

## 1 THESS 5:12-15—“GREATER THAN THE SUM OF ITS PARTS”

**INTRO:** Most of us have heard the saying that “The whole is greater than the sum of its parts.” This is sometimes called “Synergy,” which is the interaction of multiple elements in a system to produce an effect different from or greater than the sum of the system’s individual parts or effects.

- In music, for example, a great piece of music is more than just the sum of the individual notes.
- In the context of organizational behavior, synergy is the ability of a group to outperform even its best individual member. We see this all the time:
- A man and a woman, both flawed, frail human beings, fall in love and get married. And the marriage is far greater than the sum of the two individuals: they encourage each other; they support each other; they overcome each other’s weaknesses, and they may produce and nurture children. As a result, they end up accomplishing far more than they ever could have accomplished individually.
- Look at the Packers during the “glory years.” They had a few legitimate stars—Paul Hornung had won the Heisman trophy—but most of the Packers were from smaller schools who had been passed over by others. Bart Starr was drafted in the 17<sup>th</sup> round. But Lombardi put them together and they became the greatest dynasty in NFL history. The whole was greater than the sum of its parts.

How does that relate to us as Christians and, specifically, us as the church? Today’s passage of Scripture—**1 Thess 5:12-15**—deals with this very issue.

### **READ 1 THESS 5:12-15.**

What is Paul telling us? he’s telling us that:

**PROP:** The Christian community should live in such a way that the whole is greater than the sum of its parts.

**O/S:** We will see this as we consider: (1) How we relate to the leaders of the church; (2) How we relate to others who are part of the church; and (3) How we relate to those not yet members of the church.

First we need to put our passage into its context in 1 Thessalonians.

**CONTEXT:** Throughout the book of 1 Thessalonians Paul has shown his concern about the church:

- ch. 1—he thanked God for the church and noted how the church was an example to all believers in Macedonia and Achaia.
- ch. 2—his Christ-centered and eternal perspective of life caused him to have as his #1 priority seeing the family of God perfected.
- ch. 3—he was so concerned about the suffering of the church that he sent his closest associate, Timothy, to travel 100s of miles to find out how things were going.
- ch. 4—he instructed the church and encouraged the church that, in light of the 2<sup>nd</sup> Coming of Christ, not to grieve over believers who had died.
- Now in ch. 5:1-10—Paul continues that theme, and says that, in light of the 2<sup>nd</sup> Coming of Christ and the judgment it will bring, the church should redeem its time and live well.

The immediate context to our passage is v.11 where Paul says that, in light of Christ’s coming back to the earth, **[READ v.11]**. vv. 12-15 unpack how we are to **“encourage and build up one another.”**

### **I. We are to encourage and build up the leaders of the church (vv. 12-13a)—[READ vv.12-13a].**

The church is an organization. Any organization—whether it’s a country, a business, or the church—is only as good and strong as its leadership. Paul recognizes that, and he recognizes that there is a reciprocal responsibility between the leaders of the church and the members of the church.

- As to the leaders: Paul says that they have the responsibility to **“diligently labor among you,”** to **“have charge over you in the Lord,”** to **“give you instruction,”** and to **“work”** on our behalf and on behalf of the church as a whole. Consider just a few of the things Pastor Wade does:
  - (1) He spends a significant amount of time preparing good, biblical-true, sermons every week. Good sermons take a lot of time to prepare. His are not fluff.
  - (2) He is an excellent counselor. He has walked many people through very tough times. That is an art as well as a skill. It is emotionally draining and not many people are gifted at it like he is.

- (3) He handles all kinds of tedious administrative and practical responsibilities for the smooth operation of Community Church and this building.
- (4) He works closely with Pastor Merrinray and Pastor Francisco up in Green Bay to help Iglesia Evangelica Hispanoamericana and the Hispanic Church in Green Bay succeed.
- (4) He prays regularly for you and this whole body.
- (5) He puts up with me.

- As to the members: Paul says that we have the responsibility to “**appreciate**” the leaders, and “**esteem them very highly in love.**” This appreciation and esteem takes different forms:

- (1) In **1 Cor 9, Gal 6, and 1 Tim 5** Paul tells us that we who are fed spiritually by our pastor have an obligation to pay him and to provide for him materially.

- (2) In addition to financial support, what kind of *spiritual* support do we provide to our leaders? For example, how often do we pray for Wade and Annette and for our elders Todd Matulle and Kevin and Sonntag and their families, for Deb Sonntag and the worship team and their families, and for Brenda Haase and her family? They pray for us. Don’t kid yourself: regular, concerted, fervent prayer is hard work. We need to do that.

- (3) Appreciation and esteem are also *relational*. For example, consider: Inviting one or more of the leaders to your house for dinner; or giving a note of encouragement and appreciation; or volunteering to clean the church or work in the Sunday School or otherwise get involved in the church.

Our leaders are not here by accident. We must be careful not to take them for granted.

## II. Just as the leaders have a responsibility to the members of the church and the members to the leaders, we also are to encourage and build up each other who are part of the Body of Christ (vv. 13b-15)—[READ vv. 13b-15].

Paul’s basic template for how we are to relate to each other is found at the end of v.13 when he says,

**“Live in peace with one another.”** We need to see two things about this:

- First, this is the other side of the coin of **ch.5:3** which says [READ **ch.5:3**]. There he is talking about nonbelievers. They SAY “everything is fine,” “I’m OK, you’re OK,” “life is good.” But then they will be swept away. They will be swept away when Christ returns to the earth—but they will also be swept away when great tragedy overtakes them and when they die. B/c nonbelievers are all living in a fool’s paradise. Or, as Jesus said, their lives are built upon the sand, not upon the rock. They will not stand.

That is where Christians are to be different. Although Christians may be going through the wringer, we are able to have a peace within us because, as with Job and as with Paul and as with Jesus Himself, we know that everything that happens to us *first* has had to pass through the Father’s hand. Everything that happens to us is part of a grand overall plan of which we are an integral part. God knows the end from the beginning, and he has our ultimate and eternal good in mind.

C.S. Lewis once said, **“The dullest and most uninteresting person you can talk to may one day be a creature which, if you saw it now, you would be strongly tempted to worship.”** That is what God has for us, and all the events He is ordaining for our lives are directed to that end. That is why Paul could say in **Rom 8:28, “We know that God causes all things [the good, the bad, and the ugly] to work together for good, to those who love God, to those who are called according to His purpose.”** With that perspective, Christians therefore can have a peace that transcends our circumstances, in a way that nonbelievers simply cannot have.

- Second, the “peace” in our relationships with each other that Paul is talking about in v.13 is not just a “go along, get along,” “it’s nice to be nice,” passive sort of peace. Rather, it is active. It is the kind of peace that builds each other up. That is why he immediately unpacks this in vv. 14-15 [READ **v.14-15a**]. The only way we can do any of those things is if we are in close relationship with each other. When real relationship occurs in the body then, as Paul says in **1 Cor 12, “if one member suffers, all the members suffer with it; if one member is honored, all the members rejoice with it.”** Paul demonstrated that in his own life. He said in **2 Cor 11:29: “Who is weak w/o my being weak? Who is led into sin w/o my intense concern?”** That demonstrates a care for others that only occurs when one is in relationship with others and knows others well.

Of course, none of us will know everybody equally well. But by getting involved in TECH Time or a men’s group or women’s group, we will meet people who we’ll hit it off with. By getting involved with a Life Group you will meet regularly with a smaller group of people, and relationships will grow in depth. Some people we will be drawn to in a closer way, and will be able to forge the bonds that will enable us to be “real” with each other and, thereby, to hold each other accountable.

Remember: the church is a family. Families know each other, are in close relationship with each other, hold each other accountable, and take care of their own. So it is to be with the church.

But the church does not just exist for itself. So Paul concludes this passage by pointing out that:

**III. We are to encourage and build up those who are not yet members of the Body of Christ (v.15b)—[READ v.15b].**

Just as ancient Israel was supposed to be “**a light to the nations,**” so in **Matt 5:14** Jesus told his disciples, and us, “*You are the light of the world.*” In **Matt 28** and **Acts 1** Jesus commissioned his disciples, and us, to go “*to the remotest part of the earth*” and “*make disciples*” of others. As is true of the relationship between the leaders and the church members, and between the members of the church with each other, we can only be a light to others and be God’s instruments for discipling others if we are in relationship with others.

When He founded the church, Jesus said in **Matt 16**, “**upon this rock, I will build my church, and the gates of Hades will not overpower it.**” That is NOT a picture of the church playing defense, holding onto each other while the forces of evil attack it. Rather, Jesus’ is picturing the church on the move, going into all the world, influencing the culture and winning men and women to Christ out of every tribe, tongue, people, and nation on earth. B/c you see, ancient cities were walled cities. The gates of ancient cities were its defense. They were closed at night, and closed when enemy armies approached. So what Jesus is saying is that the gates of death and Hades, the gates of hell, are being assaulted by Christ’s people, the church. And if the church acts as it should, it will prevail against the forces of Satan and evil and the world and its values.

How will that happen? It will NOT happen if the church—as it too often is prone to do—adopts the tactics and values of the world. Instead, we must put on the mind of Christ and adopt the values of Christ.. And what did Jesus say? On the night before He died, in **John 13:34-35**, Jesus said this: “**A new commandment I give to you, that you love one another, even as I have loved you, that you also love one another. By this all men will know that you are My disciples, if you have love for one another.**” Notice three things about that:

- First, Jesus said this the night before he died. When someone knows he is going to die, and he’s talking to his closest friends, he says the things that are most important to him that he knows they need to hear. The same is true with Jesus—these are among His last words.
- Second, He gave us ONE SIGN by which people would know that we are His disciples. What is that one sign? (Right.) It’s not your ability to pass a theology test, however important that might be. It is LOVE.
- Third, the one sign Jesus gave by which all people will know that we are His disciples is to love one another “even as I have loved you.” That’s important. How did Jesus love us?

(1) He loved us truly. He didn’t just say he loved us, he showed us. When people were hungry, he fed them. When people were sick, he healed them. When people were hurting, he comforted them. And he tells us, “**Now you go and do likewise.**”

(2) He loved us equally. He didn’t just show love for Jews, but also for Gentiles. He showed love for men and for women; for rich and for poor; for young and for old; for tax collectors and sinners; in short, for every kind of person. As Paul points out elsewhere, in Christ “**there is neither Jew nor Gentile, slave nor free, male nor female, barbarian or Scythian**” we are all equal in the eyes of Christ.

(3) He loved us sacrificially. He gave up everything he had for us. Now we, of course, cannot bear the sins of others by dying for them as Christ did—but we can live for them.

Jesus’ statement in **John 13** was specifically given in the context of the relationship of believers to each other—but the same principle applies in our relationships with nonbelievers. How do we know that? We know that because Jesus also said that the entire Bible is based on 2 commandments: **love God with all your heart, and you’re your neighbor as yourself.** When Jesus said “**love your neighbor as yourself,**” most of us kind of sentimentalize that statement. We never think about how radical a demand that is. When Jesus said that what he is saying is: “**The same amount of thought, planning, effort, time, and money that you spend on your own wellbeing, I want you to devote to the wellbeing of others.**” That is exactly what Paul is saying in **1 Thess 5:15**: “**Always seek after that which is good for all people.**”

Is that how most Christians distinguish themselves? Is that how I distinguish myself? I am sorry to say that the answer is “no.” In the book entitled *UnChristian* that was published last year by the president of the Barna Institute, David Kinnaman, he finds that the generations that include late teens to early 30-somethings believe Christians are judgmental, anti-homosexual, hypocritical, too political and sheltered. IOW, young Americans have an impression that Christians are nothing short of . . . *unChristian*. And, as a result, they are leaving the church, and rejecting Christ in unprecedented droves.

So how should we act toward those—especially those whose lifestyles and beliefs are radically different from our own? As we all know, one of the hot-button issues before the Supreme Court is the issue of homosexual marriage. There are cogent arguments on both sides of that issue. It is not my place to get into those arguments. But, as Kinnaman pointed out, the issue of Christians’ attitudes toward gay people is one of huge importance to people of the teens-30s generation. There is a book which I highly recommend to every Christian

entitled *Love is an Orientation*, by Andrew Marin. It is subtitled “Elevating the conversation with the gay community.”

Marin is an evangelical Christian. He’s married and has two daughters. He does not compromise Christian morality, and is not an apologist for the gay lifestyle. But he lives in a very gay area in Chicago. He knows the people. He’s friends with them. He listens to them. He’s real with them. He has built bridges to the gay-lesbian-bi-and transgender community. In short, he is in genuine relationship with them. And he has a much higher view of our faith and of the power of the Holy Spirit than the host of condemnatory and judgmental Christians who are doing so much to damage Christianity in the eyes of so many.

Marin knows that our job primarily to reveal Jesus to hurting and needy people, including hurting and needy gay people. And the only way we can do that is by being in genuine relationship with all sorts of people. And as they see that we are real, and that—as Jesus said—our love demonstrates that we truly are his disciples, the Holy Spirit will work inside of gay people and change them, just as he worked inside of me and changed me, and worked inside of you and changed you.

We all can act as Christ to others: (1) We have God’s Word which tells us how we are to live, and the mind of Christ to open that Word up to us. (2) We have the Holy Spirit who both gives us the desire to do what Christ has said, and gives us the ability to do it. (3) We have each other, our leaders in the church and our brothers and sisters in Christ, to **“admonish, encourage, and help us,”** as Paul put it in **v.14**, to do what Christ has said we should be doing. You see how this all fits together?

**CONCL:** Let me conclude by saying this. The gospel of Jesus Christ is the only hope for the world and for hurting, needy people—people like you and me. But the gospel is incarnated only in the church—that’s also you and me. We need to assess how we are doing as a church. Paul has given us 3 measures for how to assess ourselves: how we relate to and interact with those who are leading the church; how we relate to and interact with each other; and how we relate to and interact with those who are not yet part of the church. This is vital—b/c outside the gospel and the church, everything is temporary and will not last. Outside the gospel and the church there is no hope at all. But if we really put the gospel and the church as our 1<sup>st</sup> priority, our lives will change, people will see that change, the church will be greater than the sum of its parts, and hope can be turned into reality.