Grace to You :: *Unleashing God's Truth, One Verse at a Time*

Dealing with Problem People
Scripture: 1 Thessalonians 5:14
Code: 52-26

For a number or months we have been studying Paul's first letter the Thessalonian church. This morning we find our text in chapter 5 of 1 Thessalonians verses 14 and 15 and I would invite you to turn to that text in your Bible.

Henry Ward Beecher once said, "The church is not a gallery for the exhibition of eminent Christians, but a school for the education of imperfect ones."

He's right. The church is not a place for perfect people, it's a hospital for people who know they're ill. We don't claim for a moment that the church is perfect. In fact, we would eagerly claim that it is not. Charles Morrison wrote, "The Christian church is a society of sinners." In fact, he said, "It is the only society in the world membership in which is based upon the single qualification that the candidate shall be unworthy of membership."

The church is full of problems because it's full of problem people because everybody in it is a sinner, albeit saved by grace but nonetheless with unredeemed human flesh, consequently battling with sin. The church grows in direct proportion spiritually to how well it deals with the sin within it. The process of church growth then is the process of the elimination of transgression, the elimination of iniquity, the elimination of sin. If the church is to move ahead powerfully and be all that God wants it to be, then it has to be dealing with its own internal sin. The world has yet to see what an absolutely pure, holy church would do. The closest thing to it would be the early church. In the fire and the heat in the purity of its birth came an energy that perhaps has been unequalled in the subsequent history. Church growth from the spiritual standpoint, which is the only standpoint God has any concern about, is in direct proportion to how well we deal with the failures in our midst.

Paul wants to help us to do that by giving us these two verses in our text which we'll look at in a few moments. But if we were to sort of step back and take a look at the church and say, "Well, how could we categorize the problem people in the church?" We might come up with five categories...five categories of problem people that retard the growth and the power of the church.

Group number one we'll call the wayward...the wayward. They're never in step. They're always out of sync. They're always out of line. They're never with the program. When everybody else is moving ahead, they're going backwards. When everybody else is filling up the ranks in proper order, they're outside that somewhere, failing to do their duty, not particularly interested in serving, sometimes not

at all interested in giving, idle, perhaps even loafing. They're in the way of the progress, disorderly they might be, even AWOL they might be, apathetic they might be, sometimes contentious, sometimes rebellious. And I suppose they fill up the spectrum all the way from apathy to rebellion. They're the wayward, they're just never going the way everybody is going in the proper line. They're at odds with everything.

A second group we might identify that hinder the growth and the life and the power of the church we'll call the worried...the worried. This group is basically motivated by fear. These are the people in the church who have no courage, who will articulate, you know, the famous words, "We've never done it that way before." Who can give you ten reasons why you can't do anything you propose to do, they have no sense of adventure. They hate change. They love tradition. They fear the unknown. They want no risk. They worry about everything. All the issues of life are far more than they can bear. They're usually sad, always worried, sometimes in despair, often depressed, discouraged and defeated. They carry none of the zeal, the joy, the thrill, the exuberance that adventure brings.

We could probably identify a third group, we could call them the weak...the weak. They're just spiritually and morally weak. Christians who because of their weak faith, because of the weak disciplines of their life are susceptible to sin and they fall into the same sins over and over and you barely get them up and dust them off and they're back in the same hole again. They find it very hard to do God's will consistently. They embarrass themselves. They embarrass the church. They embarrass the Lord. They take an awful lot of attention. They test how good a church is at church discipline and usually run you all the way to at least step two.

If we were to identify a fourth group, we could call them the wearisome...the wearisome. Another word for that would be frustrating, but it doesn't start with "W". These are the wearisome, the foot-draggers. They're in line but they're just going at the wrong speed. They never catch up. You keep teaching them and you keep training them and you keep discipling them and you pour all of this energy into them and every time you look around to see how close they might be, they look like they're farther away. Everything distracts them. They have a great difficulty concentrating, great difficulty focusing. They're just very exasperating because you make the maximum effort and you get the minimum return. They don't move and grow at the pace that would be considered normal.

Finally, group five would be the outright wicked...the wicked. They do evil. Christians who do evil. They commit sins against other Christians right in the church. They break up marriages. They defile daughters. They steal. They gossip. They slander. They falsely accuse. They're just wicked.

Now you understand as the church endeavors to grow it's got to deal with these five groups...the wayward, the worried, the weak, the wearisome and the wicked. And no wonder growing healthy flock is such a challenging enterprise because all these folks need healing spiritually. The wayward need to get back in line. The worried need to have a stronger courage and faith and boldness and

confidence. The weak need to be more disciplined in the matter of holy living. And the wearisome need to get up to speed. And the wicked need to do righteously. There's a lot of work to do to bring all these in line.

Now with all that's being said and all that's being written about church growth, all the sophisticated data, all the homogeneity principles, all the cultural demographics, all the subtle strategies, all the entertainment methods, all the advertising technique that are supposed to be the keys to building the church and growing the church...precious little is being said about how to grow a healthy flock spiritually into Christ's likeness by eliminating these problems.

The Bible never says anything about homogeneity. The Bible never says anything about cultural demographics. The Bible never says anything about subtle strategies. The Bible never says anything about entertainment methodology. The Bible never says anything about advertising technique. But it does say if you want to grow a church you need to get the impediments out of the way, you need to deal with whatever is retarding that church's growth. And then when it gets pure and it gets holy, it will get moving and it will know the power of God and it will make a massive impact on its culture.

The Apostle Paul understood this. And if you turn to the Apostle Paul to learn the principles of church growth, first of all what you want to find out is what is his goal...what's he after? What does he want the church to become? Bigger, wealthier, more popular, more accepted in the community? Let's find out what he wanted for the church. Go back to chapter 1 of 1 Thessalonians. This church will be a model and an example of what he would have desired for any church. "We give thanks to God always for you all...he says...making mention of you in our prayers." He was very thankful for this church...very thankful.

Now what was it that caused him to be thankful? Down at the end of chapter 2 he says, "You're our glory and our joy." Over at the end of chapter 5, "Greet all the brethren with a holy kiss," verse 26. He's got a strong affection for this group. Well that's because they were on the way to the right goal. They were shooting at the right target.

I look at all these church-growth experts that come along and all I can think about is David going out to fight Goliath. And Saul comes along and gives David his armor. And you remember what it says in 1 Samuel 17:39? It says of David, "He tried in vain to go, for he was not used to it. Then David said to Saul, I can't go with these, I'm not used to them. I can't wear this stuff. I'm not used to it. So David took it all off, went out, took his slingshot, he was used to that, that was the end of Goliath." The only way the local church is ever going to kill the Goliaths is to do what it's used to doing, to do what it's mandated, taught, trained and developed to do. And there are always going to be the Sauls in the wings who want to load their armor on the little Davids. But we're much better off with the weapons we know how to use.

Now Paul was very clear about the goal of ministry, chapter 2, look at verse 10. Let's begin to get a feel about what he was looking at in terms of church development, church growth. "You are witnesses, 2:10, and so is God how devoutly and uprightly and blamelessly we behaved toward you believers, just as you know how we were exhorting and encouraging and imploring each one of you as a father would his own children." All right, you're really working at it but what are you trying to do? "So that you may walk in a manner worthy of the God who calls you into His own kingdom and glory." My goal for you is that you walk worthy of the God who called you.

Go down to chapter 3 verse 1. "Therefore when we could endure it no longer, we thought it best to be left behind at Athens alone and we sent Timothy our brother and God's fellow worker in the gospel of Christ." He said, "Now I couldn't stand it anymore, I couldn't stand not knowing how you were doing and not seeing spiritual progress, so even though it meant me being alone in Athens, I sent Timothy." By the way, Silas also departed from Macedonia. "I sent Timothy...he says...my worker in the gospel to strengthen and encourage you as to your faith so that no man may be disturbed by these afflictions." They were under persecution. "For you yourselves know that we have been destined for this, for indeed when we were with you we kept telling you in advance that we were going to suffer affliction, and so it come to pass as you know. For this reason, when I could endure it no longer I also sent to find out about your faith, for fear that the tempter might have tempted you and our labor should be in vain."

He was concerned about them walking worthy. He was concerned about them having a strong and developing faith. He was concerned about them being able to handle persecution and difficulty. Down in verse 8, he says, "We really live if you stand firm in the Lord." He was concerned about their spiritual strengths. Verse 10 he says, "Night and day we keep praying most earnestly that we may see your face." Why? "To complete what is lacking in your faith." You see, what he wanted was a strong mature faith, that was the goal of his prayers and his efforts. That's what he was after. He says, "Now in this great benediction may our God and Father Himself and Jesus our Lord direct our way to you, may the Lord cause you to increase and abound in love for one another." We want you to love each other more. "And for all men, just as we also do for you, so that He may establish your hearts unblameable in holiness before our God and Father." See, he's after faith and love and virtue.

Chapter 4 verse 1, "Finally then, brethren, we request and exhort you in the Lord Jesus that as you received from us instruction as how you ought to walk and please God, just as you actually do walk, that you may excel still more." We want you to walk worthy. We want you to please God.

At the end of verse 10, "We urge you, brethren, to excel still more." And there he's talking about your love. And then in verse 11, "To lead a quiet and peaceable life, attending to your own business, working with your hands just as we commanded you." In chapter 5 verse 11 he says, "Encourage one another, build up one another, just as you also are doing." And then that benediction in chapter 5

verse 23, "May the God of peace Himself sanctify you entirely and may your spirit and soul and body be preserved complete without blame at the coming of our Lord Jesus Christ."

Boy, pretty clear in his mind what church growth meant to him. He was after deepening strengthening of the lives of believers, knowing full well that as you...as you eliminate the impediment presented by the folks that are retarding the church, the church begins to move in power. So Paul put his major energy, his resources, his prayer and his passion into growing a healthy spiritual flock by transforming the wayward, the worried, the weak, the wearisome and the wicked into the righteous and powerful and effective. And when the effort was successful, as it was in Thessalonica, he rejoiced.

Now go back to chapter 1 again. He rejoiced. Verse 3, he says, "I constantly bear in mind your work of faith, and labor of love and steadfastness of hope." And in verse 6 he says, "You became imitators of us, you became imitators of the Lord." Verse 7, "You became an example to all the believers in Macedonia and Achaia." Verse 8, "The Word of the Lord echoed from you throughout Macedonia and Achaia and in every place your faith toward God has gone forth." Everybody knows you've turned from idols to serve the living God. Everybody knows you're waiting for His Son from heaven. You've done a tremendous job in evangelizing, in demonstrating your faith. What joy he got out of that.

Chapter 2 and verse 13, "For this reason we constantly thank God that when you received from us the Word of God's message you accepted it not as the word of men but for what it really is, the Word of God which also performs its work in you who believe. For you, brethren, became imitators of the churches of God in Christ Jesus that are in Judea. You also endured the same sufferings at the hands of your own countrymen, even as they did from the Jews." Another commendation. They were real. They were true. They were faithful. They were firm. They endured suffering. And he's so joyous over this. And that's why he says in verses 19 and 20, "You're my joy, you're my joy," he says it twice.

In chapter 3 and verse 6, "Now that Timothy has come...he says...from you and brought us good news of your faith and your love and that you always think kindly of us, longing to see us just as we also long to see you, for this reason, brethren, in all our distress and affliction we were comforted about you through your faith. And we really live if you stand firm."

You see, there was so much joy when the church was growing and the church was progressing. And he even said, "I don't have to talk to you about love cause you're taught by God to love and you're doing it. All I can say is do it more." He comes in to chapter 4 and verse 9 and that's where he affirms their great love.

So, you see, when you're ministering in a church that's growing and progressing and faith is being strengthened and it's strong enough to handle persecution and it's walking worthy of the God who called it and it's walking in holiness, endeavoring to be blameless at the coming of Jesus Christ and love is flourishing and love is growing, it's exhilarating and it's joyous. A healthy flock is a beloved flock and Paul loved these people dearly. He couldn't resist them.

But that is not to say...that is not to say that they didn't have any problems. They did. And if you look at our text, verses 14 and 15, you will meet the problem people. Verse 14, "And we urge you, brethren, admonish the unruly, encourage the faint-hearted, help the weak, be patient with all men, see that no one repays another with evil for evil but always seek after that which is good for one another and for all men."

That's a marvelous, marvelous duet of verses because even though the church at Thessalonica was flourishing and growing, they had problems. And whatever they weren't was a result of those problem people. All five groups were there, just like all five groups are here. And by the way, if you're looking around to see who is near you and what group they might fit in, at one time or another we're all in one or another of these groups. But Paul said in 2 Corinthians 11:28, "It's the care of all the churches that is the biggest burden of the ministry. It transcends any physical pain I have endured," he says. "On top of all the pain, the whips, the rods that have bashed my body is this concern for the churches."

Colossians 2:1, "I want you to know how great a struggle I have on your behalf." To put it in the vernacular, "You are a big pain to me." This is a burden to me, carrying around on my back all the churches that need to grow.

Now in these two verses as he defines these five groups, he also tells us how to deal with them. This is in a section which we've entitled, "Growing a healthy flock." Verses 12 and 13, which we've already studied, talked about the relation of the shepherds to the sheep and the relation of the sheep to the shepherds. Verses 16 and following talk about the relation of the sheep to the Great Shepherd. And our text talks about the relationship of the sheep to the sheep. So this little section covers it all.

In verses 12 and 13 he talked to the shepherds as to how they were to treat the sheep and he told the shepherds, "Labor among the sheep, take authority over the sheep, and instruct the sheep." He told the sheep how to treat the shepherds. He said to the sheep, "Appreciate the shepherds, esteem the shepherds and submit to the shepherds." Starting in verse 16 he's going to tell the sheep how to relate to the Great Shepherd, "Rejoice always, pray without ceasing, give thanks, don't quench the Spirit," and so forth.

But right now he's talking to the sheep about how to deal with the sheep. The key word then in verse 14 is the word "brethren." While certainly there is a responsibility on the part of the shepherds to exercise unique authority in confronting these five groups of troublesome Christians, the lines

between the shepherd and the sheep in this regard are very fluid. He uses the word "brethren," and just to give you a comparative note, verse 12, "We request of you, brethren, that you appreciate those who diligently labor among you, have charge over you in the Lord and give you instruction." Appreciate your shepherds. So brethren in verse 12 is directed at the congregation, we assume therefore that brethren in verse 14 is also directed at the congregation. He's talking to the sheep about how they deal with the other sheep. It does not exempt those of us in leadership, but it includes everybody. And by the way, you note also Romans 12:14 to 17 is a very close parallel to this text and it obviously is directed at the whole congregation.

He also notes that there's an urgency. We urge you, he uses that familiar Greek verb parakaleoto come alongside someone and help them. It has a tone of urgency in it. So he is urgently, zealously, eagerly encouraging the sheep to get involved in helping the sheep that need the help. You see, church is not showing up on Sunday morning patting yourself on the back about how deeply religious you are. Being truly involved in the church goes far beyond the audience mentality and attendance. It gets all the way down into involving yourselves with these five groups of people that are retarding the development of the church and therefore its ultimate impact.

Let's begin with the wayward...group one, the wayward. Verse 14, Paul writes, "And we urge you, brethren, admonish the unruly." Now that little phrase "admonish the unruly" introduces us to the wayward. The word ataktosoften was used in a military sense. When used in a military sense it had the idea of a soldier who was out of line, a soldier who was out of rank, a soldier who was guilty of disorderly conduct, who was insubordinate, non-submissive, disobeying orders, not following through on his duty. He was out of step. It eventually came to mean anybody who doesn't do his duty, anybody who doesn't follow through on his responsibility. Moffit(?) translates it "loafers." Some have suggested quitters, idle, lazy, indolent, apathetic. But it doesn't have to mean just that. It can mean someone who doesn't do his duty not only out of apathy, but someone who doesn't do his duty out of a rebellion.

In 2 Thessalonians where some cognate forms of this word are used, this word is used only here in the New Testament, but where some other forms of it are used in 2 Thessalonians 3 verses 6, 7 and I think 11, in that particular text it is used to refer to some lazy busybodies who don't work and expect everybody else to do all the work and take care of them. For us, it refers to the wayward. They're out of line. They're out of step. Everybody is going in one direction, they're not. Everybody else understands spiritual duty, is willing to do it, do whatever God has gifted them to do, get involved in the service, whether it means that I'm serving the Lord with my gifts, I'm giving as God has prospered me, I'm behind the leadership of the church, I'm supporting the direction we're going, I'm on board, I'm on the team, I'm participating, I'm a part, I'm involved. That's the kind of person that makes the church move and grow. These are the kind of people who reject all that. They're out of step. It may be that they're not doing their duty because they don't care, it may be that they're not doing their duty because they're angry and rebellious and contentious. They're just not supportive. They're not a part

of what's going on. Sometimes they hang on the fringe for a while and finally they are so bitter they just leave and go somewhere else. They're the bench warmers.

And I learned a few things when I was in athletics. One of them is bench warmers become critics. The people who do the most criticizing are the people who fail to do their duty. I can remember sitting on the bench through a football season. And I had the privilege of being a starting running back and there were a few others that didn't start because I did. And at first they would be somewhat encouraging to me, thinking they were going to get their moment. And when their moment wasn't coming, then they would be secretly wishing I would break my leg. And when I didn't break my leg, they would then begin to take it out on the idiocy of the coach who didn't know talent when he saw it. And eventually they would root for the other team. That's the progression.

People who resist involvement, who never want to get beyond the audience mentality, either for apathy sake or for rebellion sake, they come to hear, to watch, and then to just criticize, perhaps at worst, do nothing at best. One preacher said, "Usually they sit in the back," but I wouldn't want to say that. But I would say that sometimes you can watch a person who becomes critical systematically move back. So I'm watching you. If you're going back two or three rows a week, I know what's happening. This is a culpable laziness. The people who want to sort of just hang on the fringe out there, just on the edge. They don't want to get involved too much. They don't want to have any accountability. They really don't want to get into it. They don't want to become a part of it. They're just not in step. That's intolerable conduct in a growing church.

How are we to deal with it? Very simple, admonish them. There's no formula, there's no program, there's no system. Individual sheep go to these sheep that are hanging on the fringes and not doing their duty, not using their gifts, not ministering, not on board, not supportive, not with the program, not going the way everybody is going. They're out of line, out of rank, disorderly, AWOL and just coming alongside. A.T. Robertson said, "The verb noutheteomeans to put sense into." To come alongside and put some sense into their heads. One writer says, "It is the idea of coming to someone who is following a path that ultimately ends in serious consequences and instructing them about the inevitability of those consequences."

In other words, the word can be translated to warn someone. It doesn't have the idea of distant judgmentalism. It doesn't have the idea of criticism from a vantage point of superiority. It has the sense of coming along closely and intimately and showing someone the consequences of their conduct. It's as simple as saying, "I've been watching you and I see your indifference, you come now and then not faithfully to the church. You're not involved in a ministry. You're negative about certain things. Or you're critical about certain things." And saying to the person, "You realize, don't you, that if you continue in that path, these are the consequences and I don't think you want those consequences, nor do I want you to experience those consequences."

END OF SIDE ONE

SIDE TWO

It's that gentle kind of warning that comes alongside and says, "You're going in a direction, the end of which will be a major disappointment to you." It's a warning that Paul gave to the Ephesian elders with tears, according to Acts 20:31. There's a passion in it. There's a hurt in it that says, "I don't want you to keep doing that because the end of that road is major consequences, for God will chasten such apathy, such rebellion, insubordination, such disorderly conduct." And when you truly love somebody, you don't hesitate to warn them. I don't hesitate to do that with my wife and my children and the people that are close to me in my life. Get in the line, not because there's some agenda that I've got, but I don't want you to deal with the consequences of living like that. I want you to know the fullness of God's blessing, the fullness of God's provision. And I want to see the church all it can be.

I'm not under any silly illusions that if we could be more clever in what we do on the stage we could have a more powerful church. No, no. If we're going to have a more powerful church to impact the world, it isn't a question of how cleverly we are on the stage, it's a question of how willing we are to come alongside believers who are wayward and lovingly bring them into line. Then the power of God begins to flow, then the church begins to cut a swath through the world. This is a necessary confrontation. Church isn't coming and sitting and staring at the back of somebody's head. That's not it. Don't commend yourself for being here. Church is being involved in the lives of people, the troublesome people. We have to go alongside, the ones that are on the outside testing the edges, living on the fringe, going day to day in their waywardness, we've got to pull them in. We do it out of love because we understand the consequences.

Group two is the worried. They're not on the edge, they're huddled in the middle. They don't want to get near the edge. They're huddled in the middle. And he says about them, "Encourage the faint hearted." That's a very interesting term, also used only here. It's the term oligopsuchos, from two Greek words, soul and small, the small souled. Best way to illustrate it was to take the opposite word, megalopsuchos(?), megameans big, large, great. So let's talk about the megalopsuchos, they're the large souled. Aristotle said, "The mega lopsuchosis the man who has achieved much, claimed much and deserves much."

When Gandhi wanted to identify himself, everybody thinks he's so humble, when Gandhi wanted to identify himself he chose the Sanskrit form of that word mega lopsuchos, Mohatma(?), it means "Large souled, great souled." He was able to embrace the bigness, the massive problems and needs of this huge chunk of humanity, the large souled. It refers to the person who takes great risk because there is great principle and truth at stake. It refers to the person of courage, the person of boldness, the person who will put his life on the line for the noble cause, the person who has a sense of

adventure who loves the challenge, who seeks the competition, who loves the battle because he tastes the victory, the one who is fearless in the face of difficulty, the one who is not afraid of persecution, the one who has a vision and who achieves great things because he sees every opportunity that is before him.

But Paul says, unfortunately huddled in the middle of the church, shivering in fear are the oligopsuchos, the small souled. They hate change. They love tradition. They want to do it always the same way. They fear the unknown. They worry about everything, bless them. As William Hardy said, "They see the manure pile in every meadow." They lack courage. They don't want to dare to do anything that hasn't been done, they love what is safe. They only want to walk in a path that somebody has paved. They only want to repeat an act that somebody has done. They want a risk-free life with absolute security. They're usually melancholy. They lack the strength to move out with the church and take challenges, strike out in new ministries. They fear persecution, don't like to communicate Christ. They're afraid of opposition, usually sad, all the time worried, very often depressed, in despair, discouraged.

And surely the little group of them in Thessalonica that everybody was trying to get moving had suffered the most from the two big problems...problem number one was persecution, they were getting persecuted. And Paul says you should have expected it, I read that to you in chapter 2, you should have expected it, I told you. But they were under it and they were saying, "Ohhh, ohhh, surely the day of the Lord is here and we've missed the Rapture, this is the day of the Lord. We're all going to be destroyed." So he has to write and say no, it's not the day of the Lord.

And then they were probably the most deeply wounded by the death of their friends and they were saying, "O look, they died and Jesus hasn't come, they're going to miss the Rapture...oh woe is me." So he has to write and say, "No, no, no, the dead in Christ will rise first, they'll be there, in fact they'll get there before the rest of you do, so go get those people and comfort them with these words."

But every church has them. They have no spirit of adventure. They can't rise above their problems. They're under everything. All the issues of life are more than they can bear and they are the crushed souls. They're like weights, you sort of have to pull them around. And often if you looked at the church as a parade, they would be the ones who carried the red flags...stop...everyone else is moving and they throw up the stop sign because they lack vision, they feel failure, they lack boldness. I think down deep in their hearts their hero is Indiana Jones but they'll never admit it.

Now how do you deal with these people? He says in verse 14, "Simply encourage them." Beautiful word, it means to speak to someone by coming close to his side...to speak....see, there aren't any shortcuts sheep to sheep, folks. You know somebody that's fearful and worried and under despair all the time and sad, can't get above the problems of life...you know, you've got to come alongside and speak to them, develop a friendly relationship with them. It has the idea of coming alongside to

console, to comfort, to strengthen, to reassure, to cheer up, to refresh, to soothe. But there's no other way than in a relationship. We can get real academic about discipleship but this is what it's all about. The idea is a personal intimate fellowship of Christians who are stronger. And this is a joy.

You probably don't know this but there are people in this church who fit into this category that I meet with regularly, just to give them a new dose of assurance which I cherish greatly, the privilege of doing. There's nothing to do except to come alongside in an intimate fellowship of Christians who are stronger and tenderly encourage that person. It would be very much like what Paul says in chapter 2 verse 7 of 1 Thess where he says, "We prove to be gentle among you as a nursing mother tenderly cares for her own children, because we had such a fond affection for you." We loved you so much that we took you to our breast and nursed you along...tender encouragement. This can include the encouragement for personal fellowship, the encouragement of prayer to the God of all encouragement, the encouragement of gospel hope, the encouragement of a secure salvation, the encouragement of God as a sovereign God with purpose and providence to effect His will, the encouragement of the love of Christ, the encouragement of the final resurrection, the encouragement of sharing the sufferings of Christ, whatever encouragement.

If the church is going to be powerful and grow and be strong, it's going to be when we deal with the wayward and we deal with the worried personally...personally, because when the wayward get in line and the worried get in on the adventure, we've removed the impediment so the church can move. Then there's the weak. In verse 14 he simply says, "Help the weak," this is category group number three, the weak.

You say, "Well what do you mean the weak?" Well, weak in faith certainly could be an element of it. We have identified by the Apostle Paul in 1 Corinthians 8 through 10 and in Romans 14 and 15 a concept that is called the weaker brother, remember that? All that means is that his faith is weak. He doesn't have a strong enough faith to experience all of the liberty and freedom that belongs to him or her in Christ. The faith is weak. A weak faith creates a problem. What is that problem? A weak faith means that that person is very susceptible to temptation and sin. It's a hyper sensitivity to sin. In fact, they're so hyper sensitive to it that they see things as sin that aren't really sin at all. And so they tend to pull back. And Paul says you can't push that. You can't force that person who is weak in faith too fast or you'll push them in to some liberty or some experience that they really aren't ready to handle, some temptation they're not ready to handle.

For example, let's say you were converted out of pagan worship and you worshiped Artemis or Diana of the Ephesians, a false god. Let's say you got converted to Jesus Christ and somebody served you a dinner and you said, "This is nice food, where did you get it?" "I bought it at the temple, it was meat once offered to Diana, now it's being fed to you." And he gasps, says, "I can't eat meat offered to that idol." You say, "Hey, you're free in Christ, an idol is nothing and meat offered to an idol is nothing and the Bible says all that." But the problem is no sooner does he partake of that meat then it casts him

back into the whole situation that he came out of, all the paganism, all the idolatry, all the immorality, all the garbage and trash that was a part of that false system is regurgitated in that man until his faith is large enough so that he is embraced strongly enough the transformation of his life, that's going to cause him to sin in his own mind because he's going to relive all of that. You don't push that man that fast. See, conscience isn't moral, conscience just activates what your mind believes is moral or immoral. And his conscience is too weak and too attached to the past to free him to conduct himself in that way. So you don't push him or you're going to push him over the edge.

There were some who were weak...weak in their faith. They couldn't enjoy the freedom in Christ. They were susceptible to a wounded conscience that could lead them to more sin and more weakness.

But there's another and perhaps a more direct group in view and that's those who are morally weak. Paul uses this word in the New Testament most often to refer to susceptibility to sin, to just be susceptible to sin. These are the weak people that you barely picked them up out of the hole of sin and get them dusted off and they're back in it again. These are the people that find it so terribly difficult to do God's will. These are the people who keep falling into the same sins over and over and you work so very hard and there they go again. I think they are the ones James had in mind in James 5:14 when he says, "Is any...and the translation sick is usually given but the word is the same as the word weak here...is there any weak among you, go to the elders." Why? Because they're strong and they'll hold you and they'll pray for you and if you've committed sins, they'll be forgiven you. Get in there with the spiritually strong when you're spiritually morally weak. The church is full of these kinds of people. Believe me, they are impediments and stumbling blocks. They retard the development of the church, the growth and the power of the church.

What are we to do with them? Help them. Help is such a simplistic word for such a magnificent concept in Greek. The Greek word means to hold firmly to, to hold tightly to, to cling to, to support, to hold them up. Galatians 6:1 says, "If a brother is overtaken in a fall, you that are spiritual...what?...pick him up." And then it says, "Bear one another's burden," that's the second step, hold him up...hold him up...hold him up, support. How do you do that? Again it's intimacy. You come alongside. This is how the church grows when the sheep start taking care of the sheep, when they start to care enough to go to the wayward and admonish them, when they care enough to go to the worried and encourage them, when they care enough to go to the weak and hold them up. That means involvement.

Sometimes, and I can think of one particular young man who came to see me who was battling homosexuality, he had given his life to Christ and was just in the terrible throes of massive battles with years and years of past living in homosexuality, not being able to divorce himself to it and finding himself falling victim to certain homosexual acts. And he came in in absolute despair, crushed and in tears. And he said, "I just...I can't get over...I can't overcome it, I can't...I can't get past it." And I said,

"Well, I want to help you." I said, "I don't have the time, you know, to just be with you every day to guard you, but I tell you what I want you to do." Gave him a little pad and I said, "I want you to write down every day of the week on a page and then I want you each day at the end of the day to write down all the homosexual acts that you did that day...whether you were alone or whether you were with somebody or whether you were just reading some material or whatever you were doing, anything that excited your homosexuality, anything that you feel was a defilement, I want you to write it down in detail. And then at the end of a week I want you to bring it in so I can read all of it."

Well, seven days later he came and he came through the door and he wasn't crying, he was smiling. And he said...I said greeting to him and I said, "Do you have your little pad?"

He said, "Yes." But he said, "There's very little on it. Just a few times in my mind and when I was battling temptation, but I never did anything."

And I said, "Really." I said, "What was the difference?"

He said, "You think I wanted to bring that pad in here and have you read that?"

Well that's a simple way for me to hold him up, just by creating accountability. You've got to hold him up. See, this is the growth of the church, forget all that other stuff, we're going to grow a church, this is how you grow a church.

Then there's group four, the wearisome. He says, "Be patient with all men." Well you have to qualify all men. The all has to refer to the people with whom we would easily become impatient. Be patient with all men, be patient with all the men who try your patience. It's easy to get frustrated, it's easy to get angry, easy to get disappointed, discouraged, exasperated with some people. You give so much, you give so much, you give so much, you give so much...you get so little. I've had that happen, you've had that happen in discipling relationships...if you've discipled enough people for enough time, you know what it is to have a major disappointment...major. And the church is full of those people who sit and they get taught and they get trained and they get discipled and they get exhorted and they get strengthened, they get inspired, they get motivated, they get encouraged. And they grow at an almost imperceptible speed. They never seem to be normal in their development. Everything distracts them. Everything slows them down in the race. They have a very difficult time focusing. They're undisciplined in spiritual matters, undisciplined in the means of grace. They can just really be heart breaking.

There are many pastors who have survived the wayward, who have even survived the worried, who have survived the weak, but been sacrificed on the altar of the exasperating. They've just finally caved in to the wearisome people. And they finally say to themselves, "I'm pouring my whole life into this thing and the faster I move the farther ahead I become. I can't get them moving. They're just not

moving. They're trained but they don't do what we train them to do. They're taught but they don't live what we taught them to live." That's very very difficult.

You can hear it in the voice of Jesus as He says in exasperation, to some extent, short of sin..."Oh you of little faith," I mean, when are you blockheads going to get this?

And what does he say we're supposed to do with those people? Be patient. You say, "How patient?" More patient than you've been. You say, "How patient?" As patient as God is with you. Oh, that patient? Hmmm. That's pretty patient.

We could go into the Old Testament, had we time, and study the patience of God. Read Exodus 34:6, read Isaiah 63 verses 7, 8 and 9, lots of other places. But you know without going to a Bible verse how patient God is with you, isn't He? That's how patient you want to be with somebody else.

Peter said, "Lord, how patient? Seven times? The Lord said, No, seventy times seven." That patient? They keep doing the same thing... That patient...that patient.

Come alongside those people who exasperate you and be patient...be patient. The wayward need admonishing, the worried need encouraging, the weak need support and the wearisome need patience. You see, what it's saying is we've got to deal with each other in compassion, personal love, personal care. That's how the church grows. That's how it purges itself.

Finally, the worst of all, the wicked. What do we do with them? Well let's meet them first, they're in verse 15, they had a whole verse just for themselves. "See that no one repays another with evil for evil." Now the implication here, of course, is that if God is forbidding vengeance and retaliation, the assumption is somebody did something to you...somebody rendered you evil...kakos, baseness, meanness, wickedness. This, I believe, is the most difficult circumstance that we as Christians face, the severest abuse, the most painful treatment is wickedness, not from the world but from our brothers and sisters. That's the deepest pain. And our Christian faith must work at this level, it must.

So, Paul is saying, "Look, there are people in church that are going to hurt you, they're going to do evil to you. They'll harm you directly with wicked words that attack you face to face. They'll harm you indirectly by gossip and slander and evil speaking to others about you. They sometimes will harm you directly by shutting you out of their fellowship, by eliminating you from their social circle, by keeping you out of their ministry because of jealousy, envy, hate, bitterness or anger. They may harm you directly by stealing your virtue in sexual sin, breaking up your marriage, taking something precious, influencing one of your children toward wickedness. They will harm you indirectly by leading you into sin."

There are people in the church, believe me, who will do wickedness against other people. It's malicious harm, it happens in the church...gossip, slander, sexual sin. By the way, before you do that you need to take a very good look at Matthew 18 because Matthew 18, Jesus says, "You would be better off with a millstone tied around your neck and be drown in the sea than to harm another believer." Better off drown by a millstone, than to harm one of the little ones who believe in me. That's not a baby, that's a believer. In fact, He says, "If your hand is doing the harm, cut it off. If your foot's doing the harm, cut it off. If your eye is doing the harm, rip it out. Woe to the one who puts down the stumbling block to one of the little ones who belongs to Me."

They're so precious to me that My angels are always beholding the face of the Father who is looking at His little ones and when the Father's face wrinkles with concern, the angels go to the aid of the little ones. So if you're fooling with God's people, you are fooling with those precious to God.

But nonetheless witlessly Christians will sin against other Christians and what are we to do about it? How do we treat the wicked? He says, "See that no one repays another with evil for evil." You don't retaliate. You don't retaliate. That's a command to the whole church in the plural imperative. There's no place for retaliation anywhere in the church. There's no place anywhere for personal vengeance. The only one who has a right to retaliate is whom? God.

Listen to Romans chapter 12 which as I said earlier is a very close parallel to this text. In Romans 12 Paul says it explicitly. Verse 19, "Never take your own revenge, beloved, but leave room for the wrath of God." Don't you step into the gap and take your own revenge, you leave room for the wrath of God, "For it is written...and here he's quoting out of the Old Testament...vengeance is Mine, I will repay, says the Lord." Vengeance is Mine, I will repay, I'll take care of that, not you.

On the other hand, "If your enemy is hungry, you feed him. And if he is thirsty, you give him drink. And in so doing you will heap burning coals of guilt upon his head. Don't be overcome by the evil he does to you, but overcome that evil with the good you do to him." See that? Now you can go back to 1 Thessalonians.

The only one who has a right to retaliate is God. You say, "What about an eye for an eye and a tooth for a tooth and a life for a life?" That was a governmental mandate that the government had the right to punish equally the criminal. The government had the right to exact a life for a life, an eye for an eye, and a tooth for a tooth. That was never instruction for personal vengeance. That's what Jesus intended the disciples to understand and the Jews to hear in the Sermon on the Mount when He said, "Yeah, you think you're supposed to hate your enemy, you've perverted the law of God to that degree, I'm here to tell you you are to love your enemy, and you're to do good to those who do evil to you."

So how do we treat those who do evil to us? We always always always seek after, pursue, pursue eagerly, pursue zealously that which is good, beautiful, noble, excellent. In other words, you say, "Well, in spite of what they've done to me, I'm going to do everything I can to do what is good to them, to do what is noble and excellent to them. In an act of love I am going to return their hostility with goodness. And not just for them, but for everybody...for everybody, for all men...especially the household of faith," Paul said elsewhere, but to everyone.

A growing flock...a growing flock is characterized by movement in faith, love, purity toward the fullness of the stature of Christ. That's a growing church. That growth is impeded by the wayward and the worried and the weak and the wearisome and the wicked. And if the church is going to grow, it isn't going to grow because somebody figures out some strategy to go around the problem. It's going to grow because the shepherds and the sheep come together in intimate relationships in which they admonish the wayward, encourage the worried, hold up the weak, are long-suffering with the wearisome and render loving goodness to the wicked, And as a church takes that shape and that form, it will be a growing and a powerful church.

We need to commit ourselves to being what the church really is. And this is it.

Father, we thank You this morning for these brief moments that You've given us to worship and to have our hearts and minds confronted by Your truth. Seal this to our hearts. Help us to have the right relationships, sheep to sheep, that we might be the kind of church that You can use in a mighty way. And we'll thank You for such a privilege in Christ's name. Amen.

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