

1 Thessalonians 5:12-15

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Preacher: Greg Hendrickson

[0 : 00] to 1 Thessalonians chapter 5. It's found on page 988, if you're looking in one of the pew Bibles. 1 Thessalonians chapter 5, verses 12 through 15.

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

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

Well, this morning's passage is about human relationships. It's about what it looks like to love other people well. And on the surface, probably all of us would recognize that as a worthy goal.

And yet, on a day-to-day basis, probably all of us would admit that we struggle to do that well, even to the people that we most want to love. Well, in this passage, the Apostle Paul gives specific instructions about how Christians are to love others, both within and outside the church.

[1 : 30] So for those of us who are Christians, I hope that this passage will shape our day-to-day relationships and interactions with other people. If you're not a Christian, you'll see in this passage some of what the Bible teaches about how Christians ought to relate to other people.

And you can feel free to challenge us to live up to these instructions. But whether you're a Christian or not, I hope you'll see one other thing. Not just how Christians ought to relate to one another, but that you'll see the unique resources that the Christian faith provides to enable us to love people well.

Even, as we'll see at the end, even people who don't treat us well. Now, this morning's passage is the beginning of the end of 1 Thessalonians. We've been going through 1 Thessalonians this spring, and we've come to the last major section.

As we've seen throughout this book, 1 Thessalonians shows us a community shaped by the gospel of Jesus Christ, a community characterized by faith, love, and hope in Jesus.

In chapter 1, verse 3, right at the beginning, Paul thanks God for their work of faith, their labor of love, and their steadfastness of hope in the Lord Jesus Christ.

[2 : 42] Chapters 1 through 3 focus on how the gospel produces faith, a conviction of the truth about Jesus that hits home in us and sounds forth from us to the world.

Chapters 2 and 4, Paul focuses on love, how the gospel produces self-giving love, like the love of a nursing mother who's taking care of her children, like the love of a father, as he says, exhorting and encouraging his children to walk in a manner worthy of God.

Chapters 4 and 5, what we've just looked at the last two weeks, focus on hope, how the gospel gives us hope to face even death and judgment without fear.

And then if you look up at chapter 5, verse 8, those three appear together once again. Paul says we put on the breastplate of faith and love and for a helmet the hope of salvation.

Now in this last section of 1 Thessalonians, I want you to see that this last section of 1 Thessalonians, which is titled Final Instructions and Benediction in the ESV title, it's not just all the random things that Paul wanted to say but couldn't fit anywhere else in his letter.

[3 : 53] But what this last section is is some very concrete, practical instructions about how to live by faith, hope, and love in Jesus. So today's passage focuses on love and how that's expressed in our human relationships.

The next two weeks, verse 16 through 22, focus on faith and how that affects our approach toward God. And then verse 22 and 23 come back to the theme of hope. So again, I hope you'll see that over the next couple weeks as we go through there.

Now today's passage starts specific and then it gets more general. It starts in verse 12 and 13 by focusing on our relationships with church leaders. Verse 14 broadens out a little more, our relationships with everyone in the church, more broadly speaking.

And verse 15 is completely unrestricted. It talks about our relationships with everyone. And what we'll see today in these three sections is that the gospel of Jesus produces a community characterized by three things.

By peaceful order, that's verse 12 and 13. By patient discernment, that's verse 14. And third, by pursuing love. So we'll look at each of those three things in turn today.

[5 : 05] So first, the gospel creates a community of peaceful order. And this is a section that focuses on relationships with our church leaders. Now Paul describes these leaders in verse 12 and 13 using three phrases.

He says first, they labor among you. That's a word that means to work hard, to sweat and toil and struggle like an athlete or a soldier or a farmer.

Second, Paul says these people are over you in the Lord. Now this word is hard to translate because it carries two potential meanings. It can mean authority or it can mean care.

It can mean leadership or it can mean provision. And so some translations say instead those who care for you in the Lord. The same word appears in Romans 12 in the list of spiritual gifts.

So some translations call it leadership and some translations call it giving aid. But actually, we shouldn't separate these two meanings. Authority and care, leadership and provision are meant to be connected.

[6 : 06] And not separated. Now we don't have one English word that neatly captures both of them. But those who have authority in the church are responsible to care for the church.

And the people who care for the church are the kinds of people who should be put in authority in the church. So the leaders labor among you. They are over you in the Lord. And third, they admonish you.

Now that word admonish means to give advice or correction designed to change the conduct of a person. In other words, good leaders don't just tell people what they already know and what they already agree with and simply seek to avoid conflict and please everybody.

Good leaders, when necessary, warn or correct or exhort in love. Now you might ask, well, who are these leaders that Paul is describing in these three phrases? Well, primarily, Paul's referring to the elders or the shepherds or pastors or overseers.

Those words are all referring to the same thing throughout the New Testament of the church. Who have spiritual authority and responsibility to lead and teach the whole and care for the whole church.

[7 : 12] Now you might ask, how do we know that? Well, here in verse 12, Paul refers to the Christian believers as brothers or brothers and sisters, brothers and sisters in God's family under the loving authority of God, our heavenly father.

And as an expression of God's fatherly care, God has established an orderly structure in the church so that his children, so that we would live in peace with one another.

And in particular, throughout the New Testament, we see that God raises up elders to exercise a fatherly authority and care, leadership and provision for the good of the whole church.

And we see this pattern throughout the New Testament. There's a parallel between the commands to elders in a church and the commands to husbands or fathers in a family.

So for example, the same word admonish that's used here in verse 12, it comes up in Ephesians chapter 6, verse 4, in a command to fathers. Paul says, fathers, bring up your children in the discipline and admonition of the Lord.

[8 : 12] Look, our first Timothy 3, Paul says that an elder must manage his own household well. And that word to manage is actually the same word that's translated to be over you in verse 12.

Again, to be over you, to care for you, to manage, to be responsible for. And he goes on, he says, if someone doesn't know how to manage his own household, how will he care for God's church? So in other words, God has established an orderly structure in both the family and in the church so that we would live in peace.

Now, I know in our culture, we're a little suspicious, well, maybe more than a little suspicious of authority structures, right? But the reality is, you know, whether or not you give them a title or whoever it might be, some person or some group of people always has the final say in any community.

There's always some authority, whether we like to recognize it or not. And we all know that in a family, if the kids run the household, right, and if the parents don't follow through on their word, or if the kids effectively have veto power by throwing a tantrum, there's no peace, right?

But if the parents, now, of course, if parents exercise authority without care and provision, that's not good. That becomes abusive. But if parents simply exercise care and provision and never exercise authority, then that's simply enabling bad habits, enabling self-centeredness to continue.

[9 : 41] In the Bible, we see that God designed parents to have authority over their children, to care and provide for them and to admonish them. And the children, in turn, are to honor their parents.

And in a similar way, as we're all called to honor our parents, Paul calls all of us in the Christian family to honor the elders and leaders in the church. Paul says we should respect.

That word could be translated, also recognize them. And he says esteem or consider them very highly in love. Now, what does this look like? Right now, in some ways, I think it's similar to what it looks like to honor your parents.

Now, parents aren't always right all the time. All the young people say amen. Just kidding. Right? And neither are church leaders. But part of what it means to honor your parents, even if you're an adult living on your own, is seeking out their advice on major decisions in your life.

Right? Rather than hiding things from them or simply going off and doing things without letting them know at all, without considering their input. And in a similar way, recognizing your spiritual leaders means getting to know them.

[10 : 51] Right? Letting them get to know you. Seeking out their input on major decisions in your life instead of simply deciding on your own and then maybe coming later and asking them to bless your decision.

Right? It also means engaging with the leaders. Even if you disagree. You know, I would much rather have you come and talk to me if you disagree with one of the decisions that the pastors are considering.

Right? We'd much rather hear directly from you rather than hear from somebody else. That's engaging with the leaders. It also means expecting God to work through the leaders of the church.

Again, this might sound a little countercultural. Expecting God to work through coming under the leadership of the church and expecting God to speak to you through the worship services every week and preparing your heart to receive what God has for you, even through us.

Now, I want to say I'm very thankful to be one of your pastors. I'm because many of you do all these things already. And even more. You pray for us. You love us and our families.

[11 : 58] You care for us as people, not just as people who can get something done for you, but as people. You know, sometimes I talk to pastors and former pastors who are weary and frustrated and alone and feel like quitting almost every day.

Or maybe have already quit. And you know, that's not me. I sometimes feel like, you know, I know I'm not as, I may not have been in this as long as some of them have, but, but sometimes I'm weary, but not always.

And sometimes I'm frustrated, but not most of the time. And it's a heavy responsibility to lead the church, but it's a joy as well. And you are many of the people who contribute to that joy, to making it a joy for us as a team of elders and a team of pastors to lead and care for you.

Now, I'd said here that Paul was primarily referring to the elders in these commands, who have spiritual authority and responsibility to teach and care for the church. But this verse also has a broader application, right?

Paul doesn't use the word elders or overseers here. He actually, there are many others who would fit this description. Many of you fit this description of working hard, caring and providing for others, and admonishing others.

[13 : 13] So think about it this way. Who has labored hard alongside you? Who has cared for you spiritually? Who has lovingly admonished you, even when you didn't want to hear it?

Well, thank God for those people. Recognize them as God's provision for your life. Esteem them very highly in love. Seek out their advice.

Seek out their accountability. If you're struggling with sin or seek out their advice, if you're seeking to discern God's will, nominate those kinds of people for positions of leadership in the church.

Now, of course, this verse is also a challenge for all of us who are leaders. Because Paul describes the leaders not by a title, not by an office, but by their work.

He says, esteem them highly because of their work. And so it's a call for us to live up to this description. To work hard alongside each other.

[14 : 12] To care and provide and admonish, as this passage says. Now, in the next verse, we actually see a little bit more specifically what that can look like. So verses 12 and 13 focus on our attitude towards church leaders and how the gospel creates a community of peaceful order.

Verse 14 focuses on the church as a whole and different groups of people within the church. And in this verse, we see that the gospel of Jesus creates a community of patient discernment.

Now, Paul describes three groups of people in verse 14. And then he describes the loving response to each of them. And this isn't relevant only to church leaders.

Right? Paul says, we urge you, brothers, brothers and sisters. He's speaking to the whole Christian community. This is something that we're all to do for each other, even if the leaders have a particular responsibility here. So he describes three groups of people.

And there's a spectrum. From the unwilling to the unable. And then those in the middle. So the idle are the unwilling. The weak are the unable. And then the faint-hearted are somewhere in the middle.

[15 : 20] So let's look at each of these. So first, Paul says the idle. Now, you might say, well, what does that mean? Well, the word was used in military contexts back then. Now, to describe a soldier who didn't follow orders and therefore wasn't ready for battle.

It wasn't necessarily someone who was just lazy, just laying on the couch all day and watching TV and never getting up. Right? It was someone who was disruptive or disorderly. As a result, causing trouble for themselves as well as everyone else.

I mean, imagine, if you're in the military, if one of your fellow soldiers is wandering off into the woods by himself, or charging into battle ahead of everyone else in foolish zeal, or not paying attention on his guard post because he's playing with his iPhone, right?

He's not only endangering himself, he's putting all the rest of you in danger as well. He's weakening the whole unit. And so Paul says the loving response to an idle person in the Christian community is to admonish them.

That is, to speak frankly to them, to warn them or even rebuke them, to give them a firm, brotherly, sisterly exhortation for their own good and for the good of the community as a whole.

[16 : 35] Paul says if we simply ignore an idle person and say, well, I don't want to have to deal with that, we do so at their own peril and eventually at our own peril. And he says this is the loving response to lovingly admonish someone.

Now, what does this look like? Well, Paul actually gives us two examples right in this letter in chapter 4. So at the end of chapter 4, in verse 11 and 12, there were some people in the community who had become disruptive and dependent.

We looked at this a couple weeks ago. They were meddling in other people's business and they were mooching off other people's generosity. And they were unwilling to go out and work.

They were unwilling to put some effort in. And in response, Paul admonished them. In chapter 4, verse 11 and 12, he says, Brothers and sisters, aspire to live quietly. Live peacefully.

And mind your own affairs. In other words, don't just be putting your nose in everybody else's affairs and not taking care of your own. Get your life straight. And take care of your business.

[17 : 41] And then he says, and work. Work with your hands so that you can set a good example and so you're not dependent, but instead so you can be generous to people who really need your generosity. Now, Paul also admonished people in the first half of chapter 4 who are crossing sexual boundaries, who are pursuing sexual intimacy without a promise of lifelong loyalty.

And he says, brothers and sisters, if you're doing that, that's a lie. He says, don't share the most intimate parts of your body with someone while holding on to your freedom to leave the relationship if your feelings change.

Because then you're saying something with your body and you're doing something else with your will and your heart. And he says, that's schizophrenic. And it's only going to leave you hurt and broken.

And it's not pleasing to God. Paul says, let no one transgress. And that word means let no one cross boundaries and wrong his brother or sister in this matter. He says, for God is not called us for impurity, but for holiness.

To be set apart for God and his purposes. So these are two examples of what it might look like to lovingly admonish someone. To come alongside them and challenge them and speak a word that's hard to say, but is actually loving.

[18 : 55] And helping them become, and challenging them to become who God wants them, to live as God wants them to. So that's the first group, the idol.

And Paul says we should admonish the idol. The second group is the faint-hearted, the timid or discouraged, people who are losing heart and feel that their resources are just not enough.

Too small to face the situations that life throws at them. And Paul says the loving response to a faint-hearted person is to encourage them. And that word means to come close to them and speak to them in a friendly way.

Not to rebuke them sharply or admonish them from a distance, but draw near to them. And urge them and give them reasons not to lose heart. Now what does this look like? Well again, Paul actually gives us an example.

It's what we looked at the last two weeks. End of chapter 4, beginning of chapter 5. End of chapter 4, some of the Christians were grieving the loss of loved ones. And they were looking forward to Jesus coming back to earth.

[19 : 57] And they were afraid that since some of their loved ones who believed in Jesus had died, that they might miss out. They were confused. And they were grieving. And Paul wrote to reassure them.

He said, since we believe that Jesus died and rose again, even so through Jesus, God will bring with him those who have fallen asleep, those who have died. Paul says, Jesus' love is stronger than even death.

And one day he will return and raise everyone who trusts in him to life forevermore. However, the hope of the bodily resurrection is one of the most encouraging teachings of the Christian faith.

You know, Nick preached a great sermon on this two weeks ago. If you weren't here for it, get a CD or listen to it on the website on the end of chapter 4. Now some of them were fearful of the day of judgment.

They weren't just fearful about their loved, they weren't just grieving their loved ones who had died, but they were fearful of actually standing before God. Because they knew that they would, and they were probably acutely aware of all their sins, or many of their sins and failures.

[21 : 04] And Paul wrote to encourage them. He says, God has not destined us for wrath, but to obtain salvation through our Lord Jesus Christ. Jesus died for us so that whether we are awake or asleep, whether we're living or dead, that we might live with him.

And Paul, at the end of both of these sections, he says, encourage one another with these words. So that's what it looks like to encourage someone who might be faint-hearted, might be losing heart, or grieving.

It's to point them to the promises of God, and encourage them, and come close to them, and give them reason not to lose heart. The third group is the weak. Those without strength.

Whether this is people who are physically sick, physically helpless, or people who are socially or economically disadvantaged, or people who are spiritually weak, with an overly sensitive conscience.

As Paul uses the word in Romans and Corinthians. And Paul says the loving response to a weak person is to help them. To take an interest in them.

[22 : 10] To pay attention to them. To be loyal to them. And the word can also be translated to hold fast to someone. Paul says if there's someone who's weak in your community, come alongside them.

Put your hand on their shoulder. Say, I'm with you, and I won't let go. And we're going to make it through this together. You know, if someone's chronically ill, or seriously depressed, or simply overwhelmed by the troubles of life, You know, it's not usually that helpful to say, you can call me if you need me.

Because some people are too weak even to call for help. Sometimes, and until they get stronger, they need you to initiate with them.

To call them up and say, I'd like to come over. Can I come over today at four o'clock? Is that all right? And unless they say no, come. Hold on to them.

And don't let them go. Paul says, help the weak. And ultimately, the greatest example of this is Jesus Christ himself. Romans 5 says, while we were still weak.

[23 : 18] The same word. At the right time, Christ died for the ungodly. You know, Jesus Christ did not only admonish and warn us through the prophets.

He did not only encourage us through his words of promise. Ultimately, Jesus came and attached himself to us. He identified with us, even to the point of taking on our own flesh and blood.

He took on our sinful flesh. And he bore it to the cross. So that he might put to death our sinful nature. And he rose from the dead so that we might rise again with him.

And be made new as children of God. And he ascended into heaven. Bodily. You know, Jesus didn't just become human when he came down to earth.

And then leave his human nature behind when he went back to heaven. Because if that was true, then Jesus reconciled us to God in the past. But we have to fill the gap in the present.

[24 : 17] No, Jesus ascended into heaven. And he's seated at the right hand of the Father. And he's fully divine. And he's fully human. He's still our brother. He's still our advocate.

He's still our mediator. He's come and he's latched onto us. By sharing in our human nature. By dying for us on the cross.

By his resurrection and by his ascension. And one day he will return. He will never let us go. This is a wonderful promise. For all of us who recognize that we are weak.

And turn to Jesus. Finally, Paul concludes this section by saying, be patient with them all. In other words, whether they're idle or faint-hearted or weak, be patient.

Don't give up. Admonishing, encouraging, and helping. Because we serve a God who's patient. God doesn't give up on his people.

[25 : 20] God is slow to anger and abounding in love. And he continues to admonish and encourage and help us. Now let me step back for a minute. Do you recognize how wise Paul's advice is here?

Paul's not constrained by one personality type. Or one school of psychology. Every one of us naturally gravitates toward one side or the other of this spectrum. Right? We're either truth-tellers who aren't very compassionate.

Or we're compassionate helpers who never get in anyone's face. And so we fall short in our efforts to love people well. You know, it's not loving to simply come alongside an idle person.

And just help them and give them things. And practice unconditional positive regard. And help them live a happier and more fulfilling life according to their own definition.

That's not loving. And it's also not loving to come to a weak person and give them lots of advice and strong admonitions.

[26 : 23] And tell them to get it together. If they primarily need help and your presence. You see, the Bible recognizes the complexity of our human experience.

That's why it's full of so many different literary genres. So many different kinds of books. Everything from the Psalms to the laws to the prophets to the wisdom literature. In all these different ways, God comes to meet us where we are.

Admonishing us. Encouraging us. Helping us. And so the more that you spend time in the Bible. The more that you let its wisdom get into you.

The more you will become a helpful friend. And a wise counselor. Now maybe you've never read the Bible. Let me invite you. The Bible is not always easy to understand.

But it is full of wisdom. And ultimately it points to Jesus Christ as the source and the embodiment of true wisdom. So let me urge you to seek the wisdom that is found in the Bible.

[27 : 28] Perhaps start by reading one of the Gospels. To read Jesus' life and teachings and death and resurrection himself. Or ask a friend who's read it before to read it along with you. And consider the person of Jesus Christ that the Bible points to as the source of all this wisdom.

And the embodiment of that wisdom. So we see the Gospel creates a community of peaceful order. Of patient discernment. And third, the Gospel creates a community of pursuing love.

This is verse 15. Paul says, Do you notice how expansive, do you notice how unlimited Paul's language is?

No one, anyone, always, everyone. There's no situation, there's no relationship in which this command does not apply.

And further, Paul says at the beginning, he says, see to it. He doesn't just say, each one of you should have this attitude in yourselves. He says, see to it that everyone in the Christian community treats everyone else according to this command.

[28 : 42] Not repaying evil for evil, but seeking to do others good. In verse 12 and 13, Paul began by saying, Respect hardworking church leaders.

God's given them to you so that we'd live in peace. And sometimes that can be hard. But for most of us, you know, especially if the church leaders really are hardworking and caring and courageous and respectable, most of us can do that most of the time.

Verse 14, I think, is a little harder. Takes careful observation to discern who's idle and who's faint-hearted and who's weak. And a mix of those things.

And patience with them all does not always come naturally. But verse 15, verse 15 is the hardest of them all. Because Paul doesn't just say, respect hardworking leaders and be patient and discerning with your fellow Christians.

And he doesn't just say, if somebody does you wrong, just leave them alone. And don't do them any harm. He says, actively seek to do good. That word seek means to pursue.

[29 : 49] Or even to chase after someone. Paul says, pursue others in love. Take initiative to do them good. Even if they're your enemies. Even if they're dishonoring and persecuting you.

You see, the only way that you can carry out that instruction. The only way that we can even begin to live this kind of life. Is by having the gospel of Jesus. By having Jesus himself.

Deeply planted in our hearts. Because the gospel is this. That Jesus Christ did not repay us evil for evil. But he pursued us to do us good.

When we had rejected his love. And betrayed his friendship. And polluted his holiness. And twisted his truth. Jesus patiently and perseveringly pursued us.

And sought after us. Even to the point of taking on our human nature. And dying on a cross. First Peter puts it this way. Jesus committed no sin. Neither was deceit found in his mouth.

[30 : 54] When he was reviled. He did not revile in return. When he suffered. He did not threaten. But entrusted himself to him who judges justly. He himself bore our sins.

In his body on the tree. That we might die to sin. And live to righteousness. By his wounds. You have been healed. This is the gospel. That Jesus was wounded.

So that we might be healed. That Jesus suffered. So that we might not eternally suffer. That Jesus died for our sins. That we might not die in our sins.

But that we might die to our sin. And live in him. To righteousness. And in light of that gospel. Peter says. For to this you have been called. Because Christ also suffered for you.

Leaving you an example. That you might follow in his steps. So Paul says. Just as Jesus has not repaid us evil for evil. But pursued us to do us good. That we in turn.

[31 : 56] Should reflect his love. By paying it forward. By not repaying others. Evil for evil. But pursuing them. In love. To do them good. And what does that look like?

You know. Sometimes when we hear that phrase. To do good. To everyone. We often think it just means to be nice. To be tolerant. And inoffensive. Maybe to be generous.

And give five or ten dollars. To the guy who asked you for money. On the street. But you know. It's not just that. And in fact. Sometimes. Giving money to the guy on the street.

Isn't actually loving. Sometimes. It's actually self-serving. It's a way that we can feel good about ourselves. Without taking the time and trouble. To really get to know someone.

And discern their real needs. And that's why verse 14 is so helpful. Because it shows us concretely. What it means. What it looks like to do good. To different kinds of people.

[32 : 56] It might mean. A loving admonition. It might mean. A tender word of encouragement. It might mean. Your presence. And your help. But verse 15 tells us that.

Though the particulars might look different. In each situation. That we are to pursue others in love. And do them good. Without any exceptions. So whether it's a spouse.

Who speaks a harsh. And hurtful word. Or a boss. Who places unreasonable expectations on us. Or even an aggressive driver. Who cuts in front of us.

On I-95. We are not to repay evil for evil. But to pursue everyone in love. For their good. Even people that we don't know personally. Even people that we think.

Will never respond to us. Or never respond to Jesus. Now let me conclude. With a story of a woman. A college professor. Who wanted nothing to do.

[33 : 54] With Christians or Christianity. But encountered Jesus. Through the patient. And pursuing love. Of a Christian. Who at first. Didn't even know her personally. This is.

From a book. The name of this professor. Is Rosaria Champagne Butterfield. She's written a book. Called The Secret Thoughts. Of an Unlikely Convert. So let me read some of her story.

She says. She wrote. As a professor. I got tired of students. Who seemed to think. That knowing Jesus. Meant knowing little else. Stupid. Pointless. Menacing.

That's what I thought of Christians. And their God. Jesus. As a lesbian professor. Of English. And women's studies. I cared about morality. Justice. And compassion. My life was happy.

Meaningful. And full. My partner and I. Were involved in AIDS activism. Children's health and literacy. Golden Retriever Rescue. And our Unitarian Universalist Church. I began researching.

[34 : 52] The religious right. And their politics of hatred. Against people like me. While on the lookout. For some Bible scholar. To help me in my research. I launched my first attack. On the unholy trinity.

Of Jesus. Republican politics. And patriarchy. In the form of an article. In the local newspaper. About promise keepers. The article generated many replies. So many. That I had a box.

On each side of my desk. One for hate mail. One for fan mail. But one letter I received. Defied my filing system. It was from Ken. The pastor of a local church.

It was a kind. And inquiring letter. Encouraging me. To explore questions. Questions that I admired. How did you arrive. At your interpretations. How do you know you are right.

Do you believe in God. Ken didn't argue with my article. Rather he asked me to defend. The presuppositions. That undergirded it. I didn't know how to respond. So I threw it away.

[35 : 50] Later that night. I fished it out of the recycling bin. And put it back on my desk. Where it stared at me for a week. With the letter. Ken initiated two years. Of bringing the church to me.

Oh I had seen my share. Of bible verses. On placards. At gay pride marches. Christians who mocked me. Seemed happy. That I and everyone I loved. Were going to hell. But that is not what Ken did.

He did not mock. He engaged. So when his letter. Invited me to get together. For dinner. I accepted. My motives were straightforward. Surely this will be good. For my research.

Something else happened. Ken and his wife. Floyd and I became friends. They entered my world. They met my friends. We did book exchanges.

We talked openly about sexuality. And politics. They did not act as if such conversations. Were polluting them. When we ate together. Ken prayed in a way. I had never heard before. His prayers were intimate.

[36 : 47] And vulnerable. He repented of his sin. In front of me. He thanked God. For all things. Ken's God was holy. And firm. Yet full of mercy. I started reading the Bible.

I read it many times. In multiple translations. All the while fighting the idea. That it was inspired. But the Bible got to be bigger. Inside me than I. It overflowed into my world.

I fought against it. With everything I had. I did not want this. I did not ask for this. Finally one ordinary day. I came to Jesus. Ken was there.

Floyd was there. The church that had been praying for me. For years was there. Jesus triumphed. And I was a broken mess. I did not want to lose. Everything that I loved.

But the voice of God. Sang a love song. In the rubble of my world. I weakly believed. That if Jesus could conquer death. He could make right. My world. I drank.

[37 : 43] Tentatively at first. Then passionately of the comfort. Of the Holy Spirit. I rested. In private peace. Then in community. And today. In a covenant family.

Where one calls me wife. And many call me mother. I have not forgotten the blood. That Jesus surrendered. For this life. Today we come to the Lord's table.

To remember the blood. That Jesus surrendered. For you. And for me. And for everyone. Who would ever trust in him. We come to him. We come to Jesus.

Our Lord. Who became our brother. Father. So that we might be part of his family. Forever. And as we take the bread. And drink the cup. Let us feed on him. By faith. And be strengthened by his grace.

To be a people who are characterized. By peaceful order. By patient discernment. And above all. By pursuing love. For the sake of his name. In this world. Let us pray. Our heavenly father.

[38 : 55] In your everlasting love. You made us for yourself. And when we had turned away from you. And become subject to evil and death. You and your mercy.

Sent Jesus Christ. Your only and eternal son. To share our human nature. To live the life that we ought to have lived. And to die the death that we deserve to die.

So that he might reconcile us to you. Our God and our father. We thank you for his. Perfect and sufficient sacrifice. On our behalf. And we pray that you would make us.

By his grace. A people who are peaceful. Patient. And pursuing. In love. For others. For his sake. Amen.