

“We Exhort You Brethren ...”

“... admonish the disorderly, encourage the fainthearted, support the weak, be long-suffering toward all” (1 Thessalonians 5:14).

This section of 1 Thessalonians has several appeals for things these brethren were to do or avoid; not necessarily connected to each other. Such a “lumping together” of appeals of several actions is found also elsewhere in Paul’s letters; see Romans 12:6-12 for a lengthy example of similar appeals. Four exhortations are found in this one verse from 1 Thessalonians 5.

Paul's first exhortation is “admonish the disorderly.” Who are those to be admonished? We are told the word “disorderly” is a word that is from a military background, signifying “to break rank.” The word is also found in James 3:8 where the tongue is called a “restless” evil. The KJV translates the word there as “unruly.” One who is unruly is one who chaffs at submitting to orders. That fits “disorderly” well.

The story is told of a doting grandmother who went to watch a grandson perform in the marching of a school band. She noticed the band’s line was not uniform, her grandson being the culprit. But prideful grandmother didn’t notice that. She exclaimed, “Look there! Everybody is out of step except Johnny!” The disorderly is likely to think that everyone is wrong but him.

“Disorderly” is an adjective which may describe many different things. Here it is not specifically identified but in Paul’s second letter to the church the word appears again. It seems Paul’s admonishment in his first epistle had fallen on “deaf ears” so he commanded, “Now we command you, brethren, that ye withdraw yourselves from every brother that walketh disorderly and not after the traditions which they received of us” (2 Thess. 3:6). Paul vigorously denied having walked disorderly among them — he had “paid his own way.” Then he wrote, “We hear of some that walk among you disorderly, that work not at all but are busybodies” (2 Thess. 3:11). Thus a specific illustration is given of one who is “disorderly” — one who will not work but depends on others to feed him.

Paul exhorted the Thessalonians to “encourage the fainthearted.” The KJV translated this word “fainthearted” to “feeble-minded,” a word which today conveys an entirely different meaning than that which Paul intended. Paul wrote of his philosophy toward life when he said, “While we look not at things that are seen, but at things which are not seen. For the things which are seen are temporal, but the things which are not seen are eternal” (2 Cor. 4:18). The fainthearted are those who find it difficult not to be affected by present things. It is not easy for him to “walk by faith, not sight” (2 Cor. 5:7). A good word from Solomon doubtlessly will profit us all: “Trust in the Lord with all thine heart and lean not unto thine own understanding. In all the ways acknowledge him, and he will direct thy paths” (Pro. 3:5)

The third exhortation from the verse is “support the weak.” The “fainthearted” and the “weak” in this verse are alike in one respect. Both, because of their “faintheartedness” were in action others engaged in virtually immobile. The difference in the two was this: the fainthearted did not have questions about the course he was reluctant to step out and walk on — he acknowledged that course was right. He just was afraid of the externals. But the one who is weak has doubts about things; he has a troubled conscience about the rightness of what others have no questions about. Elsewhere of this class of folk Paul wrote, “Him that is weak in faith receive ye, yet not to doubtful disputations” (Rom. 14:1) and then again, “We that are strong ought to bear the infirmities of the weak and not to please ourselves” (Rom. 15:1). The strong must be patient with the weak in the scruples he has, remembering that for the weak one to engage in things he has doubts about (eating meats he has in former times viewed as “unclean” for example), he has condemned himself for “He that doubteth is condemned if he eats, because he eateth not of faith and whatsoever is not of faith is sin” (Rom. 14:23).

The verse’s fourth and final exhortation is “be longsuffering to all.” “Bear ye one another’s burdens and so fulfill the law of Christ” is Paul’s command to brethren elsewhere (Gal. 6:7). We must be patient with others, remembering God’s longsuffering with us. “Longsuffering” is part of brotherly kindness, enduring the frailties and weaknesses of our brethren. “In love of the brethren be ye tenderly affectioned one to another, in honor preferring one another” (Rom. 12:10). However, our longsuffering is not confined solely to brethren: the apostle commanded, “Be longsuffering toward all.”

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