

NOTHING LIKE THAT HUMMINGBIRD

13th in a series on 1 Thessalonians called, "Alien Race"
1 Thessalonians 5:1-11

INTRODUCTION

I hate waiting. Last Sunday after church we headed for a restaurant near our home to have lunch. We saw that traffic on the freeway was at a near standstill. We said, "No way. We're not putting up with that." We drove inland and went on the winding roads through the ranch. We figured we probably didn't save much time, if any, but we were moving. That feels much better than sitting and waiting in gridlocked traffic. What is one of the most dreaded institutions in our country? It is the DMV, because you know that when you go there you are going to spend a lot of time waiting. Let's not forget being in the back of the plane after a long flight waiting for people to wrangle their 30 carry-on items out of the overhead bins and GET OFF THE STINKING AIRPLANE before you can finally leave. Yeah, I really do hate waiting. I'm coming to the place where I'm willing to consider the unlikely possibility that patience may not necessarily be a strong suit for me. Perhaps you can identify with me.

This is unfortunate for those of us who are followers of Jesus. We are waiting here for Jesus to come get us. Titus 2:13 says we believers in Jesus "wait for the blessed hope, the appearing of the glory of our great God and Savior, Jesus Christ." We've been waiting a long time. What are we supposed to be doing while we wait? Are we supposed to try to parse out the signs of the times and figure out who the anti-christ is or look for evidence that the world wants to stamp the number 666 on us?

No, if we want to be prepared for Jesus to show up at any moment we will do none of that. What we will do is focus on relationships. Paul said at the end of verse 11 that we are to encourage one another and build each other up. We should make the body of Christ be what it is supposed to be, a place of grace and love, a refuge from a harsh and demanding world.

Beginning in verse 12 Paul gives specific instruction on what he wants us to do in our relationships. He gives instruction for three different groupings of people, first with a narrowly defined group, then moves on to a broader group, and then addresses relationships among everyone in the body of Christ. Let's see what Paul has to say in 1 Thessalonians 5:12-15 about how we ought to relate to one another.

THE CARE AND FEEDING OF LEADERS

He begins by giving some instruction for how to relate to a very specific group of people. He talks about those who “work hard among you, who care for you in the Lord and to admonish you.” In other words, he is talking about how to relate to leaders. Sadly, almost everywhere you go you will find an undercurrent of criticism of leaders. It’s there in businesses, classrooms, clubs, homeowners associations, government, athletic teams and churches. Paul says if we really want to build each other up and if we want the body of Christ to be what God wants it to be, we need to acknowledge those in leadership, and “hold them in the highest regard.” You could translate that “esteem them super highly” or “give them max respect.” We need to respect them and communicate that respect to them and to others.

At times the church has taken this to the extreme. Pastors are viewed as though they are some sort of super spiritual being, not quite divine, but not merely human either. We’ll call him Reverend, or even Most Reverend. In Matthew 23 Jesus hammered the Pharisees because of their pompous religious pride and their desire to have people give them honor as great religious leaders. In verses 8-9 he said, “You are not to be called Rabbi, for you have one Teacher and you are all brothers. And do not call anyone on earth Father, for you have one Father.”

It seems like these days a pastor has to be called Pastor Rick or something like that. Look at 1 Thessalonians 1:1. “Paul, Silas and Timothy to the church of the Thessalonians.” What do you notice about Paul’s reference to himself and his colleagues? He was just Paul, not Apostle Paul or Reverend Paul or his holiness Paul. Just Paul. If God’s hand-picked apostle, author of much of the New Testament, didn’t feel a title was either necessary or appropriate, why would I?

It feels a little self-serving to talk about these verses since I am in a leadership position. That’s why I’m not going to spend a lot of time on this particular principle. But I have been on the fuzzy end of people disobeying this instruction. It didn’t feel real good, but of greater concern, it was upsetting for a lot of other people, and a number of people were hurt by it. But the good news is that for the most part in my 37 years of ministry, people have extended great grace to me. And this church needs no instruction in this regard. You have consistently and continually communicated love and respect to Laurie and me from the first day until now. I cannot explain to you how grateful I am for that. Enough said about that.

THE CARE AND FEEDING OF SPECIAL CASES

Those who are “out of order.”

Our translation in verse 14 speaks of those who are idle and disruptive. The Greek word Paul used literally meant “disordered.” The verb form meant to “set oneself outside the order,” or to “evade one’s obligations.” There were people in that church who were not meeting their own personal obligations. They were not taking responsibility for themselves, they were goofing off and in their ample spare time meddling in other’s lives and causing problems.

In the area where we live there are a lot of high achievers who generally are pretty motivated. Oddly, we have had a couple of guys as neighbors who would fit into the category of being out of order. One of them is a stay-at-home dad, which would be all right except his kids are all grown and don’t live at home. He actually has caused some neighbors to move away because he doesn’t have a lot to do and with his free time makes himself a nuisance. For a while another guy lived across the street from him. This other guy hated the first guy. We heard him railing against him one day and thought it was kind of funny because all the things he said about the man he despised were also true of him. He said the guy needed to get a job because he didn’t have enough to do. That was ironically true of him as well.

We don’t have any people in our church who are shirking their responsibility for their own lives, but there is a way this might hit a little closer to home. The out-of-order person is evading his obligations. He is not taking responsibility, is not bearing his share of the load. For a church to be a real community it requires everyone contributing. For us to have worship services, ministries to younger people, fellowship events, Bible studies and outreach events; in order to just function, we need people to set up chairs, run sound, put out signs, teach Sunday school, greet those who come, organize and oversee finances, lead worship, organize outreach and fellowship events, and the list goes on. Even in a small church a large number of people are needed for it to function. An out-of-order person might be one who expects others to carry the load while he enjoys what they provide.

As a follower of Jesus you have been given responsibilities in two ways. You have been given some abilities, some gifts that God asks you to use to help build up the Body of Christ. If you are not using the gifts God gave you to serve others you are being idle. In addition to that, all of us have been given a number of “one anothers.” We are all supposed to love one another, care for one another, comfort one another, encourage one another, serve one another and more. These things are not just the

responsibility of leaders or pastors, they are given to all of us. Anyone not fulfilling those responsibilities is shirking his duty.

Those with small souls

Verse 14 says to encourage the disheartened. The Greek word used literally meant “those with small souls.” It sounds a little like something out of The Grinch, whose problem was he had a heart that was two sizes too small. In this case it sounds like people that have souls two sizes too small. No one wants to have a small soul. Most of us would be offended if someone judged us to have a small soul. I would like to think of myself as having a great soul. However, *The Theological Dictionary of the New Testament* connects this word with the idea of having “too few resources to meet the situation.”

There were believers in Thessalonica that struggled with the persecution they were facing. They wondered if God had abandoned them. They didn’t know if they could handle it. They wondered if maybe this Jesus thing was a mistake. It would be a lot easier on them if they gave up and went back to the way things were before. Friends and family would accept them back and opponents would leave them alone. They didn’t have the resources necessary to handle the difficult situation, thus they had small souls. Paul said they needed to encourage those people. Not berate them. Not shame them. Not preach at them. Encourage them. The Greek word Paul used, “paratheisthe”, was rather rare and not the word he typically used to mean “encourage.” It meant “to speak to someone in a friendly way.” It meant to console and reassure.

It is helpful for us to consider that though a person is “small souled” at one time does not mean that is always going to be true of them. We might easily label a person as small souled, lacking the faith or strength to meet the situation and generalize that to be always true of them. If you have green eyes, you’re always going to have green eyes. Is this the same kind of deal? If you have a small soul you’ll always have a small soul? We might see it as a permanent character flaw. That’s who the person is and always will be. But being small souled is not genetic, nor is it necessarily permanent. It is not necessarily a condition a person is doomed to live with forever.

John Mark was small souled. He quit on Paul and Barnabus in the middle of a pioneering mission trip. He didn’t have the resources to meet the situation. But Barnabus did not give up on him. He encouraged him and gave him another chance. And he went on to write the Gospel of Mark. He became a trusted lieutenant for both Peter and Paul. John Mark was small souled in one situation, but that was not characteristic of him for the rest of his life.

In many instances Peter demonstrated great faith and a great soul. But in the most difficult and intense moment of Jesus' ministry Peter did not have the resources to handle the situation. When the pressure was on he denied even knowing Jesus. In that moment he was small souled, but that was not the end of his story. As we all know, he went on to demonstrate great faith and a great soul, to the point where at the end he even was martyred for his faith.

Because someone is small souled today, or this week, or this month, or this year, or this decade, does not mean they are doomed to have a small soul forever. This passage tells us that even if a person is small souled for the rest of their life, what they need from us is not criticism, rejection, disdain or lectures, what they need is for us to stand with them and speak in a friendly way. They need us to love them and encourage them.

In the most recent football season Minnesota Viking place kicker Blair Walsh led the NFL with 34 field goals. On kicks inside 30 yards he was deadly accurate. In their playoff game against the Seattle Seahawks the Vikings were down 10 to 9 with only 22 seconds left as Walsh lined up for a 27-yard field goal attempt. It seemed like a sure thing that the Vikings were about to defeat the Seahawks. Instead Walsh's kick went wide and the Vikings lost and their season ended. As you can imagine, there was a social media storm that broke, berating Walsh for his failure. But a group of first graders in Minnesota took a different approach. Their class all decided to send notes of encouragement to him. One wrote "Dear Blair Walsh, I think you should keep trying. Don't give up! We still love you! Get better by practicing." The act of kindness by those kids got his attention. He went to visit their class and after the visit he said, "It was very touching to me. A lot of the cards were very pretty and creative. I will cherish them forever." In that instance Walsh did not have the resources necessary to meet the demands of the moment. But instead of kicking him while he was down like so many adults were doing, those first-graders chose to encourage.

Those who are weak

It is difficult to know how those who are weak are differentiated in Paul's mind from the small souled. Most scholars say that both of these terms are general and imprecise. In other words, we err if we try to draw a distinction between them. One common characteristic of the ancient Jewish writings, particularly in the wisdom literature and the Psalms, is parallelism. A common form was synonymous parallelism, in which a writer would state something and then restate in another way. You will see this throughout the Psalms and Proverbs. Paul was trained in that style

of writing and every now and then it comes out. This is an example. He's kind of saying the same thing here in regard to the weak that he said about those who are small souled. The weak are basically like the small souled people. They are those who might be subject to moral temptation or spiritual shortcomings. They might be those who are given to discouragement or even depression.

Once again Paul says what they need is not someone trying to fix their problem or tell them to buck up and do better, but someone who will help them. The Greek word that Paul used there literally meant "to hold firmly to." In other words, stick with them. What they need most is someone to care about them into not feel alone. They need to know that someone actually cares about them and is going to go through whatever the situation is with them. The thing that I find most striking in these instances is Paul's instruction for dealing with people that some might look down on, or have difficulty accepting: He said what we need to do is encourage them, speak in friendly ways to them, stick with them and go through whatever they're facing by their side.

We've been doing a lot of baby care around our house lately. Laurie has been taking care of our granddaughter, Ella, most days with some minor assistance from me. It's been a long time since we took care of a baby. There are a couple of things that I have been reminded of as we have had the privilege of being with little Ella. One of them is there are times when you can't fix whatever is wrong with the baby. We've already had several occasions where our precious little granddaughter is in full roar because she's unhappy and we have no idea why. The only thing that we can do in those situations is try to comfort her. You hold her, you rock her, you speak in soothing tones to her and do your best just to let her know you love her. It occurs to me that's probably a pretty good model for how we need to deal with those who are small souled or weak. We can't fix them. Our analyzing their problem doesn't help. Our lectures or solutions just make things worse. What they need is for us to stay with them and love them.

But there's something else about Ella that I have noticed that I also think applies here. She is only four months old. She can barely hold her head up and though she has some control over her limbs, it's not a lot. Her movements are the farthest thing from smooth. She is still months away from actually being able to crawl. She can't talk though she can make babbling noises from time to time. It is clear that she doesn't comprehend anything much that we say to her. And yet it is a marvel when I hold that little girl to see what is developing there. You can see her taking in the world and trying to make some kind of sense of it. You can see her looking at people and trying to read their faces. You can see her trying to use her voice to figure out how people make these sounds and what they mean by them. You can see in that

little tiny infant vast potential. She is growing and learning at a phenomenal rate. We do not know what she will be, but we can see that she will soon be able to walk, talk, learn, and grow into an adult with tremendous possibilities ahead of her. That, again, is another aspect of how we should see those, including ourselves, who might seem small souled or weak. No matter what they are today they have tremendous potential.

The church is the place where imperfect, flawed, sometimes failed people, weak people who sometimes have souls at least two sizes too small, can be safe. Here they are to find acceptance, support, encouragement and love despite all of their blemishes. Despite all of *our* blemishes.

THE CARE AND FEEDING OF EVERYONE

Be Patient With Them

I am sure that you have noticed that those availing themselves of the services of a physician are called patients. I know why. You're feeling really bad, you need to see a doctor and you call for appointment, what typically happens? They tell you that they can get you in two weeks from next Wednesday. What are you supposed to do in the meantime? Be patient! When you finally do have an appointment with the doctor, you go to his office and what happens? You sit in his waiting room for an hour and a half because obviously they want you to understand that you are a patient. Uh, don't tell my "almost-a-doctor son" that I said that.

Sadly, patience is often in short supply in this world. Unfortunately, patience, or lack of patience, can have a big impact in relationships. In 1 Corinthians 13 Paul wrote his timeless description of love. Do you remember how it begins? He starts in verse 4 with this phrase, "Love is patient." If are going to love people it starts with being patient with them.

A common occurrence in our marriage happens when we are about to go somewhere, especially when we are under a time constraint. I admit that both of us have had the experience of remembering just as we are leaving that we have forgotten something in the house. I could be accused of being a little biased here but I believe this happens more often with Laurie than it does with me. The interesting part is that often Laurie will go back in the house to retrieve the forgotten item. It should require seconds to get it and come back. Yet often she is gone for a long time. What is she doing in there? When that happens it tries my patience. There have been occasions when I have felt the temptation to snap at her and say, "What took you so long? You were in there forever!"

I have, for the most part, managed to restrain myself. That's good, because inevitably Laurie has a valid reason for whatever caused the delay. Even a little bit of thought enables me to figure out that she has not gone in the house and suddenly decided there was something on television that she wanted to watch. So if I snap off an impatient barb at her I'm going to end up with egg on my face when she explains why it took as long as it did and I realize that there was a legitimate reason. It's also prudent for me to hold my tongue because the real problem is my own impatience. It would be about me and my desire to not have to wait and to not be late. It would have nothing to do with loving her and she would know that. Those little impatient words would actually do damage to our relationship because it would hurt her and drive her away from me. They would probably tempt her to fire back something equally chippy. It is my good fortune that on those occasions when I have been impatient with her she has been remarkably kind in her responses.

It is so easy to find fault with other people, especially those who are closest to us, and to be impatient with them. We need to be very clear on two things. First, our impatience is not love, it is the absence of love. And second, because it is not love, it is doing damage to the other person and our relationship with them.

The Greek word for patience, “hupomoné,” means “a long time until you get to anger.” The patient person will go a long time before you ever see anything resembling anger from him or her. Former Super Bowl winning football coach Tony Dungy relates the story about his dad that demonstrates this character quality. His dad was a scientist, at heart and by training, but he also loved the outdoors. He loved fishing. Tony recalls a particular summer day in 1965 when his dad took him and his brother Lyndon fishing on a small lake. His dad used that occasion to teach them how to cast. They were both working on it mostly in silence, until his dad's voice broke stillness. He said, “Hey Lyndon, don't move for a minute, please.” His dad went on in a very calm and deliberate tone, “Now Lyndon, always make sure that you know not only where your pole is when you're starting to cast, but also make certain that you know where everyone else is around you.” Tony could see that as he calmly said this he was gently working his brother's hook out of his own ear. Lyndon had caught something, he had caught his dad's ear! Tony says that years later when he himself got hooked in his hand he realized how much it hurts. He says he has never forgotten the example of his dad's patience that day. Rather than being angry and yelling, he was calm and patient even while he was in considerable pain caused by Lyndon's mistake.

Author and pastor Bryan Wilkerson says of “hupomoné,” that “it often described resignation to a situation or person that wasn't likely to change. Sitting around and

waiting for change is pretty much what this word means.” He says patience is an unswerving willingness to wait rather than to try to force change.

Most of us are probably in the camp of those who say, “I like patience. I just don’t want to have to wait for it.” I don’t think that I am a particularly impatient person but if I reflect honestly about myself I realize it kind of depends on the provocation. For instance, I know my impatience can show up when I’m driving. Not long ago, a person driving an SUV the size of an aircraft carrier abruptly pulled in front of my car in a rather rude lane change that caused me to brake to avoid running into him. Very quickly we came to an intersection where there was a red light. I was waiting behind him in the left turn lane. This was a big intersection so there were two left turn lanes and it was a long wait until the arrow turned green for us to turn. When it finally did, Mr. USS Enterprise just sat there. We had been waiting since shortly after the Big Bang for that light to turn green and when it finally did, he didn’t budge. For a long time. To add to the fun the guy next to him also didn’t move. Usually in a situation like that the sleeping driver will wake up when he realizes cars around him are moving. But these two paragons of driving virtue just sat there. I began discussing the situation with him. I said in a voice that may have been loud enough for him to hear, “What is wrong with you? Quit texting on your phone and pay attention, idiot.”

That terrible offense on the part of that driver probably cost 10 seconds of my life. It made me late for exactly nothing. It was yet another reminder that if you touch the right nerve in me it will trigger an unexpected eruption of impatience. As I said, impatience is the opposite of love. Love is about benefitting the person loved. Impatience is about me perceiving that another person is keeping me from something I want. It is my dedication to myself coming out.

How do you feel when people are impatient with you? I am usually offended or hurt by it. It does not make me think more highly of that person or be drawn to them. It makes me want to find fault with them in turn. That’s what impatience always does in relationships. Patience has the opposite effect. It draws us to those who are patient with us.

How can we become more patient? First, see impatience for what it is. It is selfishness, the opposite of love. It is you making everything about you. Second, ask God to give you patience. But I warn you, he is likely to take you up on that by giving you opportunities to exercise patience. Third, Give thanks. Gratitude is a great antidote for impatience. Once when I was in the car and Laurie seemed to be in the house for a long time, I started reflecting on how amazing she is and how thankful I am for her. I reminded myself that I have it better by far than someone who wins the

lottery because I am married to her. As I did so I found that it no longer mattered much if I had to wait for a while, because it wasn't important, and being married to her is hugely important.

Do Good For Them

Paul says in verse 15 that we should not pay back wrong for wrong, but instead to always seek to do good to people. The implication is we should seek to do good for them even if they wrong us. In Romans 12:20, as he addressed how to respond when people hurt us, Paul wrote, "If your enemy is hungry, feed him: if he is thirsty, give him something to drink. In doing this, you will heap burning coals on his head." Do good to them. In verse 21 he said, "Do not be overcome by evil, but overcome evil with good."

That's a fine way of saying it. Evil can never become good by adding more evil to the equation. Wrong can never be made right by seeing the wrong and raising it. It is obvious that when we respond to wrong with more wrong, wrong wins. We can never defeat wrong by joining it. We can never defeat lack of love by loving less.

The normal human approach to relationships is to be something like a mirror. We typically reflect back to other people what they give to us. If they are kind and patient with us, we tend to be kind and patient back in return. If they are rude and thoughtless, we tended to be distant and curt with them. If they are angry with us it seems to engender anger that we send right back. Paul is telling us that the way to build truly healthy relationships is to never be controlled by the way other people treat you but to always be controlled by the spirit of Jesus within us. It means that no matter what others do, we continually seek to love, to do good, to bless them. Galatians 6:10 says, "Therefore, as we have opportunity, let us do good to all people, especially to those who belong to the family of believers." 1 Peter 3:9 says, "Do not repay evil with evil or insult with insult. On the contrary, repay evil with blessing, because to this you were called so that you may inherit a blessing." We were called to bless people no matter what they do to us. That is our role in this world. Titus 3:2 tells us to always be gentle toward everyone.

Pastor and author Mark Devers wrote in his book, *Discipling*, "Being a disciple of Jesus means laboring for the sake of others." He went on to say, "Spiritual power is exercised in strenuous self-giving service for others. Do you want to know the power of God? Then give yourself to the struggle of working for the good of others."

CONCLUSION

What can we do to actually put these truths into action in our lives?

MAKE YOUR LIFE ABOUT PEOPLE

No matter what we say, we do what is important to us. The man who is running a successful business in dealing with constant overwhelming demands says that he believes it is important to exercise but he just doesn't have the time to do it. That is, until he has a heart attack and his doctor tells him living a healthier lifestyle and getting exercise every day is now a life-and-death matter for him. Suddenly, he finds time to exercise.

If something really matters to me I will find a way to do it. That is true of all of us. To respond positively to the instruction that we have seen in this passage we must make people the thing that really matters to us. People are what matters. When we come to the end of our lives we are not going to feel regret that we didn't spend more time at the office or that our company didn't grow bigger or that we didn't get that promotion. The things that we will regret will always have to do with people. People are what make a place we live either enjoyable or something we have to endure. Let's keep our focus on making our lives about relationships with other people.

COUNT ON GOD'S RESOURCES

Psalm 38: 20 says, "Those who repay my good with evil lodge accusations against me, though I seek only to do what is good." In that verse it seems that David actually exemplified what we're talking about in this passage in Scripture. Others were seeking to do him evil while he was only seeking to do good for them. In verse 21 David wrote, "Lord, do not forsake me; do not be far from me, my God." David understood that the thing that would enable him to keep being what God wanted him to be in that situation was that God was with him.

I shared with the guys at breakfast yesterday a story I recently remembered in which Laurie told a young guy about this. We were taking a surfing lesson in Hawaii. The young guy who taught us asked Laurie what the secret to our being married so long was. She said, "We are committed to serving each other 100 percent all of the time, not serving our own desires. But that's not natural for any of us, so we need a source to give us the strength and love to do that. The source is Jesus. We draw from his love, and that makes us able to sacrifice to love each other." He wasn't expecting that. Kind of stunned he said, "The source. I like that." Then he changed the subject. But she's right. Jesus is the source, and if you're not continuously plugged into him, you won't be able to continually do good to others. But if you walk with him and draw

continually from his boundless well of good and love, you will be able to always do good to others regardless of what they do.

SEEK TO BE A SPRING OF GOOD

Laurie goes to some pains to put a hummingbird feeder in our yard. As a result, we have a resident hummingbird. Such a cute and fascinating creature. It is an example of beauty in nature. At least it appears that way until you watch how that bird lives. The thing is a horror. It won't let any other birds near the feeder in our yard, even when he's had all the food he needs. If another hummingbird tries to drink of the juice in that feeder he dives and attacks it, driving it away. And that feeder doesn't even belong to him. It belongs to Laurie, who would like it to be a hummingbird social center. All that bird cares about is himself, and he terrorizes any bird that dares to draw from his feeder. Do you want to be like that?

Seminary professor Haddon Robinson often recalls the Promise Keepers' rally when nearly one million men gathered to praise God. Oddly, a number of women's groups showed up to protest what they call, "this male chauvinist movement." They held signs and stood outside the rally areas, yelling and chanting. Robinson says that as the day grew hot, repeatedly men from the rally would go out to the women and give them a cold bottle of water. He saw one man take a woman's sign and hold it for her as she drank the water he had just given her. It was a small example of some followers of Jesus doing good to those who oppose them. Robinson also notes that that characteristic of doing good to others was not confined to incidents like that. There was an article in the Washington, D.C. newspaper the next day about the rally that mentioned that when the cleanup crew arrived after the rally, they were astounded to find the place totally clean. The men had picked up all of their trash and placed it in trash cans and trash bags. The cleanup crew had nothing to do but take away the trash. The article quoted one employee who said, "I'm impressed. They didn't just walk away from their dirt."

What do you want to be? Somewhere inside all of us who believe in Jesus there is a desire to be that person that is a source of good and of grace and of love in every situation and every person we encounter. Don't you want to be the kind of person who isn't controlled by what other people do, but by the spirit of Jesus? I think we all want that, so let's make it our goal to continually do good to others: to be patient with them, not returning evil for evil, but to always do good to everyone in every way.