

Stirring Up Love Through Honor 1 Thessalonians 5:12-13 (ESV)

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We're going to be in 1 Thessalonians chapter 5 this morning. This will complete our series at the very beginning of the year. However, as we start Romans again next week, we really begin in a passage that also is about stirring up love. So we're going to add one more as we begin the book of Romans, to this series on stirring up love through... We've identified a number of ways that God would have us involved as members of His church, in stirring up love in our own spiritual family.

Today, we're going to really focus in on this issue of stirring up love through honoring spiritual leaders. It's a really significant part of the Christian life that is often neglected. I think often pastors feel a little sheepish about talking about it because it seems so self-serving. And yet, it is so important to the church for us to stir up love through the esteem and respect and submission that every member has for their own church leaders. We're going to talk about that. That's not the word of man; that's the Word of God. And so we can trust it and we know that it's true. So today, we're going to look at 1 Thessalonians chapter 5, verse 11. And I think we're going to read all the way through verse 24. So we'll catch some of the context as well. Our main thoughts today are going to be surrounding verses 12 and 13, though.

11 Therefore encourage one another and build one another up, just as you are doing. 12 We ask you brothers, to respect those who labor among you and are over you in the Lord and admonish you, 13 and to esteem them very highly in love because of their work. Be at peace among yourselves. 14 And we urge you, brothers, admonish the idle, encourage the fainthearted, help the weak, be patient with them all. 15 See that no one repays anyone evil for evil, but always seek to do good to one another and to everyone. 16 Rejoice always, 17 pray without ceasing, 18 give thanks in all circumstances; for this is the will of God in Christ Jesus for you. 19 Do not quench the Spirit. 20 Do not despise prophecies, 21 but test everything; hold fast what is good. 22 Abstain from every form of evil. 23 Now may the God of peace himself sanctify you completely, and may your whole spirit and soul and body be kept blameless at the coming of our Lord Jesus Christ. 24 He who calls you is faithful; he will surely do it.

May God encourage us through His Word, today!

The great preacher Charles Spurgeon called the church, "The dearest place on earth." That title describes her so very sweetly and accurately! While the church is far from perfect, she one day will be perfect. She is God's community, not the community of man. But set apart by God for the purpose of communicating His infinite value to a world that doesn't know Him. And if we want to commit to any community or society that God Himself is building, we commit to the local church. It's the only community or society that He eternally blesses. In view of this truth, Charles Spurgeon then implores us:

“Give yourself to the Church. You that are members of the Church have not found it perfect and I hope that you feel almost glad that you have not. If I had never joined a Church till I had found one that was perfect, I would never have joined one at all! And the moment I did join it,...I should have spoiled it, for it would not have been a perfect Church after I had become a member of it. Still, imperfect as it is, it is the dearest place on earth to us...All who have first given themselves to the Lord, should, as speedily as possible, also give themselves to the Lord’s people. How else is there to be a Church on the earth? If it is right for anyone to refrain from membership in the Church, it is right for everyone, and then the testimony for God would be lost to the world!”

Last week, we learned from our study of 1 Thessalonians that God’s church is truly precious to God. He freely chooses His church. He radically loves His church. He gives her His Spirit. He gives her His Gospel to transform the church into a worshipping community. He cares about the condition of His people not merely as individuals and their personal walk with God. But He cares about the condition of His people as a group, as a community of worshippers gathered together for the sake of His Name. We learned that God gives church leaders responsibilities to lead and care for the church the way a mom and a dad care for their own children. So we saw for instance in 1 Thessalonians 2:7-8, Paul is saying as one of the leaders,

1 Thessalonians 2:7-8 But we were gentle among you, like a nursing mother taking care of her own children. So, being affectionately desirous of you, we were ready to share with you not only the gospel of God but also our own selves, because you had become very dear to us.

And then again in 1 Thessalonians 2:11-12 Paul says,

1 Thessalonians 2:11-12 For you know how, like a father with his children, we exhorted each one of you and encouraged you and charged you to walk in a manner worthy of God, who calls you into his own kingdom and glory.

Paul is teaching us that God gives leaders in the church the spiritual responsibility to personally love members like a mom loves an infant that is nursing. And to practically then exhort, correct and encourage members like a dad would his own children as they grow into adulthood.

So the question that we are right to ask as church leaders is: Are we fulfilling God’s calling upon our lives? If you’re a church leader here this morning, I would encourage you to pray. Let’s pray together that God would strengthen us by His Spirit, for us to be faithful to His church here at Bethany, faithful like a loving mom is faithful to her nursing infant, faithful like a teaching dad is faithful to his kids as they grow up.

This morning, we open up our Bible’s to a couple chapters after 1 Thessalonians 2, to 1 Thessalonians 5:11-14. Now we turn our attention to the responsibilities that God gives to church members. It is the responsibility specifically of honoring and blessing their spiritual leaders.

Both church leaders and church members are given sacred responsibilities by God to stir up love in the church. The church leader stirs up love by tenderly caring for each member of the church through the teaching of the Word, through intercessory prayer, through spiritual protection against false teachers, through personal counsel, and the like. But the focus today is on the responsibilities that God gives to church members. God gives church members a sacred responsibility to stir up love in the church through honoring those who lead them.

I. God's Design for Spiritual Leadership in the Church

I think just by way of review, before we look into the text itself, we want to step back and say: How did God design His church? What does that blueprint look like? God's design for His church is to be a spiritual family united by Jesus through their union with Him, and empowered by His Spirit, so that together we would love Him and serve Him and proclaim Him.

This family metaphor is dominant all throughout the New Testament, and particularly in 1 Thessalonians. Paul is going to use the word "brothers" to refer to church members, twenty-one times. And in fact, from verse 12 through the end of the chapter, he's going to use the term "brothers" on five different occasions. Let's look at that first in verse 12. It's just striking when you read it, how he keeps saying "brothers, brothers, brothers, brothers."

12 We ask you brothers, to respect those who labor among you...

He's talking to church members as a whole to respect those who labor among you. As you look in your own congregation that are among you, there are certain people who are leaders. Elsewhere, he'll call them elders or overseers or pastors.

14 And we urge you, brothers, admonish the idle,...

25 Brothers, pray for us.

26 Greet all the brothers with a holy kiss.

27 I put you under oath before the Lord to have this letter read to all the brothers.

Brothers, brothers, brothers, brothers, brothers, in one short section! He wants this precious church to understand how they are to relate to each other. They're to relate to each other as a family, not as a group gathered together to listen to a sermon and sing some songs and pray a prayer. But they're gathered together as brothers and sisters under the headship of God as their Father.

How is God's family to be organized? We understand naturally the physical organization of family. There's a mom and a dad, and they're the ones who lead the family. And then there are children, and they relate to each other. But how does God organize His spiritual family? God designs for the church to appoint elders. Elsewhere they're called overseers. Elsewhere

they're called pastors. It's the same position, the same office with three different titles. And He says, "I want these appointed leaders to shepherd My family." God is the Leader, with a capital L, of His church. But qualified and called men are to be leaders, small l, in that family. These leaders possess authority within the family so that they are able to shepherd and lead. This authority is not exercised in a way that treats church members as "underlings," but it is exercised in a way that serves the family. Listen to what Peter writes when he speaks of this very issue of God's design for the church.

1 Peter 5:1-3 So I exhort the elders among you, as a fellow elder and a witness of the sufferings of Christ, as well as a partaker in the glory that is going to be revealed: shepherd the flock of God that is among you, exercising oversight, not under compulsion, but willingly, as God would have you; not for shameful gain, but eagerly; not domineering over those in your charge, but being examples to the flock.

Again, they're inside the congregation. They're not outside of it. They're not living in some other city.

The truth we learn is that human leadership in Jesus' church is an essential part of God's design. If we're missing human leadership that is recognized in the church, we're missing a key part to the blueprint that God has given us regarding His church. A church cannot honor God without appointing God-qualified, God-called elders to lead them. In other words, when we decide we don't need to do that, we're off the blueprint. The appointment of elders is not a human invention. The appointment of elders in a local church is an act of obedience to God who created His church for His glory. If someone asks the question, "Why do we need human leaders? Why do we need elders?" The first and final answer is, "Because God commanded us to appoint elders." Now we can talk all about the advantages later, but here's what it is. We take our cues from reading God's blueprint. We don't have a right to create our own. That's why we have elders. God knows what He's doing when He created and designed His church.

The appointment of elders in every local church was the practice of Paul and Barnabas when they planted new churches.

Acts 14:23 And when they (Paul and Barnabas) had appointed elders for them in every church, with prayer and fasting they committed them to the Lord in whom they had believed.

The appointment of elders then became a command of the apostle Paul to a young pastor by the name of Titus.

Titus 1:5 This is why I left you in Crete, so that you might put what remained into order, and appoint elders in every town as I directed you—

In other words, there was disorder in the church. And how were they going to attend to that disorder in the church? Every church is to have elders overseeing, leading and shepherding.

The church really is the dearest place on earth. She is created and designed by God to be the best testimony of His grace, of His Gospel, of His goodness. She is the nearest experience of the love in heaven that we will experience in this world. For all her flaws, she is God's choice to represent Him. We cannot abandon her, or neglect her without dishonoring God who gave us His Son to redeem us.

Now as we think of God's design for His church, let me speak plainly for a few moments about the importance of the local church. I speak with directness because I believe biblical directness about the local church is needed in this age. We've lost some of the truth that God has clearly given us. I speak with gentleness too, but I hope that my clarity won't seem very hard or sharp. But it might!

One of the most destructive notions that the devil has taught in our age is the idea that we can be right with God and yet wrong with God's church. It has become common for those professing Jesus as Savior to say something like, "I am spiritual, but I'm not religious. I don't believe in organized religion. So I worship God on my own. Or, I worship God with a small group of my friends at our house. Or, I go to this group or that group instead of belonging to any local church." Beloved, God's design clearly tells us that we cannot honor Jesus and dishonor His Body. We cannot honor Jesus and dishonor His Bride.

Imagine for a moment...God says first of His church, "This is My son's body." That's what He says. It's the Body of Christ. Consider someone coming up to you and saying, "I am all for you. I am so committed to you as a person. I'm unbelievably committed to you as a person. But I am going to act in ways that deliberately weakens your body. I love you, but I'm not so excited about your body. So I am committed to intentionally exposing your body to disease and harm through neglect. And frankly, if your body dies, good riddance! Who needs it anyway? But we're okay, right? We're cool, right?" What would you say to them? You'd say, "You can't separate me from my body. That's crazy talk!"

The church is Jesus' precious bride. Let's take that analogy in that direction as well. Consider someone saying to you, "Hey, I am really committed to you. I love the relationship I have with you. I've never been more devoted in my life than to our friendship. But man, I hate your wife! I can't stand her! I can't stand to be around her. She annoys me. In fact, she's dead to me. I never want to talk to her ever again. But we're still good, right?" You're going to look at that and say, "You're crazy if you think that's possible. We're not good! This is one that I have joined my life to. We are one. If you hate her, you hate me."

So can you imagine today, people who say 'I'm a follower of Jesus,' saying, "Jesus, I don't want anything to do with Your Body. And I don't really want much to do with your Bride, but we're good, right?" Jesus says, "No, we're not good! Something is terribly off and wrong. You have offended Me at the very core and deepest level." We must listen with eager ears to what God says about His design for His church. Our souls will be injured if we abandon what God has taught us about His church. And our community will be weakened to the point of non-influence in a world that is dark.

Someone says, “Well, I might not be a committed member of a local church, and actively involved in strengthening her and helping her. But I am very involved in a Bible study. I’m very involved in a campus group. I’m very involved in a group of men who get together and pray at Panera. I’m involved in a group of ladies who get together and pray in the morning. That’s still okay, right?” And the answer from Scripture so clearly—it’s undeniably clear—is No. That’s not alright! Those associations of believers are not a local church. God does not call us to simply be involved in groups that fellowship together. God calls us to commit ourselves to His local church. His local church is His Body. His local church is His Bride.

So someone asks the question: What makes a church a church? When does a group of believers become a church? And when is a group of believers not a church? Well, it’s very important to discern the answer to that question. And let me provide six minimum conditions for a local church, a group of people who love the Lord, who hang out together and do spiritual things together, when they become a church and when they’re not. Much more could be said about the local church, but these are bare, basic minimums in order to be a local church. If any of these are missing, then by definition, you’re missing a key ingredient to what a local church is.

Condition #1: The group must be comprised of professing believers who commit to one another to meet regularly together for worship, fellowship and prayer. (Acts 2:42-46)

In other words, it’s okay to have other people there, present, but they can’t be part of the group unless they’re a professing believer.

Condition #2: That group worships God through the preaching of the Word, the singing of praise, the celebration of the ordinances of baptism and the Lord’s Supper. (1 Corinthians 11:23-28; Acts 10:47-48; 18:8; Romans 6:1-3; Ephesians 5:19; 2 Timothy 4:2)

So a group that misses any of those things is not fitting a key ingredient to what a local church is. So if a person says, “I have a group of professing believers. We meet together regularly for worship. We listen to the Word together. We pray together. But we don’t celebrate the Lord’s Supper and we don’t exercise baptisms.” No, all of those things are part of what a local church is.

Condition #3: That group is led by publicly recognized leadership that shepherds the body. (Acts 14:23; 1 Timothy 5:17; Titus 1:5)

It’s a core ingredient!

Condition #4: That group openly invites any other professing believer to come and join.

No age, race, gender or other limits can be placed upon membership. You can’t say, “This group is only for women,” or “This group is only for men,” or “This group is only for this age group.” It’s not a church at that point. That’s not what Jesus’ church does. Jesus’ church says, “We are open for anyone who professes, from the wee littlest one, to the way oldest

one, regardless of race, regardless of gender, regardless of any other affinity. This is Jesus' church and we don't have a right to forbid anyone entrance here. Everyone is welcome."

Condition #5: That group commits to fulfilling Jesus' mission of equipping every member for ministry and proclaiming the Gospel to the whole world (Ephesians 4:11-13; Acts 1:8).

Condition #6: That group exercises spiritual restoration/discipline of members who are openly and willfully disobedient to God (1 Corinthians 5:5-7; Matthew 18:15-18).

These are the minimum requirements God's Word gives in His blueprint, in order for a group of believers to be a church, a visible expression of God's family. What a joy...what brilliance there is in God's blueprint! The church, because it's God's blueprint, is truly the dearest place on earth. Now we want to lean in to the description of spiritual leadership in the church that Paul gives in this passage.

II God's Description of Spiritual Leadership in the Church

12 We ask you brothers, to respect those who labor among you and are over you in the Lord and admonish you, 13 and to esteem them very highly in love because of their work.

My comments are going to be brief, because we really covered the responsibilities of spiritual leadership last week. But I want you to observe in this passage talking to church members, that there are three expressions that Paul uses to describe church leaders.

Expression #1: Those who labor among you.

They are laboring in the midst of you. They're not relationally distant. They also are not idle. The word here used for "labor" is a word normally used to describe occupations that require manual work with one's hands. So for instance, the Bible uses that word in reference to farmers. It also uses that word in reference to fishermen pulling in their nets and laboring in the sea. It generally means "to grow physically weak from work." This word, when he talks about spiritual leaders toiling or laboring among you, should bring up an image of a person who is sweating profusely from the effort that they have given to their job. So at the end of a long day, they're just covered with sweat. Paul reminds this church that the elders work hard for the spiritual health and happiness of members in the local church.

Most people can relate to the kind of exhaustion that comes from physical labors like farming and fishing and building homes and bailing hay and all of that. Most people have had some experience with that kind of work, at least when they were young. And they can identify with how tired the body can get from that kind of labor. But some may ask when they think of the elder: How hard could it be to study God's Word and deliver a sermon? How hard could it be to counsel a person who is in distress? How hard could it be to stand between a husband and wife who are in conflict and seek to bring peace? How hard could it be to lead a church to be faithful to Jesus' mission? How hard could it be to pray for people who are sick? I can only say from Paul's experience and from mine that that labor is joyfully exhausting. And that's what he wants to bring to these people. He says, "What they're doing is exhausting. It's

exhausting physically. It's exhausting emotionally. It is exhausting spiritually. They're laboring over you."

Expression #2: Those who are over you.

Elders are given authority to lead the church. The Chief Shepherd is Jesus. But the Chief Shepherd delegates His authority to elders for them to use in shepherding the flock. They carry the weight of responsibility for the flock. It's a weight that no one else in the church carries, and it's heavy. The emphasis here on the elder's authority is not upon their position or power, but upon their responsibility and the authority God gives them to carry out that responsibility. It's a responsibility to protect God's people from dangers and to provide leadership, to promote love within the church family, and to teach the Gospel.

God's design for His church is not a congregational democracy. Please know that. We bring American politics to the church too often. Nowhere in the New Testament are you going to find that God's design for His church is congregational democracy; one person, one vote. Every person in the congregation does not have equal maturity and aptitude to carry the weight of the responsibility of caring for the souls of people in the church. God calls, qualifies and equips mature men to be appointed to the role of elder to lead the church. I would add, He also calls and qualifies women to be involved in other matters of spiritual shepherding, specifically over women and children.

This does not mean that elders should not listen to church members as the elders lead them. They must not use their position to dominate over people. That much is clear. They must not use their position to say, "We decide everything that happens in this spiritual family." But God gives elders, spiritual leaders, responsibility and authority to resolve conflicts when they break out in the church, to bring instruction and correction from the Word, to discipline and restore unruly members, to exercise management of the workings of the church, and to expel false teachers who would abuse the people. The elders do all these gently, patiently, humbly, but surely and confidently.

Expression #3: Those who admonish you.

This means that elders are to warn individuals in the church when those members behave badly, behave contrary to God's Word. This is a negative word, admonishment. And it's never fun, because it's so seldom received well by the person who is behaving badly. This admonishment is a call for God's people to simply live in obedience to God and not in contradiction to the Gospel. And that's the responsibility of elders when they see members living in that way. When elders reprove a sinning member, the member might ask, "Who gave you the right to correct me; to talk to me that way?" And the answer is God did! That's what it means to be part of a church. That's what it means to lead the church. Elders must not be like Eli, the Old Testament prophet who sinned against God by failing to admonish his rebellious sons. Sometimes that admonishment leads to the removal of the person from that community.

2 Thessalonians 3:14-15 If anyone does not obey what we say in this letter, take note of that person, and have nothing to do with him, that he may be ashamed. Do not regard him as an enemy, but warn him as a brother.

That's pretty strong! That's what the elders are tasked to do. Paul is writing to this church, and elders need to carry out this command. If they don't listen to Paul, to God's Word, then Paul says take note of that person and have nothing to do with him. It doesn't mean you're trying to hurt him. It doesn't mean you're angry with him. It means you care about him and you also care about the community. And that person can't stay in community without infecting their own soul with greater darkness, and thus also, infecting the whole church. So he says, "Elders, you're responsible for this; to admonish."

The role of the elder is often a very difficult one. Yet it is vital for the health of each member in the church and to the family as a whole. So how can members give strength to elders in their work, in their labor, in their oversight, in their leadership and in the difficult task of admonishing others?

III God's Desire Concerning the Honor of Spiritual Leadership in the Church

12 We ask you brothers, to respect those who labor among you and are over you in the Lord and admonish you, 13 and to esteem them very highly in love because of their work. Be at peace among yourselves.

Again, notice the word "brothers." Paul as a leader does not view the church member as little children who are simple and immature in every way. But he calls them brothers. Some in the church are little brothers and sisters, but they are brothers. They are joint heirs of the gift of life. They are family. So there's a respect and esteem that leaders have for every member of the church. And then notice at the end he says,

13...Be at peace among yourselves.

The Gospel brings peace between us and God. It brings peace within God's family. Peace is a defining mark of a Spirit-led church. And each member has a part in strengthening the peace that God gave us through His Spirit; of making efforts to maintain that peace, that unity in the bond of Spirit. One principle that connects the first part of verse 13 with the last part is this. Unifying peace in the family is strengthened by relationships between elders and members that are mutually loving and respectful. When a member forsakes respect for church leadership, he or she forsakes the hope of peace in his or her local church. That's how it's tied. He says, "Esteem them highly. And then make sure that you do everything that would make for peace." Those two ideas are clearly tied together.

Hebrews then also speaks to the same kind of language regarding a member's responsibility to honor spiritual leadership in the church. Listen to what Hebrews says.

Hebrews 13:7 Remember your leaders, those who spoke to you the word of God. Consider the outcome of their way of life, and imitate their faith.

Hebrews 13:17 Obey your leaders and submit to them, for they are keeping watch over your souls, as those who will have to give an account. Let them do this with joy and not with groaning, for that would be of no advantage to you.

If they're groaning as they are shepherding your soul, that would be of no advantage to you. No good comes from that. Ever! To anyone!

The commands presented here regarding a church leader and their heart attitudes and actions towards spiritual leadership in the church, are not simply some do's and don'ts. But rather, they are given to implore members to help their own church family to be a Gospel-centered church that stirs up love within the family. This is just the outcome of the Gospel. It is no advantage to God's glory or to any individual for there to be poor relationships between church members and God's ordained authority of elders.

Notice the different terms that are used to command church members regarding their treatment of elders. Do you notice how various Paul was and the writer of Hebrews was in giving commands to members regarding their church leaders? He says "respect them." He says, "esteem them highly." He says, "remember them." The idea is, remember them with thankful hearts. He says, "consider the outcome of their way of life." He says, "imitate their faith." He says, "obey them." And he says, "submit to them." These are powerful words, especially in a culture that has so much trouble with embracing God-ordained authority in any direction.

Why does Paul write these commands? And they all are really, I think, pointing to the same thing, but they're different angles of the same thing. Remember that Paul is addressing real problems in every letter that he writes to a church. He often doesn't directly state the problem, but he offers the solution to the problem. And when he offers the solution, everybody looks around as this letter is being read in the church and saying, "Yeah. We know what you're talking about, Paul." So when the Apostle Paul writes 1 Thessalonians 5:12-13, he says "Respect those who labor among you." I'm sure some of them are saying, "Yeah, we're not doing that, are we? He's kind of correcting us, here." He's addressing a problem that is already present in that church. It's a new church and new leadership was being established. And someone says, "Who made that person the leader? I'm not going to listen to them." And when they would admonish them with the Word, "Who are you to talk to me?" And so Paul says, "Respect them and esteem them highly." He knows that the future of this church in Thessalonica to glorify God, is going to be dependent upon the church members' positive esteem and respect for the leadership that God has provided. When a church member respects and esteems church leaders, he or she pleases God by that attitude. On the other side, when a church member does not respect and esteem very highly spiritual leaders, he or she grieves God with that heart attitude.

The work of the spiritual leader in a church is often difficult. It often requires faith, strength, courage, toil and pain. That's the nature of the work. We must persist in it. We can't get discouraged by that. But God tells members, "Do your part by doing everything you can to make that work, that hardship, that labor, a joy rather than a pain." The joy for every leader is

linked to the heart of each member toward them. That's the issue. Do you know what happens when godly men become discouraged and leave their service as leaders in God's church? That's what Paul is concerned about here. He's concerned that some of these young leaders are going to say, "Who needs that? My life was a lot easier before I became a leader in this church. I'm laboring, I'm toiling, I'm giving myself, and all that's happening is I'm getting criticized. I'm being disrespected. People don't like me anymore just simply because I'm trying to serve the Body of Christ." Do you know what happens when spiritual leaders get so discouraged that they quit and leave spiritual leadership in a church? What happens is that ungodly leaders take their place. And what happens to a church when that takes place? It's a disaster! That's what Paul is trying to ward off. He saying, "God has called and qualified some godly men to be leaders. Respect them. Esteem them highly. Don't let this work be a grief to them."

You know, this issue of discouragement first has to be an issue within every church leader. We talked about that. We are right to believe the Holy Spirit and to embrace God's grace and be strengthened. We can do all things through Christ who strengthens us. (Philippians 4:13) But it's right also to look at it from the other angle of the church member. How can I strengthen? How can I encourage? How can I help? Young pastor Timothy needed encouragement. It seems from his letters that he too was about ready to say, "You know what Paul. I don't know if I can go on. I don't know if I can continue on as a pastor." I want to read you what Paul wrote to Timothy.

2 Timothy 1:5-8 I am reminded of your sincere faith, a faith that dwelt first in your grandmother Lois and your mother Eunice and now, I am sure, dwells in you as well. For this reason, I remind you to fan into flame the gift of God, which is in you through the laying on of my hands, for God gave us a spirit not of fear but of power and love and self-control. Therefore do not be ashamed of the testimony about our Lord, nor of me his prisoner, but share in suffering for the gospel by the power of God,

He says, "Timothy, I believe that you really love the Lord. God has worked in your family for a long time. Is it going to end with you, Timothy? I want to encourage you to think about that. I know that some things that are happening are dousing water on the flame, but you need to fan that gift, the gift of spiritual leadership, into a flame. You've been publicly identified. You know what was true about God's calling upon your life."

Let's seek the Lord to keep our hearts full of respect and esteem for our spiritual leaders.

Now I want to close with some really practical words. I'm going to give you six applications of this. You say, "Well how can I show honor and esteem for spiritual leaders?" Let me just give you six very practical ways to respect and esteem spiritual leaders in your church.

Application #1: Pray for spiritual leaders by name and with specific requests.

That means you have to know them to a certain degree. It's not by accident that both 1 Thessalonians 5 and Hebrews 13, passages that press in the command upon church members to respect, esteem, honor, submit to church leaders. In that same passage, both of those

passages call church members to pray for their spiritual leaders. Not just honor them, but pray for them. So if you look down in verse 25,

1 Thessalonians 5:25 Brothers, pray for us.

Hebrews 13:18 Pray for us, for we are sure that we have a clear conscience, desiring to act honorably in all things.

Right after he says “obey your leaders,” he says, “pray for us.” So it’s urgent for us to take time to know our elders well enough to pray for them. That word in verse 12, “respect,” is very personal. It actually means “to know or to appreciate.” It’s having an understanding as to what’s happening in their life. Sometimes, spiritual leaders get discouraged and prayer lifts them. Sometimes they hurt and prayer heals them. Sometimes they feel timid, and prayer fills them with courage. Sometimes they’re confused and prayer brings God’s wisdom. Praying is a loving and honoring act toward church leaders that God delights to answer.

Application #2: Receive instruction from God’s Word from them and submit your life to God’s Word.

This is the greatest joy a pastor could ever have, or an elder could ever have. It’s that people are hungry to listen to God’s Word and to repent of sin and to obey what God has to say. There’s no greater joy than that. That word “obey your leaders” doesn’t just simply mean obeying whatever willy-nilly they happen to say. It means obey them as they’re teaching you God’s Word.

There was a missionary who had trouble translating the word “obey” in this language. He was living in this village and he was thinking, “What word can I use from this community that I’m in, translating the Bible into that language? What word can I use that would communicate the idea of “obey”?” So he was pondering this. And as he did so, he had his dog walking with him. His dog ran off, and he whistled. And the dog came right back to him. And one of the villagers came up to the man and he said, “Your dog is all ear.” In other words, “The dog pays attention. When you whistle, he listens and he comes and submits.” And a light went off for the missionary. He said, “That’s how I’m going to describe the word ‘obey.’ It means ‘all ear.’ And so that’s how he described obedience in the New Testament that he was translating. It means all ear! And so, one of the ways that you honor and respect your leaders is be all ear. Say, “I’m going to listen to what God has to say because God has given you as elders to teach us the Word. And I want to listen with a submissive heart.”

Application #3: Refuse to listen to gossip or slander against them.

God does give a process to receive biblically informed accusations against elders. Elders are not sinless, and sometimes they need to be confronted as a result of sin.

1 Timothy 5:19-20 Do not admit a charge against an elder except on the evidence of two or three witnesses. As for those who persist in sin, rebuke them in the presence of all, so that the rest may stand in fear.

The idea is of elders persisting in sin. So there is a biblically defined process in God's blueprint for confronting elders who have committed their lives over to sin. Elders are accountable to live obediently both to God, but also to the congregation. But this confrontation of sin is through due process. Many charges laid against elders in the church are of the generic, whispery, secretive, behind-the-back and unsubstantiated variety.

Proverbs 16:28 A dishonest man spreads strife, and a whisperer separates close friends.

Remember that silence in the face of gossip and slander will be interpreted as agreement. So if you are hearing gossip and slander about some elders in your church, and you just are silent and say, "I didn't participate. I didn't chime in. I'm just sitting here listening." Please know that silence at that moment is approval for those who are gossiping. It is vital for the honor and esteem of spiritual leaders that you speak into that and say, "What's happening here is wrong. If we have a charge against an elder, let's go together and talk to them about it."

Application #4: Talk with church leaders when you have problems with their leadership.

Submission and respect does not mean non-communication. It's just the opposite. Submission and respect mean that you're willing to go and talk. If church leaders hurt you in some way, tell them. If they disappoint you, share that with them. If they confuse you, approach them. If you're unhappy or discouraged by your church family, sit down with your elders to discuss it. Of course, prepare your heart to speak with grace, to speak biblically and not with sinful anger. But honor your leaders by talking with them about problems.

I know it can feel scary at times to talk with anybody about a problem that you have with them. Church leaders have a responsibility to make it safe for church members to share disagreements, concerns, hurts, and questions. We must not be defensive or angry or frustrated when members come to us with negative comments. But church members are called to love and honor their leaders by engaging with them, even when it requires courage.

Application #5: Communicate your love and appreciation for your church leaders.

That kind of encouragement boosts their souls in ways and at times that you cannot fully know.

I have in my Bible, some notes. Three of these are notes that were given to me just recently from kids. In each one of these, a child in our church wrote this note to me. They all say I love you pastor, and this is why. They wrote on their own, of their own volition. And they took time to do it. And what that means to me is they were thinking of me and wanted to express love for me. And I can't tell you how powerfully encouraging that is. It's unbelievable to think that somebody, a little precious soul in our church, cared enough to think of me and write me something special.

I have a whole folder. I couldn't bring it because it's huge now over the last 25 years. I didn't save everything, but I saved some things that people wrote. This one was from a little boy who, two months from now, I'm going to officiate at his wedding. That's kind of cool, isn't it?! Of course, it's been a while ago since he wrote this. (Congregational Laughter!) But it's pretty cool.

Again, I say this not to...I'm kind of more public than all the other elders. I know I receive a lot more encouragement than any of them do. But there's so many elders. That's who I'm really encouraging you to consider. Again, I'm public. There's a lot of people who think about me. But there's so many elders who are not as public. Consider them, how you can honor them.

Application #6: Invest spiritually in the lives of other brothers and sisters in your own church.

I'll just close with this in verses 14 and 15, because church leaders are only called to do a small fraction of the ministry of the church. The majority of the ministry of a church comes from the members. And so that's why he moves from members' responsibility, to church leaders, to immediately member's responsibility to ministry to one another. This is what he says.

14 And we urge you, brothers, admonish the idle, encourage the fainthearted, help the weak, be patient with them all. 15 See that no one repays anyone evil for evil, but always seek to do good to one another and to everyone.

You'd think that that's a command for church leaders, but it's not. That's a command for church members, now. That is something church leaders do, but it's also something that should be part of the natural life of members in the church. That's one way that you honor and esteem leaders. It's by being that involved in your own church family, investing spiritually in the lives of other brothers and sisters.

The church is the dearest place on earth. And she will reflect more of her potential when members commit themselves to loving and respecting the spiritual leaders that God has called and qualified to that local church.