

“What To Do With Problem Sheep”

1 Thess. 5:14-15

- INTRO. - This morning I want to return to a passage of Scripture I dealt with about a year ago on Sunday night, because I think this is something we need to include in our series on the church.
- For some of you this may be review, but I think we need to understand the important principles in this passage of Scripture as it relates to shepherding in the church of Jesus Christ. This passage of Scripture provides valuable insights in regard to “what we should do with problem sheep in the church.”
- ILL. - Now, most of us are familiar with how Jesus restored the Apostle Peter after his denials. After Simon Peter had denied three times that he even knew the Lord Jesus Christ, the Bible tells us that he went out and “wept bitterly.”
- But Jesus came to him in John 21 (after His resurrection) and restored him, in one of the most tender and profound conversations ever recorded in Scripture.
- Three times in the course of that conversation, the Lord asked Peter if he loved him. One time for each time he denied him. And each time, when Peter assured him that he *did* love Him, the Lord responded by saying, “Feed My sheep.”
- One of the primary ways that Christians are to show their love for their Master is to take care of His sheep. God has given under-shepherds to the church to care for the sheep, but He has also given the sheep the responsibility of taking care of other sheep. The responsibility for caring for the fellowship of the church is just as much *yours* as it is the pastors.
- The passage of Scripture we are focusing on tonight is addressed to *all* the sheep, and it tells us what each of us is to do with *problem* sheep. This is *not* addressed just to the shepherds; it is given as the responsibility of *all* the sheep.
- By using the term “brethren” in v. 14, Paul makes it clear that this is for every member of the body of Christ. Since “brethren” (in v. 12) clearly refers to *all* the congregation, the term “brethren” *here* must mean the same thing.
- Certainly the shepherds are to be actively involved in caring for the sheep. But the shepherds cannot do it by themselves. It takes all the sheep working with the shepherds to deal with problem sheep who need attention.
- You know, in every church there are going to be some “problem sheep.” There are always those who require special care and attention, for a number of reasons.

- The church is *not* made up of perfect people who never have any problems. The church is *not* a display case for perfectly healthy saints; it is a hospital for spiritually sick sinners.
- Henry Ward Beecher once said, "The church is *not* a gallery for the exhibition of eminent Christians, but a school for the education of imperfect ones."
- Someone once said, "If you ever find the perfect church, don't join it because, if you do, you'll make it imperfect." That could be said of any of us because *all* of us are imperfect. There is no such thing as a perfect church because there are no perfect people this side of glory.
- Charles Morrison wrote, "The Christian church is a society of sinners." In fact, he said, "It is the only society in the world in which membership is based upon the single qualification that the candidate shall be unworthy of membership."
- Even though we are saved by the grace of God, we still struggle with the flesh, as long as we are in this physical realm, and we will *not* be fully sanctified until we reach the shores of heaven.
- So until that day when the church is with the Lord Jesus Christ in glory, we have to deal with problem sheep in the church. And folks, when we are honest, we have to admit that *all of us* are "problem sheep" at certain times in the church.
- Paul is going to give us five categories of problem sheep in this passage, and most of us would have to admit that we have *all* fallen into one or more of these categories at certain times.
- And notice the urgency with which Paul says we must deal with these "problem sheep." The phrase "we exhort you" has a strong tone of urgency to it. It implies "extreme diligence."
- Listen my friend, God desires us to go beyond merely attending church on Sunday mornings. We are *not* fulfilling our responsibility if we merely have a "once a week audience mentality."
- God wants you to do much more than simply show up on Sunday and stare at the back of someone else's head for an hour. He wants you to be actively caring for the needs of the other sheep.
- The church at Thessalonica was a strong church. It was a healthy church, a growing church. And yet it was *not* a perfect church. There were five types of "problem sheep" in that church, and I can assure you that we have those same types of sheep in our church as well.
- Let's look at these "problem sheep" and see what the Bible says we are to do with them. The first thing we see here in this passage is:

I. THE ISSUE OF FAITHLESS SHEEP (v. 14a)

- Verse 14 says, “We urge you, brethren, admonish the unruly...” The term “unruly” is really a military term. It refers to someone who is “out of step” with the rest of the troops.
- When you read this word, you should think in your mind, of a parade where all the members of the band are marching down the street, and they are all in sync except for one individual, and he is *not* in step with the rest.
- It can *also* refer to a soldier who is guilty of disorderly conduct. One who was insubordinate, non-submissive, disobeying orders, and *not* following through on his duty.
- Although this term *originally* had a military connotation, it *later* became used for anyone who was *not* performing his duty or was *not* following through with his responsibility.
- *Some* have wanted to limit this term to referring *only* to those who are lazy and are *not* fulfilling their obligation to care for their families, because in 2 Thess. 3 it is used that way.
- But this term can mean much more than merely shirking your responsibility to work and provide for your family. This term can mean anyone who is *not* fulfilling *any* of his responsibilities, including his responsibilities in the church.
- This *can* (and I believe *does*) mean those who are *not* being faithful to their local church. Those who only show up every now and then. Those who are *not* supporting the church with the giving of their tithes and offerings. Those who are *not* helping to build up the body of Christ through the exercise of their spiritual gifts...
- And this term *not only* takes in those who are faithless due to neglect, but also those who are faithless due to rebellion and disobedience.
- The “unruly” are those who are always “out of sync” with the rest of the church. They are always out of line. They are never with the program.
- When everyone else is moving forward, they are *not* on board. When everyone else is pulling together to accomplish God’s will, they are out somewhere in left field.
- They are *not* interested in serving. They are *not* faithful in giving. They are apathetic, uninvolved, and perhaps even loafing off. They are *not* contributing anything to the cause of Christ (in and through their local church).
- Their faithlessness may be because of apathy or indifference, or it might be because of anger and rebellion. They have become unhappy with the church and therefore they have become inactive.

- By the way, I have learned something about these kind of people, (in my nearly 40 years in the ministry): the benchwarmers are usually the loudest critics.
- As one author put it, “Such people, if *not* dealt with, tend to become bitter. They can become criticizing benchwarmers and eventually rebels who undermine church leadership to justify their insubordination.”
- So what does the Bible say we are supposed to do with people like that? We are to “admonish” them. This is *not* complicated. There's no formula, no program, no system to follow.
- Individual healthy sheep simply go to these “problem” sheep (that are hanging on the fringes and *not* doing their duty, *not* using their gifts, *not* ministering, *not* on board, *not* supportive, *not* with the program, *not* going the way everybody is going), and they admonish them to get back on the right track.
- Now, that word “admonish” is also found in v. 12. It is the word “noutheteo” and it means to “call someone to their senses.” It literally means “to put in the mind,” but it refers to coming alongside someone and urging them to change.
- The KJV uses the word “warn” here, which is *one* of the meanings of the word “noutheteo.” It doesn't have the idea of distant judgmentalism. It doesn't

have the idea of criticism from a vantage point of superiority. It has the sense of coming along closely (and intimately) and showing someone the consequences of their conduct.

- You say, “I'm *not* very comfortable with that.” It doesn't matter. That is what God says you are supposed to do when you see an “unruly” sheep. You are to go to them and lovingly warn them of the consequences of the path they are traveling. You are to warn them that God will eventually discipline them for their faithlessness, and you are to lovingly appeal to them to change their ways.
- Even though it may be difficult for us to do, there are times that we must confront other believers for their own sake with the truth. If we really love them, we will do that.
- We *must* be willing to do that, because the church will *not* be all God wants it to be unless we do. When we fail to admonish these “problem sheep” *we* are just as disobedient as *they* are.
- It is God's plan in the church that healthy sheep help the unhealthy sheep in this way. Then he deals with:

II. THE ISSUE OF FAINTHEARTED SHEEP (v. 14b)

- As we continue on in v. 14, we read, "...encourage the fainthearted..." The word "fainthearted" literally means "small souled."
- These are the fearful. These are the worried. These are the ones who are always afraid to try anything new. They are the ones who complain, "We've never done it that way before."
- They lack courage. They lack faith. They don't want to dare do anything that has never been tried. They love what is safe and secure. They lack the faith to step out and attempt new ministries and new ways of reaching people with the gospel.
- They hate change. They are *not* willing to risk. They want everything down pat and secure. They worry about everything. They fear the unknown.
- As a result, they are often in sadness, despair and *even* depression. They think everything is going to turn out badly. They are like "Eeyore" on Winnie the Pooh. They are always saying things like, "It's hopeless. We'll all be killed." These people may be so fainthearted that they will throw in the towel and quit when things get tough.
- These are probably the ones who were saying (in ch. 4), "Ohhh, ohhh, surely the day of the Lord is here and we've missed the Rapture, this is the day of the Lord. We're all going to be destroyed." So he has to write and say no, it's *not* the day of the Lord.
- And they were probably the most deeply wounded by the death of their friends, and they were saying, "O look, they died and Jesus hasn't come, they're going to miss the Rapture...oh woe is me." So he has to write and say, "No, no, the dead in Christ will rise first ..."
- So what does Paul say we are to do with the fainthearted? Are we to run over them like a steamroller? Are we to rebuke them? No. We are to "encourage them." We are to come along beside them and lift them up. We are to comfort and console them.
- We are to lovingly, tenderly spur them on. We are to put our arms around them and say, "Don't grow weary in well doing. Don't give up and quit. You can do it. Hang in there. Everything is going to be OK." Then we have:

III. THE ISSUE OF FRAGILE SHEEP (v. 14c)

- Paul goes on to say in v. 14, "...help the weak..." This is similar to the fainthearted, but a little different. These are Christians who are spiritually and morally weak. This is *not* referring to those who are physically weak (although we should help them as well).
- Some have suggested that this corresponds with Paul's discussion of "weaker brothers," such as in Romans 14-15 and 1 Cor. 8-10.

- If this is the case, it would refer to those whose faith is beset with doubts, and who may *not* be strong enough to enjoy the freedom God intends for us to have in Christ.
- And if *this* is what this term means, then this presents a serious problem. What is the problem? Well, a weak faith *can* mean that they may even see certain things as sin that are *not* really sinful.
- These would *then* be like those Paul talked about who would have their consciences offended by eating meat (for example) that had been offered to idols. God's Word tells us that there is inherently nothing sinful about such meat, but if eating this kind of meat (in those days of the first century) offended a weaker brother, the Christians were to refrain from eating it.
- Is that what Paul has in mind when he uses this word here? This certainly *could* be the case, and I believe that this term *includes* this aspect of weakness, but I don't believe that is *all* that is intended here.
- I believe this term also refers to those who are *morally* weak. That is, they have a tough time rejecting temptation. They seem to be continually struggling with sin, and often fail to live according to God's Word.
- These are Christians who may fall into the same sin over and over again. You work with them, you disciple them, you pray for them, but they can't seem to resist certain besetting sins.
- This may be a brand new Christian who is still struggling to overcome the old lifestyle. As Jerry Vines writes, "People don't come into the church fully grown. When people get saved that doesn't work all the problems out. When people get saved, they get saved right where they are and they come in with all of the hurts and emotional damage and problems and all of the heartaches and chaos in their families and turmoil in their souls. We have a ministry to them."
- What do you do with such problem sheep as this? Paul says, "help them." Now, this is probably too simplistic a translation for such a magnificent concept in the Greek language.
- The word that is used here really means "to hold firmly to, to hold tightly to, to cling to." It means, "Hang on to them and don't let them go."
- ILL. - The picture (here) is of someone who is falling off a cliff or a bridge or a building, and we are holding on to them so they won't fall to their deaths.
- We are much too quick to let go of these sheep. We often just "write them off" and chalk them up as necessary casualties. But God wants us to help them. God wants us to come alongside them and strengthen them and hold them up.

- Do you remember what it says in Gal. 6:1? It says, “Brethren...if anyone is caught in any trespass, you who are spiritual, (do what?) restore such a one in a spirit of gentleness...”
- When a brother (or sister) stumbles in sin, we are to pick him up and dust him off, and help him get back on the right track. Our job is to restore him, *not* to push him down.
- The next verse says, “Bear one another’s burdens...” That’s involvement. That’s caring. That’s fulfilling the law of Christ (that verse says).
- Sometimes what is needed is to create some accountability. Hold him accountable for his behavior. Ask him to report back to you how he is doing.
- And let me say a word to those of you who may be in this category: Get in there with the spiritually strong and allow them to help you overcome this weakness.
- The truth of the matter is, that the church is full of these kind of sheep, and unless they are helped to overcome, they will weaken the spiritual vitality and health of the church.
- It is critical that we follow this admonition to help these weak brothers and sisters. If you are a helper

of the weak, please keep up that good work. It is vitally needed in the church!

- And again, the truth of the matter is, that (probably) *all* of us are weak at certain times, and may be in need of some help from a stronger brother or sister. Then fourthly, Paul deals with:

IV. THE ISSUE OF FRUSTRATING SHEEP (v. 14d)

- The end of v. 14 says, “...be patient with everyone.” First of all, we have to qualify the “everyone.” When Paul says “everyone,” who is he talking about?
- Well, I believe he is talking about all kinds of problem sheep. That has been the context throughout this section of Scripture. And while I’m sure God would desire us to be patient with the lost as well, I don’t think that is what is in mind here.
- He is talking about being patient with all kinds of sheep in *all* these different categories. In fact, I think he would be saying, that we should be patient with *all* sheep, whether they fit into one of these categories or *not*.
- The truth of the matter is that *all* sheep can be frustrating at times. I even get frustrated with *myself* occasionally! The “all” (or everyone) can refer to any sheep with whom you might become impatient, including yourself.

- Listen, it takes a lot of patience in the work of the Lord and His church! It takes a lot of patience in this business of growing in the Christian faith. It certainly takes a lot of patience dealing with problem sheep.
- Why do we often fail to do the things Paul says (here) in having patience with other sheep in the flock? I'll tell you why: because it is hard work. And we don't want to expend the energy and devote the time that it takes to invest in other people's lives.
- It is much easier to simply take a "live and let live attitude" and just go our own way. But that is *not* what the Word of God says is the Lord's design for His church.
- He wants us to pay the price and make the sacrifice necessary to help those who are struggling. Even when it's frustrating. Even when we don't see immediate results. Even when it seems as if there is no progress being made. We are to do what God desires for us to do in ministering to other sheep.
- You say, "Well, Pastor, how patient are we supposed to be?" I think we need to answer that question with another question, "How patient is God with you?"
- Once you answer *that* question, you will know how patient you are to be with others. And listen, we

can't be that patient on our own. That kind of patience doesn't come naturally to our unredeemed flesh.

- That is a supernatural work of God in us. So we should ask the Lord to give us that kind of patience with other sheep, especially the problem sheep.
- Remember that "patience" is a characteristic of God-given love, and it is one of the fruits of the Spirit of God. If we really love each other, we will be patient with one another. If we are really filled with the Spirit, we will be showing patience as a result. Then lastly, Paul gives us:

V. THE ISSUE OF FORGIVING SHEEP (v. 15)

- Verse 15 says, "See that no one repays another with evil for evil, but always seek after that which is good for one another and for all people."
- Even redeemed sheep can sometimes wound and hurt other sheep. Even sheep can do "evil" (the word means baseness, meanness, wickedness). Unfortunately, this happens even in the church.
- Perhaps this is one of the most difficult issues to face in the Christian life; that of being attacked and wounded by those on the same team. Friendly fire. Being shot at by those who are in the family of God.

- This may be one of the deepest pains ever experienced by Christians. You *expect* persecution from the *world*, but when it comes from your own ranks, it seems to be much more difficult to take.
- In fact, young Christians are often disillusioned by how vicious some Christians can be to their fellow Christians.
- Paul is saying, “Look, there are people in the church that are going to hurt you, they're going to do evil to you. They may harm you *directly* with wicked words that attack you face to face. Or they may harm you *indirectly* by gossip and slander and evil speaking to others about you. They sometimes will harm you by shutting you out of their fellowship, by eliminating you from their social circle, by keeping you out of their ministry because of jealousy, envy, hate, bitterness or anger.”
- But no matter how they may harm you, you are never to return evil for evil. You are never to seek revenge. You are to turn it over to the Lord. You are *not* to retaliate in any way.
- There is never a place for personal vengeance for a Christian. What did Paul say in Rom. 12:19? He said, (beginning in v. 17) “Never pay back evil for evil to anyone. Respect what is right in the sight of all men. ¹⁸If possible, so far as it depends on you, be at peace with all men. ¹⁹Never take your own revenge, beloved, but leave room for the wrath of

God, for it is written, “VENGEANCE IS MINE, I WILL REPAY,” says the Lord.”

- You say, “That’s tough.” I know it is. But you know what? It gets even tougher than that. The next verse says, ““BUT IF YOUR ENEMY IS HUNGRY, FEED HIM, AND IF HE IS THIRSTY, GIVE HIM A DRINK; FOR IN SO DOING YOU WILL HEAP BURNING COALS ON HIS HEAD.’ ²¹Do not be overcome by evil, but overcome evil with good.”
- *Not only* are you and I to refrain from retaliating against someone who hurts us, but we are to seek to do them good!
- You say, “What about an eye for an eye and a tooth for a tooth?” *That* is a message to those in the government, that they are to be just in dealing with those who break the laws of the land. That has nothing at all to do with personal vengeance.
- Sometimes Christians *do* evil to other Christians, and sometimes they do it right in the church. But when that happens to you, you are *not* to get even. You are to attempt to do good to your enemies, and you are to turn it over to the Lord because the Bible tells us that vengeance belongs to the Lord.
- How did our Lord Jesus respond when this world treated Him in the most evil way imaginable? Did He strike back? No. He said, “Father, forgive

them...” We must learn to do the same with our fellow sheep in God’s fold.

- And this principle applies, *not only* in the church, but to *all* people, saved or lost, sheep or goats, redeemed or unredeemed.
- Rather than returning evil words with more evil words, frowns with more frowns, fists with more fists, backstabbing with more backstabbing, slander with more slander, or gossip with more gossip; Christians are exhorted by the Lord to respond in the same way Christ did when He had evil done against Him.
- PRAYER