need someone who will come alongside, maybe in their own inadequacy, and prop them up, speak a word, give some help, do what needs to be done so that they can be encouraged.

They are not to be condemned, even though they may have brought their present circumstances upon themselves. Even though they may have done certain things that have made life difficult for themselves, they need someone who will stick by, someone who will care, someone who will be tender and understanding. They need someone who will give encouragement to their small souls.

Isaiah 42:3 is a verse that I have always loved. It's often used to describe Jesus, but is really applicable to any servant and follower of Jesus Christ.

It goes like this, "*A bruised reed he will not break, a smoldering wick he will not snuff out.*"

If you walk through the woods in the summertime and come upon a little sapling or a bush that an animal or vehicle has run over, without thinking about it, you snap it off and go on your way. Or, if you see a lantern where the flame has gone out and it is just smoldering so smoke is coming out but no flame, you turn it all the way off — put it out and be done with it. The servant of the Lord is one who does not break the bruised reed and does not put out the smoldering wick but rather encourages and props up that which otherwise might break off and lights anew that which otherwise might go out. Encourage the timid.

The third action that Paul tells the Thessalonians to do in providing for fellow Christians with problems is to "*help the weak.*" The church is the place for the weak, for those who do not have power. I'm not sure I can adequately explain to anyone who has power what it is like not to have power. Power is what enables us to get what we want in this world in relationship with other people. It is expressed in a thousand different ways.

If you have money in your wallet right now, you have power — power that others who do not have money simply do not have. You have the power to purchase, the power to influence and the power to control—whether you use it or not. Someone who does not have it is weak and powerless. If you have a job and someone else does not have a job, you may not understand the powerlessness and weakness of being unemployed. Power comes in

the form of the clothes that we wear, the cars that we drive, the insurance that we carry — all those different things are power. It is

only when we face a situation where we don't have the money, we don't have the influence, we don't have whatever it takes to change the situation to enable us to cope, it is then and only then that we understand what it means to be weak and to be powerless.

There are a lot of people who have no power, who are weak, whose calls aren't returned, whose problems aren't solved. It is those people who come

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to the church of Jesus Christ as a place for help. And it is the church that has committed to help the weak, to come alongside them, to provide the time, the money, the counsel or the understanding. It is in the church of Jesus Christ where the weak will not be abandoned. It is in the church of Jesus Christ where those who are weak and powerless are to be accepted and aided even when they have nothing to offer in return.

It is a recurring theme in Scripture that the strong are to help the weak. The rich are to supply for the poor. The healthy are to heal those who are sick. Now don't misunderstand what is being said here. I am not suggesting that those who are lazy ought to be provided for in their refusal to work and I'm not suggesting that people who are manipulative and seek to take advantage of others should not be confronted. The church of Jesus Christ is pictured in Scripture as a gathering of those who are weak, coming together and gathering their strength in the Lord God Himself. We are not to criticize or condemn, but we are to help those who are powerless.

There is a special note that I need to insert here and that is that we avoid the temptation to institutionalize what we are being urged to do. Sometimes we have a tendency to avoid personal responsibility and say, "The church ought to handle that," meaning that we call the church office or we expect someone who is in an official position of leadership to go and help, encourage, visit the sick or do whatever needs to be done to enable people to get through. But that is not what is being said at all. Even though we are in the midst of our own struggles and our own problems, nevertheless, we are to take it as our own responsibility to help the weak.

The apostle goes on to add a fourth action that really ties in with all three previous actions, "*Be patient with everything.*" You see, problems require patience. Our society has deceived us into thinking that there is a quick solution to just about anything. If we're sick, we take a pill and think we'll be well. If we've got a spiritual problem, we talk to God and expect a quick answer. I don't think most other societies think that way.

I think that difference is largely a function of television in our society. In a one hour program,

with twelve minutes for commercial interruptions, about forty-eight minutes is all it takes for an earth-shaking crisis to arise in someone's life, then they go through all of the trauma and find a solution, and by the end of the program everything is taken care of. And we start to expect that. We have little patience to understand that some problems in life take years to solve; some are never solved. We may not like it, but it's true. Problems require patience. We need patience concerning our own problems and patience concerning the problems of other people.

Problems also require a diagnosis. Have you noticed that the instructions Paul has given, "*to warn the idle, to encourage the timid, to help the weak,*" all assume a correct prior diagnosis? What happens if we warn the timid and help the idle? Then we are compounding someone's problem. We are taking the discouraged and stomping them into the ground. We are taking the idle and, instead of warning them, we are enabling them to remain idle and out of step. So we must first have a correct diagnosis. We need to take the time to understand one another well enough to see what the problem is and to pray for wisdom from God. But it is even more important that we allow God to take his time in our lives and in other's lives. If God chooses to take years, we must not rush in where God has chosen to delay. Also, Scripture urges us to be patient with everyone and that includes those who get under our skin, those who may test and aggravate the normal limits of our patience.

I invite you to look for people with problems. I urge you to warn those who are idle, to encourage the timid, to help the weak and to be patient with everyone.

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