

March 21, 2021  
Sunday Evening Service  
Series: 1 Thessalonians  
Community Baptist Church  
643 S. Suber Road  
Greer, SC 29650  
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**TO BE SANCTIFIED COMPLETELY**  
**1 Thessalonians 5:23-28**

The COVID pandemic has thrown much of normal life into confusion and uncertainty. There seems to be a good amount of evidence that we might finally be reaching a non-pandemic point where it can be considered just another medical nuisance. However, there are probably some things that will never return to what we knew as the “normal” state.

The other day I read a news article about athletes who have trained for the Olympics possibly being disappointed by their event being cancelled at the 2021 games in Tokyo. It was disappointing enough that the entire venue was canceled last summer. If we stopped to consider the amount of time, energy, and sacrifice the athletes have made to prepare for this once-every-four-years event, we would be sympathetic.

The typical olympian begins training early in life. In some cultures authorities choose the athlete who is then forced to begin training in childhood. In our culture, a person first discovers he or she has an ability and, while pursuing that ability, they develop a desire for the sport. The desire drives the athlete to endure an intentional, detailed regiment for months and years to prepare for the competition. Their regiment is very strict and they follow it precisely seeking to gain even the smallest advantage over their opponents. Often the winner of an Olympic event will be a fraction of a second faster than second place. We think of all this in order to understand why there is so much disappointment after training for a precise goal for so long. Indeed, it is a lifestyle directed toward a particular end.

That should sound like the Christian life. New life in Christ is not a carefree stroll through utopia. The New Testament pictures of

the Christian life are not a day in the park, being born with a silver spoon, and servants to wait on you. It is not like winning the lottery. The pictures we find are that of the hard working farmer, the soldier who is regularly in a spiritual battle, a builder who must follow exact plans, an athlete who must compete by the rules.

All of those pictures explain the goal and the process of the goal that we have looked at often. Again Paul instructed the Christians in Ephesus about our “training” program. We are doing *the work of ministry, for building up the body of Christ, until we all attain to the unity of the faith and of the knowledge of the Son of God, to mature manhood, to the measure of the stature of the fullness of Christ (Ephesians 4:12b-13).*

In this letter to Christians in Thessalonica, Paul described some of the nuts and bolts of that training process that makes us like Christ. It involves our relationships with each other (5:11-15) and our relationship with God, especially God the Holy Spirit (5:16-22). Now in the last words of the letter, we discover that this whole process that looks a lot like training is called sanctification. Sanctification is the theological term for “becoming like Christ.” We should pray for it. We should expect it to happen. And we should engage in it in our relationships with God and others.

**Sanctifying Relationship with God (vv.23-24).**

Our process in becoming more like our Creator God significantly includes a prayer for sanctification. *Now may the God of peace himself sanctify you completely (v.23a).* This simple and short prayer identifies right away who it is that sanctifies us.

The opening word, “now” links this statement as flowing out of the previous multiple commands that describe the character of the Church. The Body of Christ is known by love and respect of spiritual leaders (vv.12-13). In the Church, we all admonish, encourage, help, and are patient with others (v.14). We do not seek vengeance but always do good to everyone (v.15). We are to always be joyful (v.16), always be prayerful (v.17), and always be thankful (v.18). We have stopped quenching the Holy Spirit’s influence (v.19) and have stopped criticizing messages from God (v.20). We continually put

everything to the test and hold firmly to what is good (v.21) and then we hold every kind of evil at arm's length (v.22).

Right! Anyone who is honest is going to have to admit that living according to that standard is going to be very difficult. The person who lives like that consistently is going to have to be like Jesus Himself. That is the point. That is what sanctification looks like.

God Himself desires for us to be like Himself. He is described here as the God of peace. That means that God is the author and provider of peace that is beyond the scope of human comprehension. He offers peace which stands in contrast to all the conflict that comes in human relationships. He offers peace between Himself and us who offend Him by sin. Notice then that all of those previous requirements have to do with our relationships with each other and our relationship with God the Father, Son, and Holy Spirit. Sanctification makes us more like God so that we can be at peace with Him. The old prophet's simple statement makes a lot of sense in this process: *Do two walk together, unless they have agreed to meet (Amos 3:3)?*

The prayer also expresses the desire for complete sanctification. To sanctify is to set apart, to separate. When used of God in relation to His people, it means to make holy. God sanctified everything that was connected to the tabernacle and worship through sacrifices and offerings. God sanctified Aaron and his sons as priests to serve Him. These things and people were set apart for God's service, to represent God being set apart from sin. Therefore, using that which was set apart for God for common purposes brought a stiff penalty as in the case of Nadab and Abihu (Numbers 3:4). God is in the process of setting apart to Himself, more and more, us His people and servants.

How far does that process reach? What areas of our lives are touched? Or we might ask, "What is the extent of sanctification?" Paul addressed that question with the words, *And may your whole spirit and soul and body be kept blameless at the coming of our Lord Jesus Christ (v.23b)*. The Greek sentence is a bit hard to translate. In a very literal translation it would sound like this: *Now Himself the God of peace, may He make you holy, wholly completed and entire [same word as wholly completed], your spirit, soul, and body, faultlessly in the presence of our Master Jesus Christ may be kept.*

Is that a reference to humanity's tripartite nature? Some would argue that this description of us humans is a reflection of the three persons of the Trinity in whose image God made us. Others conclude that soul and spirit are synonymous as other passages in the New Testament indicate. Either way, the point is that sanctification impacts our immaterial being as well as our material being. Sanctification is going to change how we think, feel, decide (heart). Sanctification is going to therefore effect the way we act, i.e. what we do with our bodies.

The goal of sanctification in our soul, spirit, and body is that we would be kept blameless. The desire is that God will keep us blameless—pretty hard to do. To be faultless (*without blame*) is to be innocent or guiltless. Perfection is the goal which is never reached in this life but will be fully enjoyed when we see Christ. We rest in this very secure promise, *Beloved, we are God's children now, and what we will be has not yet appeared; but we know that when he appears we shall be like him, because we shall see him as he is (1 John 3:2)*. We are not there yet. Nevertheless it is still God's goal for us as we proceed through sanctification in this life.

A great motivator in the process is that we are looking toward the Lord's return. The *coming of our Lord Jesus Christ* refers to the *parousia*. The word is used twenty-four times in the New Testament to speak of the arrival of a person, or most frequently of the return of the Lord Jesus to earth. Believing with all our hearts that Jesus our Savior is going to literally return and will ask for an accounting from us should motivate us to gladly submit to God's process of making us like Himself.

Will it happen in the Christian's life? Is it happening? There is the certainty of sanctification. *He who calls you is faithful; he will surely do it (v.24)*. God is faithful to His call. The reference to the *call* is a reminder that God who is making us like Himself initiated the call for us to come to Christ for forgiveness of sin. Jesus taught that this is the way salvation, new life works. He said, *"No one can come to me unless the Father who sent me draws him. And I will raise him up on the last day" (John 6:44)*. Paul pointed to the same truth about God's calling to salvation when he wrote to these people, *For we know, brothers loved by God, that he has chosen you (1Thessalonians 1:4)*. Also, *We exhorted each one of you and encouraged you and*

*charged you to walk in a manner worthy of God, who calls you into his own kingdom and glory (1Thessalonians 2:12).*

God who called will complete what He calls us to. That is the essence of the wonderful promise in Paul's letter to the Romans. *And we know that for those who love God all things work together for good, for those who are called according to his purpose. For those whom he foreknew he also predestined to be conformed to the image of his Son, in order that he might be the firstborn among many brothers. And those whom he predestined he also called, and those whom he called he also justified, and those whom he justified he also glorified (Romans 8:28-30).*

This promise reminds us that while God is working out in us what is good, we will also learn that God will do what is best. That is good to remember in those times when it seems like the sanctification process is confusing, hard to understand, or even painful. God is surely doing the best thing, the necessary things in making us like Himself.

### **Sanctifying Relationships with Others (vv.25-28).**

God is working our sanctification in our relationships with other Christians also. That is why we pray for each other. *Brothers, pray for us (v.25).* As brothers are praying, the leaders in the assembly will pray for the people. Paul's confession that he prayed for people is a common theme in his letters found seventeen times. He showed us by his example a heart for the people God brought into his sphere of ministry.

At the same time, as the text states here, the people pray for the leaders. Paul also encouraged others to pray for him on nine different occasions. He depended on others to pray for him in the Lord's work. Obviously, Paul was convinced of the efficacy of prayer.

When you consider the incredible spiritual warfare this servant of the Lord faced daily, you realize that he truly believed in the importance of prayer in the process of being spiritually weaponized. *Put on the whole armor of God, that you may be able to stand against the schemes of the devil. For we do not wrestle against flesh and blood, but against the rulers, against the authorities, against the cosmic powers over this present darkness, against the spiritual forces*

*of evil in the heavenly places (Ephesians 6:11-12). . . . praying at all times in the Spirit, with all prayer and supplication. To that end keep alert with all perseverance, making supplication for all the saints (Ephesians 6:18).* If we understood the spiritual warfare in which we are engaged and the battles of our friends and fellow church members, we would probably be more serious about prayer.

Wouldn't we think that Paul was such a giant in prayer that he wouldn't need others? How could young and new Christians measure up to Paul's level of prayer? In truth, we will be surprised to learn who prays how, and how the supposedly insignificant people move the heart of God.

Second, part of the sanctification process requires us to greet each other. Strangely we read that we should *Greet all the brothers with a holy kiss (v.26).* There is little argument that the specific command is questionable. We need to stop to consider what was encouraged.

The most important part of the statement is that a greeting to all the brothers is expected. This indicates the importance of those relationships we have been discussing in the last chapter. It is a reminder that the local assembly is a family. In many cases, we are closer to each other than even literal families, especially when actual family members are not born again. Also, notice that the greeting is for everyone which includes the people we like, the ones we know best, friends. But also we are supposed to greet those who are weak, fainthearted, need admonishing, maybe even doing evil to you (5:14-15).

The general command to greet others is sensible enough. The particular kind of greeting raises questions. We should greet with a kiss? A kiss as a greeting was common in most ancient cultures and is still common in many cultures. In Bible times, it was common for inferiors to greet a superior by kissing his feet (extreme submission) or kissing his hand. Probably what is recommended here was not a kiss on the lips as much as a kiss on the cheek. In that sense, it would be similar to the practice in some modern Hispanic cultures where they kiss you on both cheeks. Some scholars believe that the kiss of greeting became standard expectation at the Love Feast and Communion. The practice certainly included men greeting men in

this way, women greeting women, and probably men and women greeting.

But the text states clearly that this was not just another kiss. It was to be a HOLY kiss. In other words, even the kiss was sanctified. That was necessary because one can see how easily this could get out of control. The word *holy* kept the practice in bounds. Let such a practice become unholy and all kinds of problems would result. And the fact that this was a holy kiss makes the betrayal of Jesus by the kiss of Judas an abomination. This simple act was supposed to be a sign of *philos* and *agapee* love. It is the kind of greeting Paul commended four times and Peter once (Romans 16:16; 1 Corinthians 16:20; 2 Corinthians 13:12; 1 Thessalonians 5:26; 1 Peter 5:14).

The practice in the church as a whole was eventually disbanded. Soon the men and women sat separately in the meetings which helped with any problem in that way. By the fifth century, the rule was that only the clergy greeted each other with the Holy Kiss. By the middle ages, the idea had passed except for clergy kissing the Pope's ring.

While the idea of a kissing greeting is dubious, the application of the principle is sensible. The Holy Kiss was never intended to be an expression of romantic feelings but a matter of loving friendship. It was for many years replaced by the common hand shake or hug when people greeted each other in church meetings. That kind of greeting is now reduced to a fist bump or nod of the head. The command for greeting each other is still good, useful, and proper. It is a good comment on the importance of being together.

Meeting and greeting was an issue for the early church especially because there was the threat of persecution – which there was in Thessalonica. Still in our day, being together is of great importance and is especially to people in difficult circumstances like that. Of course no one had the option of staying home watching their favorite preacher on TV. Suffice it to say that being able to greet each other is an important ministry of the local assembly.

Third, part of our sanctification lies in the reading of the Bible to each other. That is the essence of Paul's command in verse twenty-seven. *I put you under oath before the Lord to have this letter read to all the brothers (v.27)*. We know that an oath was a serious issue. However, the English word oath may not be the best word for translation here. Some translations have the word *adjure* (*I adjure you*

*by the Lord . . .*) or *charge*. But the word does mean to put someone under an oath. It is the kind of thing one would do to obligate a person to do what was commanded, or two times the word is used in the New Testament when a demon is commanded to come out of its victim.

It seems a bit odd that Paul would put the people under an oath when Jesus warned against taking oaths. He said, *"But I say to you, 'Do not take an oath at all, either by heaven, for it is the throne of God'" (Matthew 5:34)*. He also said, *"And do not take an oath by your head, for you cannot make one hair white or black" (Matthew 5:36)*. It is important to note that the context of those statements found Jesus arguing with the Pharisees about their misuse of the law. They would use the law of God as a guarantee to keep their word. Jesus's lesson was to let our yes be yes and no be no so that we don't have to make an oath on anything material or physical.

The point is that reading inspired letters to the whole assembly is a serious issue. Paul was simply stressing how important it was to hear the instruction of inspired writing. Granted, all the brothers did not have ten copies of the completed Bible at home gathering dust like we do. They were brought face to face through God's inspired Scripture in the public reading of such inspired letters. It is still imperative that the congregants of a local assembly hear the reading and teaching of God's inspired message.

Finally, a step in sanctification is for us to enjoy Christ's grace. *The grace of our Lord Jesus Christ be with you (v.28)*. This is not a thoughtless benediction like some we are familiar with. One very popular statement to come out of the Star War phenomena was, "May the force be with you." It was a phrase used to wish an individual or group good luck or good will, one that expressed the speaker's wish that the Force work in the favor of the addressee. The Force was an energy field created by all life that connected everything in the universe and was known by a variety of names throughout galactic history. I am of the opinion that this borders on blasphemy since the real "Force" is our Holy Creator God.

Rather, this is a prayer for the knowledge of Christ's active grace. Paul's closing statement is a prayer for Christ's people to be keenly aware of His grace. Christ's grace is not a vague, mystical force that is found in all of nature. When we truly learn and

experience Christ's grace, we realize how critical His favor is for us to proceed and succeed in sanctification.

If you are truly born again, and, therefore, a child of God, God will be engaged in your life to make you more like Himself. That is called sanctification. It is God's will for His people. If you do an assessment of our growth in godliness, you might discover that you are really no different today than you were the day you claimed to be born again. Growth into the image of God our Savior is an absolute given for His followers. It takes place in the very practical, everyday arena of your relationship with God through prayer and reading of His Word to you, and in the arena of fellowship with other of God's people. Therefore, people who have no time or desire to read the Bible and pray, people who have no desire to be in relationships with other followers of Christ have much reason to wonder if they are born again.