

A HOLY FELLOWSHIP

Key Idea:

Holy fellowship calls God's people to honor, encourage, help, and patiently care for one another.

Key Text: 1 Thessalonians 5:12–15 ESV

We ask you, brothers, to respect those who labor among you and are over you in the Lord and admonish you, and to esteem them very highly in love because of their work. Be at peace among yourselves. And we urge you, brothers, admonish the idle, encourage the fainthearted, help the weak, be patient with them all. See that no one repays anyone evil for evil, but always seek to do good to one another and to everyone.

Key Points:

- **Honor and Respect Those Who Labor Among You** — Paul opens with a request, not a demand: acknowledge, know, and honor the leaders who labor among the church (1 Tim. 3 lays out the qualifications). These leaders are both “among” and “over” the flock, serving as under-shepherds of Christ, the true Shepherd (1 Pet. 5). Paul even calls ministers “under-rowers” in 1 Corinthians 4:1 — not the prominent people, but those who steer the ship at the Captain's direction.
- **Esteem Them Beyond All Measure, in Love** — The esteem Paul calls for is not grudging or minimal; “very highly” is literally “beyond all measure,” the same extravagant language Paul uses in Ephesians 3:20. This honor is due because ministry is weighty and often costly: recent research indicates roughly a quarter of senior pastors seriously considered quitting ministry in 2025, and about half don't survive their first five years, often due to isolation, conflict, and family strain. Hebrews 13:17 and 1 Timothy 5:17–22 call the church to double honor for elders, while also being willing to receive a legitimate charge against them — honoring leaders never means treating them as infallible or shielding those who would abuse spiritual authority for power, money, or fame.
- **Be at Peace Among Yourselves** — Unity in the body flows from leaders who joyfully serve and a congregation that joyfully submits to Christ's appointed leadership (Heb. 13:17). Jesus prayed for this very unity in John 17, and Paul echoes the same call toward the end of Ephesians 5. Peace is not an optional extra to holy fellowship — it is its atmosphere.
- **Admonish the Idle** — Just as leaders are charged to admonish the church (v. 12), the body is also expected to “police itself” through loving instruction. The “idle” describes a lack of order or discipline — like a city without walls, or a military unit acting without leadership. Given the call to be “sober” earlier in the chapter, this is likely a lack of focus, discipline, and restraint, and it calls us to confront our own idleness before addressing someone else's.
- **Encourage the Fainthearted and Help the Weak** — The Thessalonians were “small-souled” — fainthearted — largely over fear that loved ones would miss the resurrection, a fear sharpened by the real threat of persecution for confessing Christ over Caesar (Acts 17:1–9). The same word for comfort appears when Jesus consoles Mary and Martha at Lazarus's death (John 11), showing its specific connection to grief. Helping the weak — physically or spiritually — means visiting, praying, encouraging, and tending to real needs as we are able.
- **Be Patient, Refuse to Repay Evil for Evil, and Pursue the Good** — Holy fellowship is not a condemnation campaign or an overnight fix; it is more like planting and watering. Rather than repaying evil for evil — a rejection of eye-for-an-eye — believers are called to pursue the good of one another and of everyone, in both temporal and

spiritual ways (Gal. 6:10; Rom. 12:20; Heb. 10:24–25). We cannot be at peace with one another (v. 13) while repaying evil for evil at the same time.

Discussion Questions:

- Paul calls the church to “esteem” leaders “very highly in love” — a phrase that literally means “beyond all measure.” Where does your esteem for your church's leaders tend to fall short of that standard, and what would it look like to close that gap?
- Roughly a quarter of senior pastors seriously considered quitting ministry in 2025, and about half don't make it past their first five years, often due to isolation, conflict, or family strain. How does this reality change the way you think about your responsibility toward the leaders in your life? What is one practical way you could ease that burden this week?
- Paul distinguishes between honoring leaders and treating them as infallible, reminding us that some who claim spiritual authority for personal power, money, or fame are not shepherds but wolves. How do we hold together the call to give leaders “double honor” (1 Tim. 5:17) with the willingness to receive a legitimate charge against them (1 Tim. 5:19–22)?
- “Be at peace among yourselves” sits right between the call to honor leaders and the call to admonish one another. Why do you think Paul places peace at the center of these instructions? What most often threatens peace in your own church community?
- The word translated “idle” describes something like a city without walls or an army without order — someone acting, or failing to act, without discipline or direction. What might “idleness” look like in a modern church context, beyond simple laziness? Why does Paul's pattern suggest we should confront our own idleness before confronting someone else's?
- Many in Thessalonica were fainthearted over grief and fear, including fear of death for their faith (Acts 17:1–9). Who in your life right now might be fainthearted, and what would it look like to bring them the same kind of comfort Jesus brought Mary and Martha at Lazarus's tomb (John 11)?
- Paul says to “help the weak” — a word that can describe someone physically sick, spiritually struggling, or simply lacking vigor in the faith. Is there someone weak in your circle you've been meaning to check on, pray for, or physically assist? What has been holding you back?
- “Be patient with them all” follows directly on some pretty direct commands to admonish, encourage, and help. Why is patience essential to each of those tasks? Where do you find patience hardest to sustain in your relationships?
- Paul insists that no one repay evil for evil, but instead pursue good for “one another and everyone” — insiders and outsiders alike (Gal. 6:10; Rom. 12:20). What is one example of “good” you could pursue this week for someone inside the church, and one for someone outside it?

For Further Study:

- Read 1 Timothy 3:1–7, 1 Peter 5:1–5, and 1 Corinthians 4:1–2 together. How do these passages round out the picture of leaders as “under-shepherds” and “under-rowers” rather than people seeking power or prominence? What does faithful leadership look like when no one is watching?

- Study Hebrews 13:17 and 1 Timothy 5:17–22 as companion texts to today's passage. How do these passages balance the call to honor leaders with the call to hold them accountable? What does healthy accountability look like in a local church?
- Compare the “peace” of verse 13 with Jesus' prayer for unity in John 17 and Paul's instructions toward the end of Ephesians 5. What is the connection between submission to Christ's leadership and peace within the body?
- This week, take a personal inventory of verses 14–15: Where might you need to be admonished for idleness? Who is fainthearted and needs your encouragement? Who is weak and needs your help? Bring each one before God in prayer, asking Him to make you patient and quick to pursue good rather than repay evil.
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