

Concluding Exhortations and Commandments (7)

Introduction:

Last Lord's Day we addressed 1 Thessalonians 5:21 and 22, in which we are commanded, "Test everything; hold fast what is good, abstain from every form of evil." We are to live through each day assessing and evaluating everything using God's Word as our standard. We are to employ the Word of God, the Holy Bible, in order to distinguish between good and evil, between truth and error, and between good and evil. We are to affirm and embrace what is good. We are to abstain from every form of evil.

The people of this fallen world are opposed to this way of thinking, to this way of living. They may not state it this way, but this is what they believe: "You are wrong to say that some ideas, some behaviors, and some actions are wrong." But you see, they too, are saying that there are some things that are wrong. They cannot escape thinking in categories of right and wrong, for God has made us moral beings. The people of the fallen world have not abandoned making judgments, what they have done is change their standard of judgment from God's laws to the laws of their own creation. But we are to cleave to our responsibility to see the world and assess the world from God's perspective, according to His laws that He has given to us in His holy Word. "Test everything; hold fast what is good, abstain from every form of evil." We are to live this way even in the face of the fallen world that demands that we do otherwise.

Let us now give our attention to 1 Thessalonians 5:23-28 to consider these concluding words of Paul's First Epistle to the Thessalonians. After the apostle offered a form of prayer on behalf of the church at Thessalonica (vs. 23f), he gave forth the two last commands of the total of 18 we have considered in this final section of the epistle. He then wrote a few words regarding the distribution of this epistle, followed by a word of benediction. Let us read these verses

²³Now may the God of peace himself sanctify you completely, and may your whole spirit and soul and body be kept blameless at the coming of our Lord Jesus Christ. ²⁴He who calls you is faithful; he will surely do it.

²⁵Brothers, pray for us.

²⁶Greet all the brothers with a holy kiss.

²⁷I put you under oath before the Lord to have this letter read to all the brothers.

²⁸The grace of our Lord Jesus Christ be with you.

I. A prayer on behalf of these Christians (5:23f)

²³Now may the God of peace himself sanctify you completely, and may your whole spirit and soul and body be kept blameless at the coming of our Lord Jesus Christ. ²⁴He who calls you is faithful; he will surely do it.

Let us first consider the title or description of God. Paul described God as...

A. "Now may *the God of peace*..."

Paul wrote, "Now may *the God of peace* himself..." This is one of five instances in which the expression, "God of peace" is used in the New Testament. Here are the other four places:

Romans 15:33. "May *the God of peace* be with you all. Amen."

Romans 16:20. “*The God of peace* will soon crush Satan under your feet.”

Philippians 4:9. “What you have learned and received and heard and seen in me--practice these things, and *the God of peace* will be with you.”

Hebrews 13:20f. “Now may *the God of peace* who brought up our Lord Jesus from the dead, that great Shepherd of the sheep, through the blood of the everlasting covenant,²¹ make you complete in every good work to do His will, working in you what is well pleasing in His sight, through Jesus Christ, to whom be glory forever and ever. Amen.”

What is conveyed by the expression, “the God of peace”? It probably speaks of God in two senses.

1. First, it describes God who is at peace with His people. (This is sometimes referred to as objective peace with His people.) A state of peace exists in the relationship that God has with His people who have been redeemed by Jesus Christ. This objective peace is what those in Jesus Christ *believe* characterizes their relationship with God through faith in Jesus Christ.

Before people receive salvation, God is not at peace with them. A state of war exists between God and the fallen people of this world. The Scriptures speak much of this hostility between God and sinful man. The Word of God declares that before we came to Christ as our Lord and Savior, we were opposed to God. We were enemies of God and He was an enemy to us. We were opposed to His rule over us, just as the people of Israel were opposed to His rule over them. But Christ as the Prince of Peace ended that hostility between God and ourselves. He gained peace for us by dying on the cross for us. This appeased God’s wrath that was upon us, which the Bible sets forth in terms of the word, propitiation. Because of the death of Jesus Christ satisfying the justice of God on behalf of believers, God was propitiated with regard to us, His wrath was abated toward us. The result was that Jesus Christ secured a state of peace between God and His people. We read of this in **Colossians 1:21**,

And you, who once were alienated and enemies in your minds by wicked works, yet now He has reconciled in the body of His death, to present you holy, and blameless, and above reproach in His sight.

This objective peace, this state of peace, belongs only to those who have been reconciled to God through faith in Jesus Christ, for He alone is the basis and securer of peace of sinners before a holy and just God. They are ones for whom Christ died, whereby peace with God is obtained and secured for them. They have an **objective peace with God**; that is, God is no longer at war with them. Romans 5:1 reads, “Therefore being justified by faith, we have *peace* with God through our Lord Jesus Christ.” The reason that God is at peace with them is that they have been **reconciled**. This is stated later in Romans 5:11, “And not only that, but we also rejoice in God through our Lord Jesus Christ, through whom we have now received the reconciliation.”

Reconciliation is a word that describes the cessation of hostility between two warring factions, resulting in peace between them. And how does this reconciliation take place? It can only take place when their former hostility and rebellion ceases and the justice of God toward their crime has been satisfied. God is at war with sinners and has purposed to punish them for their sins because they have violated His laws. God demands that justice is rendered regarding them. They must answer to the Judge of all the earth. The reason that Christians alone can escape the condemnation of this unbending, inflexible justice of God, is because Christ Jesus bore their punishment on their behalf, when He died on the cross. And so by Him, through faith in Him, they may be reconciled to God.

For in him all the fullness of God was pleased to dwell, and through him to **reconcile** to himself all things, whether on earth or in heaven, **making peace by the blood of his cross**. And you, who once were estranged and hostile in mind, doing evil deeds, he has now reconciled in his body of flesh by his death, in order to present you holy and blameless and irreproachable before him” (Col. 1:19-21).

The blessing of peace can only be appreciated fully when we consider the state of the non-believer who is *not* at peace with God. We live in a world in which people will allow you to believe in any kind of God that you like, but if you say that you believe God is a God of wrath against those that are outside of Jesus Christ, you will be rejected and opposed. Paul declared, “Therefore, since we have been justified by faith, *we have peace with God through our Lord Jesus Christ.*” But what of those who are not justified by faith? They do not have peace with God, rather, the wrath of God rests upon him. **John 3:36** reads, “He who believes in the Son has everlasting life; and he who does not believe the Son shall not see life, but *the wrath of God abides on him.*” People who are outside of Jesus Christ are not in a state of peace with God. There exists *a state of war* between God and them.

Jonathan Edwards (1703–1758) wrote of their dreadful condition in his sermon entitled, “Natural Men in a Dreadful Condition.”

They are not only without God, but the wrath of God abides upon them... There is no peace between God and them, but God is angry with them every day.¹ He is not only angry with them, but that to a dreadful degree. There is a fire kindled in God’s anger; it burns like fire. Wrath abides upon them, which if it should be executed, would plunge them into the lowest hell, and make them miserable there to all eternity. They have provoked the Holy One of Israel to anger. God has been angry with them every since they began to sin. He has been provoked by them every day, every since they exercised any reason. And he is provoked by them more and more every hour. The flame of his wrath is continually burning. There are many now in hell that never provoked God more than they, nor so much as many of them. Wherever they go, they go about with the dreadful wrath of God abiding on them. They eat, and drink, and sleep under wrath. How dreadful a condition therefore are they in! It is the most awful thing for the creature to have the wrath of his Creator abiding on him. The wrath of God is a thing infinitely dreadful. The wrath of a king is as the roaring of a lion. But what is the wrath of a king, who is but a worm of the dust, to the wrath of the infinitely great and dreadful God? How dreadful is it to be under the wrath of the First Being, the Being of beings, the great Creator and mighty possessor of heaven and earth! How dreadful is it for a person to go about under the wrath of God, who gave him being, and in who he lives and moves, who is everywhere present, and without whom he cannot move a step, nor draw a breath! Natural men, inasmuch as they are under wrath, are under a curse. God’s wrath and curse are continually upon them. They can have no reasonable comfort, therefore, in any of their enjoyments; for they do not know but that they are given them in wrath, and shall be curses to them, and not blessings. As it is said in Job 18:15, “Brimstone shall be scattered upon his habitation.” How can they take any comfort in their food, or in their possessions, when they do not know but all are given them to fit them for the slaughter?

John Gill (1697-1771) wrote of the wrath of God under which unbelievers exist and for their need of reconciliation with God.

First, by observing the character of the persons reconciled; which will show the cause, reason, and necessity of a reconciliation to be made; they are “enemies”; and in one of the texts referred to, they are said to be “enemies in their minds by wicked works”: which is expressive, of the internal enmity there is in their minds and hearts; the carnal mind, as every man’s mind is naturally carnal, is not only an enemy, but “enmity” itself, “against God” (Rom. 8:7), to the Being of God—wishing there was no God—to the nature and perfections of God, denying some of them, misrepresenting others, and framing him in their minds, as altogether such an one as themselves—to the purposes and decrees of God, which they cannot bear, and to which they insolently reply; and to the providences of God, they charge with inequality and unrighteousness: and they are inwardly and secretly enemies to Christ, to his person and offices; particularly his kingly office, being unwilling that he should reign over them; and to his gospel, and the special doctrines of it; and to his ordinances, they care not to be subject unto: and so they are to the Spirit, to his Person, whom they know not, nor can receive; to his operations, which they deride and ridicule; the things of the Spirit of God are foolishness to them: and they are enemies to the people of God, there is an

¹ Psalm 7:11 reads, “God is a just judge, And God is angry with the wicked every day.”

old and implacable enmity between the seed of the woman and the seed of the serpent; the saints are hated by the world, because chosen and called out of the world; God's elect themselves, while in a state of nature, are hateful, and hating one another; Paul, a chosen vessel of salvation, was, while unregenerate, exceeding mad against the saints.

But, there is an external enmity, which appears by wicked works and sinful actions openly committed: which are acts of hostility against God, are contrary to his nature and will are abominable in his sight provoke the eyes of his glory, excite his wrath, and cause it to be revealed from heaven, and for which it comes on the children of disobedience; and all are deserving of it: sins are breaches of the law of God, render men liable to the curses of it, and to death itself, the sanction of it; they not only all with enmity to God, and show it to him, but set men at a distance from him; so that they have no communion with him, are far off, are without him, and separate from him.

But, men are not only enemies internally, and externally to God, but there is an enmity on the part of God to them; there is a law enmity, or an enmity declared in the law against them; they are declared by the law of God as enemies; traitors, and rebels to him; and as such God's elect were considered, when Christ died to make reconciliation for them; for it is said, "while they were sinners Christ died for them, and when they were enemies they were reconciled to God, the death of his Son" (Rom. 5:8, 10). Now the far greater part of those for whom Christ died, were not then in an actual sinful state, nor in actual rebellion and enmity against God; for then they were not in actual being; but they were considered as in their apostate head, as sinners in him, and so as rebels and traitors; as such they were deemed by the law, and proceeded against, proclaimed guilty, judgment came upon them to condemnation; they were, in the eye of the law, and in the sight of justice, viewed as enemies, and declared such: and this law enmity is what was slain by Christ, and removed at his death; and not that enmity that was in their minds; that was not removed by and at the death of Christ; that is removed at conversion, when the arrows of the word become sharp in these enemies, which bring them to fall under, and be subject to Christ; when they are made willing in the day of his power, to be saved by him, to submit to his righteousness, and to have him to reign over them: this is the work of the Spirit of Christ: there is a two fold reconciliation, one of which is the work of Christ, and was made at his death: the other the work of his Spirit, at conversion; when, by his grace, men are reconciled to the way of salvation by Christ; and both may be seen in one text (Rom. 5:10). If there had been no other enmity than what is in the hearts of men against God, there would have been no need of the sufferings and death of Christ to make reconciliation; but there was a law enmity on the part of God, and his justice, which required the death of Christ to take it away. Not that there was any enmity in the heart of God to his elect; that would be inconsistent with his everlasting and unchangeable love, which appeared strongly towards them at the time Christ died for them, reconciled them, and became the propitiation for their sins (Rom. 5:8,10; Titus 3:3, 4; 1 John 4:10). But they were, according to the law, and in the view of justice, deemed and declared as the enemies of God. So when the subjects of a king rise up in rebellion against him, there may be no enmity in his heart to them; yet they are, according to law, proclaimed rebels, and enemies to him, and may be treated as such, and proceeded against in due form of law; and yet, after all, be pardoned by him. There was, in some sense, a reciprocal enmity between God and men, which made a reconciliation necessary; and which was brought about by the bloodshed, sufferings, and death of Christ, when he slew the enmity of the law, and blotted out the handwriting of ordinances that were against sinners, so making peace (Eph. 2:14-16; Col. 2:14).

Second, "the God of peace" sets forth God as the source of peace for His people. Not only is God in a state of peace with those who have faith in Jesus Christ, but God bestows the grace of peace to His people, in that He comforts them and assures them in their lives that they belong to Him and that His favor is upon them. The verse that clearly speaks to this is **Philippians 4:6** and **7**:

Be anxious for nothing, but in everything by prayer and supplication, with thanksgiving, let your requests be made known to God; ⁷and *the peace of God, which surpasses all understanding, will guard your hearts and minds through Christ Jesus.*

God gives His people a sense of peace, which is a restful, settled spirit, which is to be received and enjoyed by those who entrust themselves to their God through Jesus Christ. This sense of peace is commonly called God's *subjective* peace. Subjective peace is the awareness that the believer senses in his soul that he is at peace with God. Whereas objective peace between God and His people is what Christians are to *believe*, this subjective peace is what people *feel*. Because of our faith in Christ, we may sense peace, or a tranquillity of soul, a settling of our guilty conscience respecting sin, when we received through faith our free and full pardon of sin due to the death of the Savior. We are secure, and if we are thinking and believing rightly, we feel ourselves to be secure. In Romans 1:7, when Paul expressed his desire for them, that they would experience "*peace from God our Father and the Lord Jesus Christ.*" Paul desired they would experience this subjective peace, the awareness that all is well between them and God.

All disciples of Jesus Christ are in a state of *objective* peace with God. All disciples of Jesus Christ *may* enjoy a *subjective* peace with God. But sadly, not all Christians always experience this peace, but all may.

We may next consider the work of this God of peace on behalf of His people. We read...

B. "Now may the God of peace himself *sanctify you completely*..."

We addressed the subject of sanctification somewhat when we considered 1 Thessalonians 4:3-5, which reads,

³For this is the will of God, your sanctification: that you should abstain from sexual immorality; ⁴that each of you should know how to possess his own vessel in sanctification and honor, ⁵not in passion of lust, like the Gentiles who do not know God; (1 Thess. 4:3-5)

But Paul deemed this matter of the believers' sanctification to be so important, that he expressed it again here at the conclusion of his epistle. Paul set forth his desire, even his prayer, that their God would sanctify them completely.

The basic idea of the verb, "sanctify", is to make holy, or for God to separate unto Himself His people. For God to sanctify His people means that He is making them to become increasingly holy in character. God is preparing His people in this life for their future life with the Lord and His people in eternity.

Here is the common definition of sanctification that is set forth in the **Westminster Shorter Catechism**:

Question #35. What is sanctification?

Answer: Sanctification is the work of God's free grace,² whereby we are renewed in the whole man after the image of God,³ and are enabled more and more to die unto sin, and live unto righteousness.⁴

² **Ezekiel 36:27**, "And I will put my spirit within you, and cause you to walk in my statutes, and ye shall keep my judgments, and do them." **Philippians 2:13**, "For it is God which works in you both to will and to do of his good pleasure." **2 Thessalonians 2:13**, "But we are bound to give thanks always to God for you, brethren beloved of the Lord, because God hath from the beginning chosen you to salvation through sanctification of the Spirit and belief of the truth."

³ **2 Corinthians 5:17**, "Therefore if any man be in Christ, he is a new creature: old things are passed away; behold, all things are become new." **Ephesians 4:23-24**, "And be renewed in the spirit of your mind; and that ye put on the new man, which after God is created in righteousness and true holiness." **1 Thessalonians 5:23**, "And the very God of peace sanctify you wholly; and I pray God your whole spirit and soul and body be preserved blameless unto the coming of our Lord Jesus Christ."

⁴ **Ezekiel 36:25-27**, "Then will I sprinkle clean water upon you, and ye shall be clean: from all your filthiness, and from all your idols, will I cleanse you. A new heart also will I give you, and a new spirit will I put within you: and I will take away the stony heart out of your flesh, and I will give you an heart of flesh. And I will put my spirit within you, and cause you to walk in my statutes, and ye shall keep my judgments, and do them." **Romans 6:4, 6, 12-14**, "Therefore we are buried with him by baptism into death: that like as Christ was raised up from the dead by the glory of the Father, even so we also should walk in newness of life.... Knowing this, that our old man is crucified with him, that the body of sin might

Each of us who are truly Christian is experiencing a work of grace in our lives that is sanctifying us. This is the will of God being accomplished in every Christian. We saw this back in **1 Thessalonians 4:3**, “*For this is the will of God, even your sanctification.*”

More specifically, when the Bible speaks of sanctification, one of two ideas emerges.

1. Sanctification speaks of being consecrated or set apart for God.

Everything that belongs to God is to be set apart for Him. We read in the Old Testament that the tabernacle, the articles of furniture in the tabernacle, the utensils used in the tabernacle, the priests themselves who ministered in the tabernacle, were all sanctified for that purpose. They were set apart for God and His worship. The Bible speaks much about Christians being sanctified in this sense. Through the work of Christ and through coming to salvation we have been sanctified, set apart as God’s own possessions. When Paul was parting from the elders of the church of Ephesus he said these words, “*And now, brethren, I commend you to God, and to the word of his grace, which is able to build you up, and to give you an inheritance among all them which are sanctified*” (Acts 20:32). All who belong to Jesus Christ have been sanctified. This is largely a positional idea. We have been separated, set apart, sanctified in the mind of God from all others. We who are in Christ stand in a covenant relationship with God having been chosen and set apart from the world as a unique people. In the mind and purpose of God we are separate (sanctified) from the fallen world and He has glorious and vastly different designs between them and us whom He has not sanctified. This positional sanctification was a work of grace on our behalf. We were purchased by the blood of Jesus Christ and set apart as the unique people of God. ***This positional sanctification occurred once for all time*** for each of us at the time of salvation, or, perhaps more specifically when Christ Jesus purchased His people on His cross. **Hebrews 10:14**, “*For by one offering he hath perfected for ever them that are sanctified.*” This was a work of grace that was accomplished on our behalf apart from us, apart from our work or effort. This was a work of grace that Christ performed on behalf of each of His own.

2. Sanctification speaks of being purified or made holy in our lives.

This is the idea conveyed in our text, 1 Thessalonians 5:22, “Now may the God of peace himself sanctify you completely...” This is not speaking of our position in Christ; rather, it speaks of practical outworking of God’s grace in our lives in which He is making us more holy in character, making us to become more like our Lord and Savior.

a. The cause of our sanctification

The Scriptures speaks of the causes of our sanctification in different ways. The historic **Westminster Confession of Faith** describes it this way:

1) “The *moving* cause of sanctification is the grace of God.” It is of God’s free will and purpose that we are sanctified apart from any merit of ourselves.

2) “The *meritorious* cause is the blood and righteousness of Christ.” Any and all work of Christ is performed due to Christ and what He performed for us through His life and death.

be destroyed, that henceforth we should not serve sin.... Let not sin therefore reign in your mortal body, that ye should obey it in the lusts thereof. Neither yield ye your members as instruments of unrighteousness unto sin: but yield yourselves unto God, as those that are alive from the dead, and your members as instruments of righteousness unto God. For sin shall not have dominion over you: for ye are not under the law, but under grace.” **2 Corinthians 7:1**, “Having therefore these promises, dearly beloved, let us cleanse ourselves from all filthiness of the flesh and spirit, perfecting holiness in the fear of God.” **1 Peter 2:24**, “Who his own self bare our sins in his own body on the tree, that we, being dead to sins, should live unto righteousness: by whose stripes ye were healed.”

3) “The *efficient* cause is the Spirit of God.” The Holy Spirit is the one who does the work of sanctification in us.⁵

b. The nature of sanctification

(1) **Sanctification is the fruit and evidence of Salvation.** Every true child of God has this work of sanctification being wrought in him/her.

(2) **Sanctification is the way (course of life) which leads to our final and full salvation on the Day of Judgment.** It is described in the Scriptures like a highway to the Promised Land; it is called the **Highway of Holiness** (Isaiah 35:8). We must arrive at our desired destination of glory by journeying on this highway. The book of Hebrews speaks of this journey to the heavenly Zion. It is one of the major themes of the entire book. If we desire to be found to have been saved from God’s wrath on the judgment, we must travel this Highway of Holiness unto our heavenly Zion.

(3) **Sanctification is a gradual process.** We increasingly become more like Christ as we progress through the Christian life. Whereas as Christians we are all equally justified before God on the merit of Christ’s life and death and our justification knows of no degrees, our levels of sanctification are quite varied. Some of us are quite well along this highway, some of us have just started out.

(4) **Sanctification involves the entire person in all aspects of life.** Our text expresses this idea: “Now may the God of peace himself sanctify you completely, and may your whole spirit and soul and body be kept blameless at the coming of our Lord Jesus Christ” (1 Thess. 5:23).

(5) **Sanctification is the conforming of the Christian to the very image of Jesus Christ Himself.** The work of sanctification makes the believer Christ-like in his thinking, his attitudes, his actions, and his reactions.

(6) **Sanctification will never be fully seen in this life in this world.** Our complete sanctification will occur when we stand before Christ when we shall be like Him for we shall see Him as He is.

(7) **Sanctification is a work of God’s free grace.** God is performing this work in us of His own free will. This is also suggested in our text: “*Now may the God of peace himself sanctify you* completely, and may your whole spirit and soul and body be kept blameless at the coming of our Lord Jesus Christ” (1 Thess. 5:23).

(8) **Sanctification is the duty of every Christian.** Our sanctification is a work of God’s grace in us, but it requires our attention, our energy, our faith and repentance. It involves the humbling of ourselves before God, our yielding to the Spirit of God, it involves conforming every thought, attitude, and action to the Word of God.

The last two points show us that sanctification, although being a work of God’s grace, it is also a duty of every Christian. These two aspects of our sanctification must always be kept in balance. If you emphasize one to the exclusion of the other, you will be become out of balance and will tend to fall into error. Some only rely on themselves. They are doomed to fail, for sanctification is a work of God’s grace. But others are too passive; they claim to believe, but do not take action; they do not obey. “It is of grace”, they say, “so I will just sit and trust for He must do it for me.” This one becomes idle, careless, and caught up in and bound in sin. The first group ignores the grace aspect; they see it only as duty. He will lack the power of God to live godly, and will tend toward failure and defeat. And, if he happens to attain to any measure of improvement in his life, it is only a moral renovation, it results in pride and self-righteousness. The second group sets aside their responsibility; they, too, will not become sanctified. In the matter of our individual sanctification these two, duty and grace, are like spiritual Siamese twins that cannot be separated lest one of them die. Paul expressed both of these in the same context of Philippians 2:12-13.

Wherefore, my beloved, as ye have always obeyed, not as in my presence only, but now much more in my absence, work out your own salvation with fear and trembling—**there is the duty**-- For it is God which works in you both to will and to do of [his] good pleasure—**there is the grace**.

⁵ These quotes are taken from the excellent work by Alan Cairns, *Dictionary of Theological Terms* (Emerald House Group, 1998, p. 325-7. The article on these pages also generated other thoughts in this message.

When the grace of God comes to a Christian he is given both the desire and the ability to do the will of God. This is the nature of God imparting grace to us as Christians that results in our sanctification by God.

C. “Now may the God of peace himself sanctify you completely, *and may your whole spirit and soul and body be kept blameless at the coming of our Lord Jesus Christ.*”

The Lord is preparing us to stand in His presence one day. He justified us when we first believed the gospel of Jesus Christ. We believed what God said regarding Him. Jesus Christ is the Lord, the crucified, risen, enthroned King of kings and Lord of lords. We have submitted unto Him, committed our lives to Him. And since the day we were justified God has been sanctifying us through His grace God, so that when we stand before Him on that great Day our claim to be His people will be substantiated by the work of grace that He performed in us.

We now need to address a matter that is suggested in this text, but we must address it briefly. We have spoken of this matter before, but it bears repeating. Most evangelical Christians believe (for this is what they have been taught) that God created Adam and Eve as comprised of three “parts”, which are the body, soul, and spirit. And this verse before us is used to argue for their position. Again, Paul wrote: “...may your whole **spirit** and **soul** and **body** be kept blameless at the coming of our Lord Jesus Christ.”

And so, it is a commonly accepted belief among Christians that man is a trinity: he is a soul, a spirit, and a body. But most historic Protestants did not hold this view, but rather they viewed man as a duality. Man is a **body** and **soul**, and frequently the soul is identified as the spirit of a person. And so, the common understanding goes something like this:

When God created man and woman, Adam and Eve, God created each of them with a *body*, a *soul*, and a *spirit*. *First*, there is the *body*, which is understood (rightly, I might say) as being the means by which a human being is able to interact with the physical world through his physical senses. *Second*, there is the *soul*, which is viewed as the sphere of the mind (intellect), the emotions, and the will; this is the center of a person’s personality. But *thirdly*, and most importantly many would say, is the *spirit*, which is said to proceed immediately from God and which gives spiritual life to the soul and body. *The spirit is viewed as a separate entity from the soul, being the true and highest spiritual self which able to know God, hear from God, and communicate with God.* It is then said that when Adam and Eve sinned, that spirit in each of them, which is characterized by spiritual life and knowledge, died, and was thus extinguished. And since the fall, when one is born into the world he is soul and body only, for he does not have a spirit, for he is spiritually dead. He needs the new birth, when God causes his spirit to be created anew in him, so only then does he have the capacity to know God and relate to God through his own “spirit”, for he is once again comprised of body, soul, and spirit.

And so, the sum of the matter is this: the common evangelical believes that as a person he is comprised of a body, a soul, and a spirit; he believes that he has a spirit that is distinct from and different in nature from his soul.

But because this is believed to be the biblical teaching, the following assumption is embraced: What is most important for the Christian, it is taught and asserted, is to know God, hear from God, and relate to God in one’s “*spirit*”, not in the “*soul*”, for the “*soul*” can only experience God to a lesser degree and in an imperfect manner. What sadly results is the common and intentional marginalizing of the *soul* and particularly that aspect of the soul which is the *mind*, or the *intellect*, or the *understanding* that comes through the Holy Scriptures, the Word of God. Thus doctrine is viewed as less than spiritual, sometimes even deadening to true spiritual health and vitality. This view of the psychology of a human being is wrong biblically and it leads to wrong thinking and wrong practice. As another once wrote,

Biblical usage leads us to say that we have and are both souls and spirits, but it is a mistake to think that soul and spirit are two different things; a “trichotomous” view of man as body, soul, and spirit is

incorrect. The common idea that the soul is an organ of this-worldly awareness only, while the spirit is a distinct organ of communion with God, brought to life in regeneration, is out of step with biblical teaching. Moreover, such a view leads to a crippling anti-intellectualism whereby *spiritual insight and theological reflection are separated* to the impoverishment of both—theology being regarded as “soulish” and unspiritual, while spiritual perception is viewed as unrelated to the work of teaching and learning God’s revealed truth.⁶

Do you see what is assumed by someone who views a person in this threefold composition? Doctrine is something to which the *soul* gives attention, but it is seen as *less* spiritual and *less* important than *true spiritual life* which is imparted to and manifest through one’s *spirit!*”

The problem with this teaching of the distinction between soul and spirit as two separate parts of a person is that it is not biblical. For the Bible does not teach that a person is a trinity of body, soul, and spirit, but rather, the Bible teaches that God has made us a living soul that animates a physical body. A human person is a body and soul, and often times, instead of the word “soul”, the word “spirit” is used, but these two words refer to the same thing. So let me set forth the biblical and factual reasons that this *trichotomous* (meaning three parts) view of man, as it is commonly called, is not according to God’s truth, but rather a *dichotomous* (meaning two parts) view of man’s person is the teaching of Scripture.

How do we deal with the verse before us? Here Paul was not describing the nature of a person, but he was expressing his desire for sanctification to take place in the whole person of a Christian. We take the view of **John Murray**, the 20th century reformed theologian who wrote of this verse:

“It is in accord with the usage of Scripture to employ an accumulation of terms to express completeness...and it would be unwarranted to assume that it is intended to provide us with a definition of the component elements of human nature.”⁷

[I have attached an appendix to these notes that give forth the biblical teaching that man is a duality of body and soul (or spirit), not a trichotomy of body, soul, and spirit.]

We next read of the certainty that the Lord will accomplish this work of sanctification in every one of His people.

D. “Now may the God of peace himself sanctify you completely, and may your whole spirit and soul and body be kept blameless at the coming of our Lord Jesus Christ. ***24He who calls you is faithful; he will surely do it.***”

What the apostle is underscoring is that sanctification is ultimately a work of God’s grace, not your work, although it requires your work or effort. Again, a verse that sets forth this idea is Philippians 2:12 and 13, “Therefore, my beloved, as you have always obeyed, not as in my presence only, but now much more in my absence, ***work out your own salvation*** with fear and trembling; ***13for it is God who works in you both to will and to do for His good pleasure.***”

Let us quickly consider the next commandment:

II. The 17th Command of the passage: “*Brothers, pray for us.*” (5:25)

Paul was a great man, but yet, he was only a man. God had called Him to do a great work, a work beyond his capability. He, like you and I, are in need of God’s grace to enable us to do the things that He has commanded us. If the great apostle Paul needed prayer, certainly you and I need prayer also. “Brothers, pray for us.”

⁶ R. C. Sproul, *The New Reformation Study Bible* (1995), p. 10.

⁷ Murray, vol. 2, p. 31.

III. The 18th command of the passage: “Greet all the brothers with a holy kiss.” (5:26)

This is worded as a command. Of course it reflects the cultural manner in which men greeted men and women greeted women in the first century Hellenistic world. There are places in the world today where Christians greet one another in this precise manner, such as places in Eastern Europe. But in the western world, this custom fell away long ago. But the principle remains. We should greet our Christian brothers and sisters warmly, making known our affection and our appreciation of our relationship with one another in Jesus Christ.

IV. There are a few words regarding the distribution of this epistle (5:27). “I put you under oath before the Lord to have this letter read to all the brothers.” This may speak of reading this epistle publically in the local church at Thessalonica, or it may refer to making known this letter to all Christians, even those Christians of in other churches and other places.

V. The final benediction. “The grace of our Lord Jesus Christ be with you” (v. 28). We are all in need of the Lord Jesus Christ to impart grace to us. This speaks of God’s favor in giving us both the desire and the ability to do His will. We were first saved by grace. We can only live this Christian life by His grace. **“May the grace of our Lord Jesus Christ be with you.”**

Now to Him who is able to keep you from stumbling,
And to present you faultless
Before the presence of His glory with exceeding joy,²⁵
To God our Savior, Who alone is wise,
Be glory and majesty,
Dominion and power,
Both now and forever. Amen. (Jude 24)

The Case for Man as a Duality of Body and Soul Rather than a Trichotomy of Body, Soul, and Spirit

The problem with the teaching of the distinction between soul and spirit as two separate parts of a person is that it is not biblical. For the Bible does not teach that a person is a trinity of body, soul, and spirit, but rather, the Bible teaches that God has made us a living soul that animates a physical body. A human person is a body and soul, and often times, instead of the word “soul”, the word “spirit” is used, but these two words refer to the same thing. So let me set forth the biblical and factual reasons that this *trichotomous* (meaning three parts) view of man, as it is commonly called, is not according to God’s truth, but rather a *dichotomous* (meaning two parts) view of man’s person is the teaching of Scripture.

First, it is simply wrong to assume or assert that because a person is “spiritually dead” it means that he is no longer a spiritual being. This is the understanding of those who hold to a trichotomous view of the person. They assert that God made man body, soul, and spirit, but that when Adam and Eve sinned, their spirit died, or was extinguished. And so, fallen man is born into the world as only having a soul and body. But when he is born again, God gives him a “spirit”, and now he is a whole person once again. But the fact is that even unsaved people everywhere are spiritual in nature, whether they are Christian or not. Man is a

spiritual being in his very existence; he cannot cease to be, for this is one aspect of being made in the image of God. When we say that a man is spiritually dead, we are not saying that he is no longer a spiritual being, but that he is no longer spiritually alive before and unto the true God. His spirit is separated from God and therefore, severed from the life of God. But man remains a spiritual creature. A man will worship something or someone, he cannot help but do so, for this is how God constituted him as a human being; he is a spiritual being. If he is converted by God's grace, he will worship the true God who has been revealed to him. But if he is not converted, he will still be a worshipper, but he will be as the woman at Jacob's well, to whom the Lord said, "You worship what you do not know" (John 4:22). Although she was unsaved, she was still a worshipper; she was still a spiritually-minded person. And so, an unconverted man is a worshipper; God made him that way. He cannot cease to be a worshipper. If he is spiritually dead it means that he cannot and will not worship the true God, but he will still worship. He will either worship himself, another human person, a false god, or he may even degenerate to the worship of animals and other created things. As Paul wrote of unconverted people, that while they were...

"claiming to be wise, they became fools, ²³and exchanged the glory of the immortal God for images resembling mortal man and birds and animals and creeping things. ²⁴Therefore God gave them up in the lusts of their hearts to impurity, to the dishonoring of their bodies among themselves, ²⁵ because they exchanged the truth about God for a lie and *worshiped* and *served* the creature rather than the Creator, who is blessed forever! Amen. (Rom 1:22-25)

A fallen man is spiritually dead, so he cannot and will not worship the true God, but he will worship something, whether it is a rock or a bug. Unconverted people are very spiritual, for God made us to be spiritual people. And there are no natural born atheists; someone has to be taught or he must convince himself to be an atheist, for he was born with a capacity and propensity to be a worshipper. He can be nothing but a worshipper, for he is spiritual in nature. Therefore, to say that when Adam and Eve sinned, *they died spiritually in the sense that a spirit component of their person was extinguished*, is wrong and is simply not taught in the Scriptures.

Second, the soul of a person is sometimes referred to as his spirit. This is commonly found in the Scriptures. Why does God use two different terms? He does so to better describe what a human being is like. When God uses the term "*soul*" to describe a person, He is showing the distinctiveness of that man or woman as an individual person with an individual self-identity. When God uses the word "*spirit*" to refer to a person, He is emphasizing the fact that each of us owe our life to God who gave us life, that each of us are dependent upon Him in this life, and thirdly that our true self is distinct from the body. This is what a theological note in **The New Reformation Study Bible** says:

Each human being in this world consists of a material body animated by an immaterial personal self. Scripture calls this self a "soul" or "spirit." "Soul" emphasizes the distinctness of a person's conscious self-hood; "spirit" carries the nuances of the soul's derivation from God, dependence on Him, and distinctness from the body as such.

Third, oftentimes, the biblical expressions of "soul" and 'spirit" are used interchangeably, for they refer to the same constituent part of a person.

1. When the person of man is used in Scripture. Sometimes the Word of God describes a man as "body and soul", such as in

Matthew 6:25 -- "Therefore I say to you, do not worry about your *life* (Greek word for "soul"), what you will eat or what you will drink; nor about your body, what you will put on. Is not life more than food and the body more than clothing?"

Matthew 10:28 – “And do not fear those who kill the body but cannot kill the *soul*. But rather fear Him who is able to destroy both *soul* and body in hell.”

1 Corinthians 7:33f. “But the married man is anxious about worldly things, how to please his wife,³⁴ and his interests are divided. And the unmarried or betrothed woman is anxious about the things of the Lord, how to be holy in *body* and *spirit*. But the married woman is anxious about worldly things, how to please her husband.”

2 Corinthians 7:1. “Since we have these promises, beloved, let us cleanse ourselves from every defilement of *body* and *spirit*, bringing holiness to completion in the fear of God.”

James 2:26. “For as the *body* without the *spirit* is dead, so faith without works is dead also.”

2. The seat of spiritual exercise. When we examine spiritual experiences being described in the Scriptures, they are often times described as occurring in the “soul.” This again supports the idea that a man’s spirit and a man’s soul, are one and the same.

(1) We read of spiritual sorrow on the part of our Lord:

John 12:27. “Now is My *soul* troubled.”

Matthew 26:38. “Then He said to them, ‘My *soul* is exceedingly sorrowful, even to death. Stay here and watch with Me.’”

(2) We read of spiritual desire and spiritual joy manifested in one’s soul. “*The highest spiritual exercises are ascribed to the soul as well as the spirit.*”⁸

Psalm 42:1-6

As the deer pants for the water brooks,
So pants my soul for You, O God.
²My *soul* thirsts for God, for the living God.
When shall I come and appear before God?
³My tears have been my food day and night,
While they continually say to me,
“Where is your God?”
⁴When I remember these things,
I pour out my *soul* within me.
For I used to go with the multitude;
I went with them to the house of God,
With the voice of joy and praise,
With a multitude that kept a pilgrim feast.

⁵Why are you cast down, O my *soul*?
And why are you disquieted within me?
Hope in God, for I shall yet praise Him
For the help of His countenance.

⁶O my God, my *soul* is cast down within me;

⁸ I am indebted to the chapter on “Trichotomy” by John Murray for these arguments and the many Scripture references used for support of what I asserted in this message. See John Murray, *Collected Writings of John Murray*, vol. 2 (Banner of Truth Trust, 1977), pp. 23-33.

Therefore I will remember You from the land of the Jordan,
And from the heights of Hermon,
From the Hill Mizar.

Numerous passages could be cited like these. For the use of “soul” see Psalm 63:5; 103:1, 2; 116:7; 130:6; Isa. 26:9; for the use of spirit for similar kinds of experiences see Psalm 32:2; 34:18; Prov. 11:13; 16:19; Isa. 57:15; Ezek. 11:19; 18:31; 36:26. For an example of the use of “spirit” consider:

Psalm 51:10-17

¹⁰Create in me a clean heart, O God,
And renew a steadfast *spirit* within me.

¹¹Do not cast me away from Your presence,
And do not take Your Holy Spirit from me.

¹²Restore to me the joy of Your salvation,
And uphold me with a willing spirit.

¹³Then I will teach transgressors Your ways,
And sinners shall be converted to You.

¹⁴Deliver me from the guilt of bloodshed, O God,
The God of my salvation,
And my tongue shall sing aloud of Your righteousness.

¹⁵O Lord, open my lips,
And my mouth shall show forth Your praise.

¹⁶For You do not desire sacrifice, or else I would give it;
You do not delight in burnt offering.

¹⁷The sacrifices of God are a broken *spirit*,
A broken and a contrite heart—
These, O God, You will not despise.

(3) We read of spiritual devotion to be manifested in one’s soul.

Here I will cite the words of Reformed scholar **John Murray**:

In Mark 12:30, for example [which reads, “And you shall love the LORD your God with all your heart, with all your soul, with all your mind, and with all your strength”], we have a statement of the sum of devotion to God. The four terms used as heart, soul, mind, and strength. If the spirit is the organ of God-consciousness, it must surely be enlisted in the highest reaches of devotion to God. It would not be consistent with this alleged primacy to omit the spirit in such an enumeration of the aspects of personality.

In like manner various passages refer to community of interest and purpose in the kingdom of God to wholehearted dedication in the fulfilment of the demands of the Christian vocation. This devotion is expressed in the terms of the soul as well as of the spirit (cf. Acts 4:32; 14:2, 22; Eph. 6:6; Phil. 1:27; 2:2, 19, 20). ‘One spirit’ and ‘one soul’ are, at least, parallel if not synonymous (Phil. 1:27). To do anything wholeheartedly is to do it from the ‘soul’ (Eph 6:6). One soul is equivalent to one heart (Acts 4:32).

The conclusion is inescapable that the centre of devotion and the seat of the most characteristic exercises of the regenerate person are the soul as well as the heart and the spirit. The evidence cannot be adjusted to the supposition that the soul is the outer chamber, and that it is the spirit that is the organ of God-consciousness and the centre of spiritual mindedness.⁹

⁹ Murray, vol. 2, p. 27.

We could show many other reasons why this idea that a man is comprised of spirit, soul, and body is not biblical. And the notion that the spirit of man is the locus of God's greatest interaction with, revelation to, and fellowship with a human being is patently unbiblical.

God has made you to be a body and soul, and often times your soul is identified as your spirit in the Holy Scriptures. The main point I wish to stress is this. God has made you to be a spirit, and your spirit is comprised of a mind with which to think and reason, affections with which you can experience your emotions, and a body through which your spirit lives. God communicates to your spirit, that is your soul, through His written Word, the Holy Bible, which the Holy Spirit enables your mind to comprehend, your heart to respond in a devotional manner, and a will to conform your actions to that revealed Word.

Now there are two passages of Scripture that are often cited to assert and defend a *trichotomous* understanding of a Christian, that he is a spirit, a body, and a soul. The first is Hebrews 4:12ff.

“For the word of God is living and powerful, and sharper than any two-edged sword, piercing even to the division of *soul* and *spirit*, and of joints and marrow, and is a discerner of the thoughts and intents of the heart.”

The thought is that the Word of God is able to separate the soul and spirit. “Clearly they are two different things which are separate from one another.” But the Greek words translated “Piercing to the division” is never used to describe separating two different things from one another, but rather dividing a single thing into two parts. The Word of God is able to distinguish the soul as it manifests one's self-identity and at the same time the Word is able to show that soul, or spirit, rather, is life having been given by God. This verse does not teach they are two separate components to a human being.

The second is our text of 1 Thessalonians 5:13. “Now may the God of peace Himself sanctify you completely; and may your whole spirit, soul, and body be preserved blameless at the coming of our Lord Jesus Christ.” Here Paul was not describing the nature of a person, but he was expressing his desire for sanctification to take place in the whole person of a Christian. “It is in accord with the usage of Scripture to employ an accumulation of terms to express completeness...and it would be unwarranted to assume that it is intended to provide us with a definition of the component elements of human nature.”¹⁰

Why is this important? The evangelical scene is rife with the idea that *God communicates directly with your spirit*, which is believed to be a heavenly, spiritual self that is distinct from your soul, and that this kind of communication or revelation from God's Spirit supposedly to your spirit is a higher and more desirable and purer kind of knowledge and experience with God that your soul could never contemplate or encounter. Their thinking is like this:

“And so doctrine, what use is it? For God has spoken to my spirit! That is what is really important. Scripture says? So what? What is most important is what God has said to my spirit.”

This is not biblical. I would argue it is not even Christian. It is pure mysticism in Christian dress, yet many, many, are deceived with this silly and foolish idea of spirituality. What matters to many people is not the Word of God, but they are looking for an “impression”, a “feeling”, that God “spoke to their spirit.” May God deliver us from this error. May we look to the written, authoritative, inerrant Word of God in the Scriptures, for it is through the Scriptures alone that the Lord speaks to His people.

We will close with citing an important verse in Romans that underscores all of what we have said today of the primary role of the mind of understanding truth as the divine means of sanctifying God's people. Romans 12:1 and 2 read,

¹⁰ Murray, vol. 2, p. 31.

I beseech you therefore, brethren, by the mercies of God, that you present your bodies a living sacrifice, holy, acceptable to God, which is your reasonable service. ²And do not be conformed to this world, but be transformed by the renewing of your mind, that you may prove what is that good and acceptable and perfect will of God.

Here we see that Paul appeals to the need for Christian to experience transformation, in other words, the believer's sanctification. How is this experienced by the believer? The "mind" needs renewed through acquiring truth. The believer is then to order his life according to that truth that his mind has acquired. This is the way of sanctification, through the hegemony (domination) of the mind.

Below is a copy of a bulletin insert from several years ago that addresses the biblical view of the personhood of man. It is a copy of a theological note in *The New Reformation Study Bible*., which is edited by R. C. Sproul.

#18 Body & Soul, Male & Female¹¹

Each human being in this world consists of a material body animated by an immaterial personal self. Scripture calls this self a "soul" or "spirit." "Soul" emphasizes the distinctness of a person's conscious self-hood; "spirit" carries the nuances of the soul's derivation from God, dependence on Him, and distinctness from the body as such.

Biblical usage leads us to say that we have and are both souls and spirits, but it is a mistake to think that soul and spirit are two different things; a "trichotomous" view of man as body, soul, and spirit is incorrect. The common idea that the soul is an organ of this-worldly awareness only, while the spirit is a distinct organ of communion with God, brought to life in regeneration, is out of step with biblical teaching. Moreover, such a view leads to a crippling anti-intellectualism whereby spiritual insight and theological reflection are separated to the impoverishment of both—theology being regarded as "soulish" and unspiritual, while spiritual perception is viewed as unrelated to the work of teaching and learning God's revealed truth.

The embodiment of the soul is integral to God's design for humanity. Through the body we experience our environment, enjoy and control things around us, and relate to other people. There was nothing evil or corruptible about the body as God first made it. If sin had not occurred, the physical aging and decline that leads to death as we know it would have been no part of human experience (Gen. 2:17; 3:19, 22; Rom. 5:12). Now, however, all people are corrupt throughout their psycho-physical being, as the disordered desires of mind and body, warring against each other as well as against the rules of wisdom and righteousness, clearly show.

At death the soul leaves the body behind, but this is not the happy release the Greek philosophers and some cults have imagined. The Christian hope is not redemption *from* the body but redemption *of* the body. We look forward to having a part of Christ's resurrection in and through the resurrection of our bodies. Though the actual composition of our future glorified bodies is presently unknown, we know that there will be a continuity with our present bodies (1 Cor. 15:35-49; Phil. 3:20, 21; Col. 3:4).

The two genders, male and female, belong to the creation pattern. Men and women are equally image-bearers of God (Gen. 1:27), and their dignity is equal in consequence. The complementary nature of the genders is meant to lead to enriching cooperation (see Gen. 2:18-23), not only in marriage, procreation, and family life, but in life's wider activities also. Perception of the difference between a person of the other gender and oneself is meant to be a school for learning the practice and joy of appreciation, openness, honor, service, and fidelity.

¹¹ This "theological note" is from *The Reformation Study Bible*, published by Thomas Nelson Publishers