

## 1 Thessalonians 5:12-19

But we appeal to you, brothers and sisters, to respect those who labor among you, and have charge of you in the Lord and admonish you; esteem them very highly in love because of their work. Be at peace among yourselves. And we urge you, beloved, to admonish the idlers, encourage the faint-hearted, help the weak, be patient with all of them. See that none of you repays evil for evil, but always seek to do good to one another and to all. Rejoice always, pray without ceasing, give thanks in all circumstances; for this is the will of God in Christ Jesus for you. Do not quench the Spirit.

### **We Need Each Other**

Talk about a man led by the Spirit! That was Paul of Tarsus, or Saul of Tarsus – one of the “traditional” Christian beliefs about Paul is that he changed his name from Saul after his “conversion.” No, ‘Saul’ was a Jewish name, while ‘Paul’ was a Greek name, and ‘Paul’ probably used whichever name was appropriate to the company that he was keeping at particular time. And Paul kept company with a lot of different people. He was the mother of all missionaries, traveling all over the Northern Mediterranean preaching the gospel to anyone and everyone he encountered. It didn’t matter to Paul if you were Jew or Gentile, male or female, slave or free. Paul understood that Jesus was not simply the Savior of Israel; he was the Savior of the *world*. And he was so convinced of this that spent most of his life traveling to the extreme limits *his* world to spread the message of Jesus.

Paul had not always been so outgoing. In fact there was a day when Paul *hated* Gentiles. You’d have to say that Paul was a racist, but he used his religion to mask his racism. Paul was a very zealous Jew, a Pharisee. He wasn’t a priest or a rabbi; as a matter of fact Paul was a tentmaker. He had studied under some great rabbis, but there’s no indication that he was among the religious elite in Jerusalem where he first encountered these Christian Jews, and it wasn’t so much the fact that these Christians believed that Jesus was the messiah; I think what really rubbed Paul the wrong way so many of the Christians treating Jewish law and tradition and Temple worship. Jews like Paul were not crazy about the idea of welcoming a bunch of non-Hebrew speaking converts who knew nothing about Moses or Abraham or David and who were now hanging around their Temple. Paul was either a religious purist or he was just ambitious; either way he saw these Christians as a threat to the things he valued most.

Paul was an extremist. He went out with his religious cronies to harass and stifle these Christians who hardly seemed Jews at all, and one of their first victims was a man named Stephen, a deacon among the Jesus crowd. But he thinks that very well-received by the Pharisees, and probably other denominations as well, and so the lynch mob dragged him out of Jerusalem and stoned him to death. Paul was part of that lynch mob, and author of Acts tells us that Paul approved of the whole atrocity. In fact Paul requested a letter from the high priest giving him permission to go to Damascus (about 130 miles away) to round up Christians, arrest them, and bring them back to Jerusalem, which must have scared the bejeebies out of the Damascus Christians, many of whom had fled from Jerusalem to escape people like Paul.

But then something extraordinary happened; something miraculous. While Paul was on his way to Damascus, something happened. The book of Acts says that Paul saw a great light and heard Jesus asking, “Why are you persecuting me?” Paul doesn’t describe it quite that way, but he does insist that he met Jesus.

And Paul's life takes a 180. Paul, the man who despised these very un-Jewish Jews and had no qualms about murdering them, now becomes Paul the man who travels to the ends of the earth to reach these very souls – people, you should never think that anyone, including you, is beyond God's ability to change. Paul has met the Christ, Paul has felt the hand of mercy and forgiveness for his crimes, Paul has come to know the joy of God's immeasurable love, and Paul has found that peace that passes human understanding, and now Paul wants to share all of that with everyone. And so he goes about sharing and preaching and changing people's lives, and he helps form little communities of those who believe Christ is King and his kingdom is coming. And these communities are little kingdoms of God here on earth...supposedly.

Supposedly! Yes, Paul encountered the sorts of issues that plague so many churches today; people arguing over the color of the carpet, people talking behind each others' backs, people who want to rule over others, and all sorts of other messy problems. But Paul also encountered the good in every church, people going out of their way to help one another, people caring for the needs of the hungry, the homeless, the mentally ill. And Paul referenced the good more than the bad as he wrote letters to the new friends (very often Gentile friends) who were part of these churches that had popped up all over Turkey and Greece. Those letters of Paul form the foundation of the New Testament. I sincerely doubt that Paul ever even thought that these letters would someday be so cherished as they are today. It should make us stop and think about the things we leave behind in writing, or on video. Who knows what will happen to them after we die. I like to think that someone might gain some encouragement from things I've written or spoken. I think we all hope for that.

And I think we all strive to be a community that is defined by love, a community where...

We respect those who labor among us and have charge of us...

Where we are truly at peace among ourselves.

Where we can admonish the idlers, encourage the faint-hearted, help the weak,  
**and be patient with all of them.**

Where we don't repay evil for evil, but always seek to do good to one another and to all.

Where we rejoice always, pray without ceasing, give thanks in all circumstances

And where we do not quench the Spirit.

So let me wrap up this series on Intentional Discipleship by saying that we need each other, and that no one here is without value to this community. We need to pray for eyes that will allow us to see the beauty in everyone. We need each other as we confront a world where values are skewed, where people are beating each other up, where people are lost morally and their very souls are at risk. I've mentioned that the message we carry is not accepted by everyone. Too many people live in fear and anger and hatred and suspicion, and they resist handing their lives over to Jesus Christ. And when you say something or do something that upsets their wishes they may strike out and push you out of the way. Those little communities that Paul worked so hard to establish and maintain – those people needed each other, because they were facing threats of arrest and imprisonment and execution for their faith. We don't face those kinds of threats here in Staten Island, but we do sometimes face scorn and anger and verbal attacks when we stand up for the kingdom of God, and as a church we can be tempted to compromise, to convince ourselves that it would be better to be "practical" than it would to be righteous or just. We need each other to stand with each other when it comes to doing the right thing. We need each other to prevent us from quenching the Spirit, because "Where the Spirit of the Lord is, there is freedom."