

Fundamental Christian Attitudes: Compassion

Selected Scriptures

90-124

We have been doing a study of the church called the anatomy of the church, and we've been talking about spiritual attitudes which fit into the anatomy analogy as sort of the internal systems. We've taken the body of Christ metaphor, extended it a little bit and got a little more deeply into the imagery that that purposes for us. We talked about the skeleton. There are things in the church that are the framework, the sort of non- negotiables, the bottom line, the foundational things that give the shape and form to the church, things without which the church could not stand and move, skeletal things. And we talked about those.

And then we said, just like in a human body you have to hang organs on that skeleton in order for life to flow, there are internal systems in the church. They are made up of spiritual attitudes that flow and carry the life of the church. And we've been talking about those various attitudes. And there are many of them in the Scriptures and we're kind of taking them one at a time. Spiritual attitudes like faith, which, of course is a starting point, obedience, things like humility and love and unity and forgiveness. And last week we talked about two very important spiritual attitudes, joy, and thankfulness. Very, very essential in the life of a church that its people be filled with joy and gratitude.

And this morning...and we have an abbreviated time this morning, and so I won't have as much time to speak about this issue as I might like to have. But that's all right; we'll address it from some other angles again in days ahead. But I want to talk about another absolutely essential component that has to be a part of the church to make its life flow and to make it what God wants it to be. And that's the spiritual attitude of compassion, compassion.

And when a church is as committed to sound doctrine as we are, as committed to a biblical Christianity as we are, is as concerned about precision not only in its doctrine but precision in its teaching and precision in its living, when a church is concerned about holding up the highest possible standard of virtue and holiness, when we are as sensitive to sin as we are as a mature church, it is easy for us to error on the side of being judgmental and sitting in a condemning position on people who are struggling. And so it's important for us to understand the wonderful balance of compassion in the life of the church and how absolutely critical it is.

The church, by the way, is not a gallery for the exhibition of eminent Christians. It is rather a hospital for the healing of those who are imperfect. We understand that. The church is filled with people who fail. It is filled with sinners. As Charles Morrison once wrote, "The Christian church is a society of sinners. It is the only society in the world where membership is available only to those who aren't qualified." We are not qualified to name the name of Jesus Christ. We're not qualified to be a part of His church, and that qualifies us to be in it, the recognition of that and the dependence upon Him to do for us what we are unable to do for ourselves.

But the church has problems. As one of my friends used to say, "The light draws bugs." And I think there's some truth in that, I guess. The bugs are the sinners and the light is the Word and the Word draws sinners, and we're a society of those sinners and we've got our problems. I remember a young man who was talking to me one day. He was ready to launch out from here and he said, "I'm going to go pastor a church, I want to get into local church ministry. I want to pastor a church but I'm not in a hurry because I want to find a church that doesn't have any problems." Oh boy. I said to him, "Look, if you find one don't go there or they will."

There is no such thing as a church without problems unless it's a church without people. People have problems and the church has problems. We struggle with issues all the time here. We certainly don't make any claim to perfection at any level. It's the direction of our lives that the Lord is concerned about, obviously not the perfection. We have to await that at our resurrection, at our going home to be with the Lord. Until then, we have problems. And the church has problem people. And in all honesty, we spend a lot of time dealing with problem people.

They can drain the energy of a pastor; they can drain the energy of a staff, continually trying to help these problem people. Very much like families, I think, where you might have a number of children, one or two of which stand out as being more demanding than the rest. You know, they say there are those Type A personalities that are already programmed genetically when they arrive, and from the beginning they put great demands on the parenting process. There are other compliant children who don't call for so much time and energy. That is true in any series of relationships, that's the way life is. There are going to be those people who put tremendous demands on leadership, tremendous demands on the people of God to work with them because they struggle so greatly.

Now, if I were to divide those people up into five categories, they would be these categories. Number one are the wayward, the wayward. They're the people you're always trying to get off the edges. They run everything to the edge. They want to climb the fence; they want to go outside the boundaries. They want to stop over the line, violate the law.

They're never really in sync with where you're going. They're always out on the fringes, never with the program, never really involved continuously doing their duty, never faithful in service or giving. They tend to be sometimes idle, lazy, loafers, in the way of progress, disorderly.

They can be AWOL, they can apathetic or indifferent, and sometimes they can even be contentious, everything from being uninvolved to being rebellious. They just push the edges all the time. Maybe they don't get into the place where you want to discipline them; they're just on the borderline all the time. On the borderline of commitment, on the borderline of faithfulness, on the borderline of service using their gift, on the borderline of contributing positively to the development of the church. They're those fringe people out there just right on the edge of everything, never really concerned and committed to the heart and flow of the life of the church.

The second category of people I would call the worried. These are the no-risk people who basically operate out of fear. Fear that somebody won't love the, fear that they might fail, fear that problems that might arise that overwhelm them. If group one tests the edges of everything, this group huddles in the middle. They never get near the edge.

They're motivated by fear. They're driven by a lack of courage. They can think of ten reasons why

something could never succeed. They have no sense of adventure. They hate change. They fear the unknown. They worry about the consequences of everything. All the issues of life are...are really more than they can bear and so they go around generally dismayed and occasionally depressed.

Then, thirdly, there are the weak. Not only the wearied...or the worried, I should say, but the weak. These are people who spiritually are just weak. They have fallen to temptation. They have fallen to sin. They keep trying to scramble back up, dust themselves off, get back in the flow. But they seem to be highly vulnerable because of long habits, because of bad influences, because of their own spiritual weakness.

They want to do what's right, they have a desire to do what's right but they sort of fuddle along in the Christian life stumbling, picking themselves back up, as sort of three steps forward, two steps back, and maybe sometimes two steps forward, three steps back. They embarrass themselves. They embarrass the church. They goof up their testimony and they are occasionally a real dishonor to the Lord. They're just feeble and susceptible to temptation and sinful patterns.

And, fourthly then, there are what I would call the wearisome. They just frustrate you. They are the...they're the people who never get it. They never quite catch up. They...they can't focus; they can't concentrate. They drag their feet, they miss the point or they forget the point, or they ignore the point. They never seem to speed up, get with the group and move at the rate that everybody else is moving at. They exasperate you because they never seem to change. And you try this and you try that and you try this and they never seem to change.

They're the kind of people to whom I have often spoken and said, "Well, why don't you do that?" "I did that. It didn't work." "Oh, well why don't you try doing this? Take a little time and read five Psalms every –" "I tried that. It doesn't work." "And, well, here's a series of tapes. Maybe you could listen to those." They come back, "I listened to those, didn't help." Oh, they just...they just exasperate you. They exhaust your options, and you keep trying and trying and trying and you never seem to get them where they need to be. Those are the wearisome folks.

And then, finally, there are the downright wicked. Those are the folks who just do evil in the church. They do harm to other Christians through gossip or slander. They break up relationships. They fracture the unity of the Spirit. They violate the bond of peace. They are unloving. They break up marriages. They divorce their spouses. They're unkind to their children, or there are children who are disobedient to their parents. They defile daughters and sons. They just sin.

And as a church we deal with all these people. I mean, the standard of getting in is you have to be a sinner to get in and you have to be an unworthy sinner to get in. So we assume we've got this problem. The wayward, the worried, the weak, the wearisome and the wicked. And it's a little wonder that growing a healthy flock is a challenging business, isn't it? All these folks need help.

And with all today that's being written about the church and the growth of the church, all the sophisticated stuff, all the homogeneity principles, cultural demographics, all the subtle strategies, all the entertaining methods and all the advertising and marketing technique to build the church, little of anything is ever being said about spiritual health of the flock, about how you grow people into Christ's likeness. That is the great challenge.

Getting a crowd is not nearly as difficult as building a Christlike disciple, that is a very challenging situation because you've got people in all these categories at all varying points in their own personal life, and you're trying to move them to the single goal of the likeness of Jesus Christ. Churches are spending all kinds of money on stuff that is purely external, superficial, that is not going to change the inside. And when the church is changed on the inside it really becomes a force for evangelism and righteousness in the world.

The apostle Paul, you must know as you read through the New Testament, put all his energy and his prayers into growing a spiritually healthy flock. And that's...that's the real work of the church. It's not just my work; it's your work as well. In fact, look at Colossians if you will for a moment. And there's a pervasive attitude that we're going to address today that is essential to this work, and it's found in Colossians chapter 3 in verse 12.

And you will see here that he's referring to all of us, because he says in verse 12, "And so as those who have been chosen of God, holy and beloved, –" That's all Christians. All of us are elect. We have been made holy by the righteousness of Christ, and we are the beloved of God. All of us, all of us in the church – "must put on a heart of compassion." We must deal with each other compassionately, with kindness, he says. Later in that verse, "gentleness, patience –" verse 13 – "bearing with one another.

In other words, there needs to be a patient, gentle, humble, kind compassion toward people as they struggle through all of the issues that debilitate them, whether waywardness, worry, weakness, being wearisome or just being wicked. All of us who belong to the Lord, all of us who are the chosen, the holy in Christ, the beloved of God are called to compassion, not just compassion toward lost people. And sometimes churches have more compassion toward the unregenerate than they do toward their own. But we are to show love to all men, but especially those of the household of faith. So we are to be compassionate.

Let's look at this issue through the pen of the apostle Paul in 1 Thessalonians chapter 5. First Thessalonians 5, as you have noted in the last few weeks, is a very important passage because it gives instruction for life in the church. It's a very, very important chapter. It talks about how the shepherds act toward the sheep in verses 12 and 13 of 1 Thessalonians, how the shepherds act toward the sheep. It also talks about how the sheep act toward their shepherds. So in verses 12 and 13 you have the sheep-to-shepherd and shepherd-to-sheep relationship.

But when you come in to verse 14, now you have the sheep-to-sheep relationship. How we are to conduct ourselves among ourselves. In verse 14 he says, "We urge you, brethren –" Now we're sheep to sheep, now we're talking about how you live in the church. "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."

Now, in verses 14 and 15, Paul gives instruction to these five categories of people that I have mentioned to you. All five categories are introduced there. Notice how verse 14 begins. "We urge you." This is the tone of the whole section. There's an urgency here, there's a command here, a compelling here to the sheep to behave in a certain way among themselves. And that way indicates compassion.

We're to treat each other with kindness and compassion and patience, bearing with one another as we struggle through our weaknesses and our worries and fears, as we struggle through our waywardness and our wickedness, and all of those things we must be dealt with lovingly and compassionately. As I have been studying in the Old Testament, it is amazing to me going through the Old Testament how consistently righteous and just God is and at the same time how consistently gracious and merciful He is to those who sin.

On the one hand, there is always the standard that is perfect and holy. On the other hand, God is so patient and so tenderhearted and so merciful as He deals with His sinning people and does not consume them until He has exhausted His compassion in pleading with them to return from their iniquities. As holy and righteous and just as He is, He is that compassionate as well. And that's the way we are to be. We can hold the standard high, we will. We can call people to a holy and righteous life, we will. But that should be equally balanced with a heart of compassion, understanding the struggle that all of us engage because of our flesh.

First of all, let's talk about the wayward, the people who get out on the edge and just test the edges of everything. They live right on the fringe. He addresses them in verse 14. He says this. "We urge you, brethren, admonish the unruly." The word "unruly," *ataktos*, used only here, though it has cognate forms used elsewhere in 2 Thessalonians. The word, basically, had the idea of being out of line in a military column.

When the troops all lined up as they are want to do in every army, when it's marching time they get into rank and file and they stand appropriately in perfect order because that's the design, there would be a soldier out of rank, out of line, and that would be the word to describe him. Somebody who is unruly, disorderly conduct. Somebody who doesn't get in line, who doesn't find his place properly in the rank and file. It could be someone who's just too lazy to do it, who's idle, or someone who's just in his heart kind of rebellious. He doesn't want to conform. He just doesn't want to get involved.

By the way, in 2 Thessalonians where you have other forms of the same root word, it is used to describe someone who is a lazy busybody. Laziness can keep someone from being there in line conforming to the group as they move ahead. It can refer to laziness, indifference, a loafing attitude. Just sort of hanging on the fringe because you don't have an interest in getting involved, a certain kind of apathy. But it can also refer to general insubordination to a leader, general insubordination to someone who is in charge, being out of step.

And certainly that is true in the church. There are those people who just hang on the edges all the time. They're just wayward; they're unruly. You can't seem to get them in line; you can't seem to get them to the place where they do what needs to be done. They hit and miss at the worship services on Sunday morning. They hit and miss on Sunday evenings. They never get involved in a fellowship group. They never get in a ministry.

They never really commit themselves to godly living and a holy life. They just kind of hang on the edges with a certain amount of apathy or a certain amount of rebellion in their hearts. They can be contentious. They are usually non-supportive both in their activities and their giving. That's...that's just an attitude that they carry. They're just wayward. They just don't have the commitment to the heart of what is going on.

I like to think of them as benchwarmers, you know; they never get in the game. They just...they can't get in the game because they don't have a commitment to play; they haven't honed their skills to play. They're not that devoted to it. They don't care about the cause. In my judgment, benchwarmers usually become critics, negative. They usually turn out to be critical of what you're doing.

They at best have an audience mentality and they just don't get into the flow. Often these people sit in the back, unless the place is full and there are no other seats. See, I let you off the hook. They sure don't sit in the front because they don't want anybody to assume that they might be accountable for what they heard. They get as close to the door as they can usually, in that way no one knows if they're accountable for anything they might have heard. They want to watch and they usually want to criticize.

How do you deal with these people? It tells you right there in verse 14. "Admonish them." What does admonish mean? It's *noutheteō*. It's been sort of transliterated into English with the word nouthetic, when you talk about nouthetic counseling. And it's a marvelous word. It means to advise in the light of future consequences. It means to warn in the light of what is coming. In that sense, it's an instruction. A.T. Robertson has a wonderful way of expressing it. He says it means to put sense into something, to give somebody some sense of what they're doing and where it's leading.

It demands a certain closeness and a certain intimacy, to get close enough to someone to begin to put some sense into their heads about their behavior. It's a recognition that somebody's behavior needs to be altered, not by punishment but by influencing them. It's a positive word. And what you want to do, according to Kramer's definition, is you want to influence their mind.

You want to teach them the path that they're on is a path to discipline or punishment, and certainly it's a path away from blessing. It has no element of judgmentalism; it has no element of Pharisaism; it has no element of a sense of superiority, of condemnation. But it has the idea of coming alongside someone to warn them, to warn them.

To put that in a sort of a paradigm that you might understand, Paul uses the parental image in 1 Corinthians 4 where he uses the same word. And he says to the Corinthians in verse 14, "I do not write these things to shame you." In other words, my goal is not to just...just to obliterate you, just to heap shame on you, but to admonish you, to *noutheteō* you as my beloved children. So the paradigm is that of a parent.

It is the kind of warning; it is the kind of instruction that you give a child that you greatly love. Sometimes the child doesn't understand that you say I'm not going to allow you to do that. I'm not going to allow you stay in that path. I'm not going to allow you to keep maintaining that kind of attitude or that kind of behavior or that kind of relationship because I love you too much to allow you to expose yourself to the consequences of that. And a parent does that. We do that all the time.

There are...there are consequences to certain paths. And when you know that, you warn and you warn out of love. And sometimes the person you're warning doesn't appreciate that. Sometimes the children don't appreciate that. Sometimes the Christians that are wayward, that are playing out on the edges all the time don't understand the implications of that kind of life. And you may warn them out of love and they may...they may see it as judgmentalism and they may try to define it as that, but

in fact it's not.

The attitude with which you do it is very important. The attitude with which you do it is essential. And to get a picture of that attitude, Acts 20:31, where the same word is used, very important. Acts 20:31, Paul uses this word, and here's what he says. "I did not cease for three years to admonish – " same word – "to admonish each one with tears." That's not a judgmental attitude. That's an attitude of compassion, that's tenderheartedness, that's kindness. That's a broken heart that says I grieve over where this is taking you.

That's how you deal with the wayward. You don't pounce on them, judgmentally; you don't condemn them; you don't wreak havoc on their lives by abusing them and alienating them and cutting them off. You come alongside like a parent loving a child and understanding where the child is going, calling them back, and you do it with tears of compassion, compassion, a beautiful, beautiful attitude which God demonstrates toward sinners and which Christ demonstrates toward us.

Secondly, let's talk about the worried. These aren't the people who test the edges; these are the people who huddle in the middle, the sort of the no-faith group. It says, "Encourage the faint-hearted." Faint hearted describes the worried. Faint hearted literally in the Greek, I don't...that's kind of an interesting translation because it's...I suppose it does get at the point, but the Greek word is small soul. Soul, *psuchos* from which we get psyche, psychology, psychiatry. That's the Greek word soul. And this word *oligopsuchos* means a small soul, a small soul. It's the opposite of *megalopsuchos*, large-souled person. Aristotle, he defined the ideal man as large souled.

In other words, he could embrace all kinds of things. He was adventurous, he was courageous, he was bold. He had room in his heart for many things. He could reach out. The Sanskrit...interesting, the Sanskrit equivalent for that word is mahatma that's the ancient Sanskrit word. And Gandhi, the Indian leader, took that word mahatma and used it as if it were his name because he wanted to identify himself as a man with a large soul, with great cause and great capacity to embrace a great nation with all of its needs.

This is the person with great courage, boldness, willing to risk for the noble cause, who has a sense of adventure, who is willing to put his life on the line and who is eager to confront challenges, who is fearless in the face of difficulty, who is not afraid of persecution, who has great vision, who can mobilize people to a great cause and ennoble their hearts to that cause. That's the large-souled person.

But in the church there are the small souled who hate change, fear the unknown, worry about everything. They're the negative people. They see the downside of everything. The woe is me. They lack courage; they don't want to attempt anything. And if you change their routine they go into panic. They are the traditionalists.

They want what is secure. They want what is risk free. They're not sure they want to get associated with unbelievers cause somehow they might get corrupted, and so their evangelism is minimal if not non-existent. They huddle in the middle and sort of contemplate their sanctified navels together and feel safe and secure in their little group.

Easily discouraged, easily defeated, they lack the strength to move out, they lack the strength to

lead, they even lack the strength to follow the leaders, afraid that...they sort of live by Murphy's Law. Whatever can go wrong will go wrong. All the crises of life are more than they can bear. And they can find a reason why nothing ought to change ever.

These are difficult people to deal with. They're the people who march in the church parade carrying the red flags. And when everyone is ready to move, they're ready to stop them. They lack vision. They fear failure. They lack the boldness to witness. And secretly, their hero is probably Indiana Jones or Rambo, but they can never get into that mode themselves, you know.

Now what do you do with these people? What do you do with these people? It says in verse 14, encourage them, encourage them. What a positive approach. The basic meaning of the verb is to speak to someone close by his side. You get up next to these people and you speak to them. Again, you have a teaching responsibility based upon a friendship. You build a relationship with them, a friendship. You have the...you bring yourself alongside to comfort, console, strengthen, reassure, cheer, refresh, renew, revive. You're just there to pump them up, to encourage them, to build them up.

What a tremendous and wonderful ministry of encouragement that is. And the church needs to be busy doing this all the time. Don't look down on people like that. There are probably some reasons why they're that way. It might have been some things in their past, some failures, some insecurities that they carry, some difficulties in their childhood, and most of all an immature understanding of the goodness and greatness of our God. Those kinds of things may be combined to make them that weak.

They need to be tenderly encouraged. They need to be brought alongside and you bring them to the place of strength. You give them the comfort of your fellowship, the encouragement of prayer. Tell them you're praying for their strength and for the fact that they'll become bold and step out. You give them the comfort of hope and what God has planned for them in the future, and that the Lord is building His church and they're a part of it. You give them the encouragement of a secure salvation that can never ever change.

You give them the encouragement of God's sovereign purpose and providence, working out everything to His good will and for their good. You give them the encouragement of the undying, undiminished love of Christ. You give them the encouragement of the final glorious resurrection, the encouragement of the privilege of sharing in Christ's sufferings and the encouragement of living by faith and seeing God demonstrate His power when you risk everything to do what you know His Word has commanded you to do. You come alongside and compassionately and kindly and tenderheartedly you nurture those people to strength.

Thirdly are the weak, the weak. And I suppose in some way all of these are forms of weakness, but specifically are mentioned here "the weak." He says in the middle of the verse, "Help the weak." These are people who lack moral strength and, consequently, lack spiritual strength. These are not quite the fearful worried kind. These are the kind that are just always knocked down by temptation. These are the kind of people who very often will come to me, repeatedly, over the years and say to me, "I...I don't know if I'm really a Christian, I still wonder if I'm a Christian."

With some people in our church I've been having that conversation would you believe for up to

seven, eight years? Why? Because they go...they get along for a while and then they go falling into patterns of sin and temptation and the spiral is downward. And then when you...when you become operative in the flesh, and you've...you've lost the victory and you fall into the pattern of sin, one of the things that goes is your confidence and your assurance.

And then there's that struggle. People who are spiritually...we've got a lot of reasons for this. Temptation, of course, is one very obvious reason. They literally have fallen into patterns of unrighteousness and, consequently, as Peter says, "They have forgotten that their sins are forgiven." They can't hang on to anything because they have forfeited by their disobedience, the...the confidence and the assurance that the Spirit of God gives an obedient believer.

Some of them may be weak because they just continually lose to the same temptation. It comes back and down they go. It comes back and down they go. It comes back and down they go again. And they just are embattled and battered by that continual onslaught. They never can seem to get on top of that. Maybe they're spiritually immature, maybe they have long-term patterns that are hard to break, whatever it might be, or they're in positions where they are influenced with evil things, and they can't stand against that very well.

There are others who are just new Christians and maybe like those weaker brothers in 1 Corinthians 8 and 9, and in Romans 14, they come out of a background that is...that is so fraught with iniquity or so fraught with some kind of behavior. In the case of a Gentile, for example, in Rom...in 1 Corinthians 8, Paul says there are some Gentiles who have come out of idolatry and they were involved in it with all of its immorality and its gross wickedness and sin and prostitution, and all the filth of the pagan systems.

And now, they've come to Christ, and you've got to be very careful that you don't feed them meat that was sold in the idol butcher market, because they can't eat that because it brings back all the past filth that they were saved from and it grieves their conscience which reacts to that stuff. And they're still weak in the faith. They don't understand that an idol is nothing. They don't understand they can eat that meat, it doesn't matter. But their conscience won't let them because of the way they used to be.

I remember a conversation with a...with a young man who said he could never listen to rock music because he was involved in drugs and sex and he was deep into the...into the culture of that stuff. And it represented all that was dirty and evil and filthy. And when he came to Christ and was totally washed and cleansed and transformed, every time he heard that it just reintroduced to his mind all the trash that the Lord had washed away. That was too much, too close to his past. And there will be some time before he could ever treat that with a level of indifference that a lot of us are able to treat it with.

There is the typical story of the Jew who comes to Christ and can't have pork roast. Even though there's no longer a ceremonial law, his conscience is going to take some time to accept that liberty because he lived under Mosaic restrictions for so long. So, there are those that are weak because they're new in the faith and don't understand their freedoms. There are those who are weak because they just don't seem to be able to get the victory over temptation. They're not faithful in the disciplines of...the spiritual disciplines of the Word and prayer, discipleship, worship and all of that, and so they struggle.

What do we do with those people? It simply says in verse 14 help them. Help them. Literally, the verb here means to hold firmly to, put your arms around them and hold them up. They're too weak. You need to embrace them and they need your strength. This is where we call for intimate relationships. Compassion is delivered one to one. It's delivered one to one.

There's an illustration of this that I think is helpful in James 5. I don't want to belabor this point cause our time is gone but I do want to take a few minutes to point it out to you. In James 5, there's a very interesting portion of Scripture. And if you want the full thing, of course, I preached on it in the past. The believers to whom James writes were being persecuted, seriously persecuted by the rich. The rich are condemned starting in chapter 5, "Come now you rich, weep and howl, for your miseries are coming upon you."

And he says your riches have rotted your garments moth-eaten; your gold and silver are rusted. And the reason for this was because of the way they treated the righteous. Verse 6, "You have condemned and put to death the righteous man, he doesn't resist you." What they were doing was persecuting believers to the point of death. And so James is writing these believers who are under this terrible persecution.

Now he says to them in verse 7, "Be patient, just be patient, hold on, accept this persecution." Verse 8, "Be patient, strengthen your hearts." It's not easy. It's easy to become weak under the terrible pressure of persecution. It becomes a temptation to distrust God, to become even angry toward God, to lose trust and lose faith and lose joy.

And he reminds them in verse 10 to take the example of suffering and patience from the prophets. And then in verse 11, to see the endurance of Job and the outcome of the Lord's dealings with him how that the Lord is full of compassion and merciful. God understands that you suffer. He understood the suffering of Job and all the prophets, Isaiah who was sawn in half and Jeremiah who was thrown into a pit. You need to be patient. Don't get angry.

In verse 13 he says, "Is anyone among you suffering, then pray. Anyone who is cheerful, you're not suffering, praise." And then verse 14, "Is anyone among you sick?" A better translation, I think, would be weak. That's the primary translation that I find in many of the lexicons.

He's talking about someone who has literally collapsed under this onslaught, difficulty, temptation, suffering, persecution, whatever it is. And if that's you, then here's what you do, "Call for the elders of the church." Here's a person who's weak, a person who has committed sin in weakness. Get to the elders and let them pray over him, anointing him with oil in the name of the Lord.

Now what does that mean? Well, there's two words for anointing in the Greek. This one has to do with giving someone a rub down with oil, not some ceremonial anointing. He's not talking about some ceremony here. He's saying go to the elders and let the elders massage him. It could be metaphoric that you're just going to massage his wounds and his bruises from the weakness. It even could be that he had been whipped and beaten and abused by the rich, and maybe he did need an actual physical anointing to heal some of his wounds.

But the idea is that the elders become to him a source of strength and encouragement. And the

prayer, verse 15, offered in faith by those spiritually strong will restore, revive the one who is weak and the Lord will raise him up, and if he's committed sins they'll be forgiven. I think this is talking about not a healing, but a spiritually weak person going to the spiritually strong so they can hold him, so that they can rub him and massage him and help him with his wounds and encourage and comfort and pray for him. He's leaning on their spiritual strength.

I've often told the students at the college that if my door is open you can come in and pray with me if...when I'm there. And one day I was in my office and a young man came in who was in his senior year, an outstanding young man from a wonderful Christian family who was devoted to serving the Lord in his future.

He came in and he said, "I just need to pray with you." And I said, "Well, why, Steve?" And he said, "Well – " he says – "I'm just weak, I'm really weak. I've lost my interest in prayer and I just can't seem to study the Word and I'm just being hammered by temptation, and it's the same thing and I keep falling and I...I just...I just need somebody that I can lean on. And would you pray with me?" And I said "Sure."

I'll never forget, I pulled two chairs together and I said, "Let's kneel down." And he was wanting to lean on one that he perceived as spiritually strong in the time of his weakness, and I nailed down...knelt down and put my hands and my head down in the chair, put the chair up beside me for him. Only he didn't use it. He knelt down and put his whole body across my back. And his body language was saying what his heart was saying. "I am weak and I need to lean on someone who is strong."

And with tears in his eyes he stayed that way while I prayed that God would forgive any sin that he had committed in this process and that God would pour out His strength on his behalf, and renew and revive and refresh him. And we prayed quite at length, both of us.

And when we were done, I remember standing up and he embraced me...I'm thinking of that verb here, hold firmly to...and he just held on to me for a long time. And, finally, he let go and we parted and within a couple of days he came back to tell me that his heart was so encouraged and renewed and God had answered our prayers and he was well on his way; finished his year and went on to serve the Lord.

I think that's the spirit of this. And when you find someone who has been caught in some time of weakness in their life, this is absolutely crucial, personal ministry to be available for the spiritually strong to lift them up. Galatians 6 says the same thing. You that are spiritual restore such a one in love. When someone has fallen, tripped into some sin, the spiritually strong put their arms around them and lift them up.

And then fourthly are the wearisome, the wearisome. And we'll just mention them briefly. The wearisome are described at the end of verse 14 where it says, "Be patient with all men." There are going to be all kinds of people who test your patience. That's what he's saying. The wearisome, they just drive you crazy. They just exasperate you. You deal with them and you deal with them and you deal with them and you deal with them, again and again and again and again. And they marginally comply or they don't comply or they do.

And then they fall back and they just continue to exasperate, frustrate, disappoint, discourage, and even anger you because they never seem to catch up. They never seem to catch on. They resist all the efforts to teach them, train them, discipline them, exhort, strengthen, inspire, motivate, encourage. They just exasperate you. Never seem to get it. Never seem to get up to speed, always run the race with the weights on, always carry all the encumbrances, lack the ability to focus, are undisciplined in matters, spiritual matters. And these...these dear folks test everybody's patience.

How do we deal with them? He says be patient. The word is long-suffering. Get ready for a long-term deal. You can't fix them quick. They take a lot of work. And God is patient, isn't He? That's a godlike quality, patience with people, and it tests us. I think sometimes they're there...I think sometimes the Lord is saying this guy is your test to see if you have Christlike patience.

I think about that sometimes when I tend to get exasperated and say, "Oh boy, not him again. Not her again, please. What else can I say? What else can I do?" And you remind yourself this is a test of your Christlike patience. You remember His patience exhibited with His disciples who never seemed ever to get it, even down to the end. What do we do with them? Just be patient, suffer long, just like the Lord suffers long with you.

And finally the wicked. They're the subject of verse 15. "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." Here you have the evil, *kakōs*, the people who just do wicked things. And this is the most difficult, the severest problem of all because these people do evil.

They harm directly with wicked words that attack the church and attack people. They harm indirectly by gossip and slander and evil speaking. They harm by shutting someone out of the fellowship, by being jealous, hateful, bitter, envious, angry. They say things that aren't true. They sow discord. They steal virtue. They lead people into sin.

They commit iniquities that pollute the church. They work malicious harm. What do you do with them? It says, "Don't repay evil for evil but always seek after that which is – " what? – "good." Seek what is good for them. Don't turn to vengeance, personal vengeance, retaliation, not required, not allowed. What do you do? You seek what is good.

What is good? "To bring them to—" what? – "repentance." So you pursue them to bring them to repentance. The only one who has a right to retaliate is God. You just seek their restoration. You seek their purity always. Look at it. "Always seek after that which is good." It's the verb "to pursue." Always pursue what is good, noble, beautiful. You give them acts of love in the face of their hostility.

You find the path of goodness, not the path of retaliation. Learning to do this is a very, very important thing. Whenever there is someone mistreating you and someone is causing problems, someone is iniquitous, you try to find the path of goodness. Now, if they continue in that sin there's a...there's a pattern of New Testament discipline that is laid out. But in your approach you do everything you can to bring them to the place of repentance so that they may enjoy the goodness of God in their obedience.

Well so it is. A growing flock needs great care because the church is full of problem people. And the pervasive attitude that we must have toward them is an attitude of compassion, tenderheartedness,

kindness. May God so grant us that that we may enjoy His blessing as a congregation. Let's pray.

Father, we have covered so much so fast and yet really just one great truth. And that is that we are to deal with folks compassionately, the way you deal with us who fail you so constantly, who violate your perfect standard so regularly. And You are so compassionate. Your compassion is immeasurable, unending, unceasing and great. We thank You for it, and may we be as compassionate with those around us who are wayward and worried and weak and wearisome and wicked. And may our church be known not only as a church of sound doctrine but a church of great compassion as together we struggle with the flesh to gain the victory that will conform us more and more to the likeness of Christ in whose name we pray. Amen.

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