

1Thess. 5:12-28; Text v. 23

Have you ever noticed that when it comes to planning a budget for your money or for your time the largest category seems to be that miscellaneous category. These are the things that can't be slotted anywhere else and so they end up being thrown into the catch all category – the miscellaneous category.

Now it seems that commentators who analyze the books of the Bible make extensive use of this miscellaneous category also. This last section of chp. 5 in 1Thess. comes under the category of miscellaneous exhortations given by the Apostle Paul. And indeed this section is filled with exhortations:

We beseech you Paul writes in v. 12; *Now we exhort you* he writes again in v. 14. And we find a number of very concise exhortations that follow: **{cf. 14-22}**.

Are these the last minute things that came to Paul's mind as he sought to wrap up this epistle? Or is there a common element to link them all together? I believe there is a common element and its shown to us in v. 23 **{cf. v. 23}**. Paul had a desire for the Thessalonians to *increase* and *abound*. This is tantamount to saying that he had the desire for them to grow in grace and in the knowledge of Jesus Christ.

And even though their lives were in many respects above reproach – Paul nevertheless recognized the potential for even greater improvement and growth in grace. And so after expressing his desire for them to *abound more and more* (4:1) he goes on to say that *this is the will of God, even your sanctification* (4:3).

And as we read the words in our text – this apostolic benediction *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* – we are able to pick up in the end of this epistle not just a few miscellaneous thoughts – but a point of emphasis which magnifies what Paul has been writing earlier in the epistle.

Paul's desire is made clear at the end of this letter that he wants these Thessalonian believers to know more of Christ, to draw closer to Christ, to serve Christ with greater fervency and increasing fruitfulness and to steer clear of anything and everything that would get in the way of that fellowship and that service.

You could say in a sense that these miscellaneous exhortations give the substance of how this sanctifying process is to take place. How can you and I do the will of God, knowing that His will is our sanctification? Here's how **{cf. 14-22}**.

And by looking at these exhortations in the light of our sanctification and then discovering from our text that God Himself must sanctify us then we have a concise but somewhat comprehensive understanding of our sanctification. Sanctification is not like justification. In our justification we are merely the passive recipients of Christ's righteousness. We cannot earn it. We do not deserve it. We simply receive it by faith.

Sanctification, on the other hand is defined as *a work of God's free grace that enables us to die to sin more and more and live to God more and more*. We have a part in it. We are enabled by God and then we do our part. This was Paul's desire, then, for the Thessalonian believers that their sanctification be improved.

This is the desire that any Pastor would have for his congregation. This is the desire that parents have for their children. This is the desire that we all should have for one another and for ourselves as individuals. And so I want to exhort and admonish you, therefore this morning that:

We Must Strive to be Wholly Sanctified

And our text shows us how we must strive to be wholly sanctified. Consider with me first that we must strive to be wholly sanctified:

I. By Seeing God as the Source of Our Sanctification – v. 23 *And the very God of peace sanctify you wholly*

The point needs to be stressed that God is the One who sanctifies His people. It is the work of God's Holy Spirit that makes us holy – and that is what sanctification means – to be made holy. And in the work of being made holy we are as Christians completely dependent upon God.

Our catechism defines sanctification as *the work of God's free grace*. In 2Thess. 2:13 Paul writes that *God hath from the beginning chosen you to salvation through sanctification of the Spirit and belief of the truth*. The very act of gaining a saving interest in Jesus Christ is the work of God's Spirit upon the heart. You could say that the new birth – which is that work of the Spirit upon the heart of a sinner is the very first act of sanctification.

You were spiritually dead. You had no interest in the things of God. You may have been religious but you were still spiritually dead. There's plenty of religious interest among those that are spiritually dead. But a common element among such people is that they fashion a god in their own minds and follow a god of their own making. They do not – indeed they will not and cannot submit to the God who is revealed in the Bible. Instead they fashion a god so that they can confine him to their own specifications.

You could say that they do the very opposite of what we find in Scripture. In the Bible we read that God created man in His own image. The practice of sinful man ever since the fall, however, has been to create a god of his own in man's own image.

I remember a lady at Design Printing who was very interested in religion. I don't know if I've ever met anyone who was so avowedly liberal in their religious beliefs as this lady. It was her opinion that the Apostle Paul was a male chauvinist. It was her belief that this world came into existence through evolution. She was that liberal in her faith. During that period of time when I was in printing the Dali-lama, an exiled Buddhist

monk came to speak in Bloomington. This lady went to hear him and when she returned she told me all about it. She gloried in the fact that there had been a Buddhist monk, a Jewish Rabbi, a Catholic nun and some liberal Protestant minister who shared a platform and proclaimed their desire for peace to prevail in the world.

I asked her if she bought into the kind of ecumenism that brought so many different faiths together no matter what those faiths subscribed to individually and she assured me that she did buy into kind of ecumenism. I then expressed to her my opinion that the religious trend of the day is to visit the market of religions where each one, so to speak, has set up a booth describing what they believe. The individual is then allowed to visit the booths and pick and choose from the tenets of each religion – choosing what he likes, discarding what he doesn't like until he at last creates a composite religion of his own making. I think this lady liked that analogy and believed in it until I raised the question to her – *who is God under that kind of activity?*

And the truth of the matter is that the individual who does the choosing becomes God. He determines for himself what is and what isn't true concerning God. You begin to see my point that the lost sinner does not submit to a God who has revealed Himself – he instead fashions a god in his own mind. He becomes the determiner of truth.

This was your condition and my condition until an act of power was wrought upon your heart and my heart. And that act of power was the Holy Spirit opening our blind eyes, and giving hearing to deaf ears, and subduing the rebellion of our sinful hearts and then pointing us to Christ and enabling us to submit to Him to the saving our souls.

That was the beginning of sanctification and it was wrought by God. Could I point out something else about this text in 5:23. Notice, if you will, that Paul says it is the *very God of peace* that sanctifies you wholly. We have in that designation *the very God of peace* a very strong hint that there is a close tie between our sanctification and our justification.

Being justified by faith we have peace with God, Paul writes to the Romans (Rom. 5:1). It is because we are at peace with God that we can be sanctified. It is because we know God has imputed our sins to Christ who then bore our judgement and God has imputed Christ's righteousness to us which gives us a perfect standing with God. This knowledge that God can and has justly forgiven our sins is what brings peace to our souls. And in the power of this peace, or the power of gratitude for this salvation that we've received freely by faith we strive in dependence at all times upon God to be wholly sanctified.

In striving for holiness we are not striving to earn something from God. We have already faced the truth that we can not and we need not strive to earn anything from God. But because He has given us salvation and the gift of righteousness that comes with that salvation we strive to be holy.

There's a sense in which we're at war and there's a sense in which we're at peace. *Striving for sanctification* – the very phrase suggests a struggle and it is a struggle to overcome the flesh with all its lusts; and it is a struggle to overcome the world in all its ungodly ways. But it's a struggle we're willing to enter because we are at peace with God. We've been reconciled to Him through the blood of Jesus Christ. And because we are at peace with Him we take up the spiritual warfare against the world and the flesh and the devil. We do so because we're thankful for so great salvation. We do so because we have a love for purity and righteousness which we did not have before the Spirit of God worked in our hearts.

>>> How is it with you, this morning, believer? Are you striving for sanctification? If you're like many others you may be finding the battle difficult. Are you depending on the power of Christ for that struggle? He's the One that gave you the initial interest and the initial power. He must also be the One who carries you forward. So in your striving don't forget that you are dependent on Him and don't forget that through the blood of Christ you are at peace with Him. Your peace is in no way dependent upon your success in the struggle. Your peace has been won by Christ's death and burial and resurrection.

So the first thing we learn from the text, then, is that we strive to be wholly sanctified by seeing God as the source of our sanctification. Consider with me next that we strive to be wholly sanctified:

II. By Seeing Obedience as the Fruit of Our Sanctification –

And under this heading we are able to take into account these various exhortations that govern our actions and our attitudes. *If ye love me*, Christ says to us in His word *keep my commandments*. And we reply – *we do love you, Lord Jesus. We love you for saving our souls. We love you for delivering us from eternal condemnation. We love you for bearing our penalty. What commandments would you have us keep?*

And the first commandment given in our text is a command to submit to the authority that God puts in place for your good and for His glory. {cf. 5:12,13}. Submission to authority is not something that is popular in our day. And yet there can be no denying the truth that God has set up authority structures in our society. There is the authority of the Government. We are commanded to submit to that authority. There is the authority of the husband – being head of the home. Paul addresses this issue in his epistle to the Ephesians and the Colossians. Peter also addresses this authority structure in his first epistle. And then there is the authority of parents over their children. This ordained authority structure is also under attack and has been severely hampered in our culture. And there are professing Christian young people who buck so hard against this authority that if others knew the extent of their rebellion they would have serious doubts about the credibility of such a person's profession of faith.

And in the text we see that the specific authority ordained by God (and this is one that is perhaps one of the most despised today) is church authority. *Esteem them or respect*

them Paul says – why? Because they’re so intelligent and spiritual and more godly than anyone else? No – *esteem them for their work’s sake*. Those who are in positions of leadership within the church are accountable to others and are ultimately accountable to God Himself for others.

The proper exercise of authority and the proper submission to authority must be seen as the fruit of our sanctification if we are to be wholly sanctified to the Lord. In v. 14 we see 3 more exhortations coming in rapid order – we’re to *warn*; we’re to *comfort*; and we’re to *support* – all in an attitude of patience. (v.14).

This word *warn* is an interesting word in the Greek. It’s the same word that is translated *beseech* in v. 12. The word in the Greek is *νουθετεω*. You may be familiar with a phrase that is heard in some Christian circles – the phrase *nouthetic counseling*. This is the kind of counseling that is advocated by Jay Adams. It’s recognized as being very good Biblical counseling because it purports to be from a Reformed perspective.

The word *νουθετεω* speaks literally of confrontational counseling. The idea is emphasized that a man is personally responsible to God and this kind of counseling places a strong emphasis on that responsibility. Under this kind of counseling sin in a believer’s life is confronted and faced and dealt with. I suppose you could say, in a sense, that the pulpit ministry of a Bible-believing church is a form of nouthetic counseling. *Preach the word* Paul writes to Timothy. *Reprove, rebuke and exhort with all longsuffering and doctrine*. Of the 3 terms used in that verse to describe preaching, two of them are confrontational in nature – reprove and rebuke.

It has been Dr. Cairns belief that if the pulpit ministry is a spiritual exercise then personal counseling can be reduced to a minimum. People who have a heart for Christ will respond to the preaching of God’s Word and will confront their sins and will endeavor to repent and have faith in Jesus Christ.

Now it’s interesting to note who it is that we’re to warn – or confront. The text says *warn them that are unruly*. When you think of someone who is unruly the first thing that comes to mind is a child who asserts his independence and becomes strong willed. He desires to have his own way and in the strength of that desire he becomes unruly. I find it interesting, however, that according to my Greek lexicon this word *unruly* was used in Greek society of those who did not show up for work.

And I think that by understanding the term this way and looking at the other descriptions in our text – *comfort the feebleminded*, *support the weak*. The picture emerges in the spiritual realm of a soul who is losing out with God. The word *feebleminded* is a compound word that could mean *slight of soul*. Or it might be described as *fainthearted*. I think the term is translated *feebleminded* because the next term *weak* also makes reference to the soul being weak.

And so the total picture we have of those who need to be warned, or comforted, or supported are those who have through various ways become spiritually careless, and are

not minding the things of God and whose hearts are no longer sensitive to the Spirit of God. Every means must be employed to minister to them. They must be confronted and supported in an attitude of patience.

Now unfortunately we often times don't measure up to this kind of ministry. At times we fail to exercise ourselves by this standard. And at times we fail to submit to this kind of ministry. Confrontation can provoke a carnal response. And even comfort and support can provoke the recipient into a self-centered martyr's complex. This is why patience is called for.

And this is why in the next verse Paul warns us not to be pulled down into the realm of carnal bickering and proud back-biting if our ministries are not received in a right spirit. You see how he puts it in v. 15 – *See that none render evil for evil unto any man; but ever follow that which is good.*

And in vv. 16-18 we have 3 more exhortations that must characterize our lives if we would minister or be ministered to – *Rejoice evermore; Pray without ceasing. In everything gives thanks.* It seems like a pretty high ideal, doesn't it – until you remember that it is the God of peace who sanctifies you wholly. It is because you are at peace with God through Christ that you can and should rejoice evermore and pray constantly and be thankful in everything.

Look to your Savior, today. Remember His death. Remember His shed blood. Remember that you were at one time without hope without Christ in the world but now you who sometimes were afar off are brought near by the blood of Christ. You are fellow citizens of heaven with the saints and joint heirs of Jesus Christ. So long as the truth of your salvation is fresh in your heart then you'll be enabled to rejoice and pray and give thanks. The Holy Spirit will minister Christ to your hearts. The Holy Spirit will keep you sensitive to the blessings you have in Christ. He'll impress upon you all that you are and all that you have in Christ.

This is why you must be on your guard to *quench not the Spirit* (v. 19). Don't cut Him off through vain carnal lusts and pride. And in vv. 19,20 we have a call to spiritual discernment {**cf. 5:19,20**}.

Prophesyings I believe refer to the exercises of communicating God's Word. His word is communicated when we preach. His word is communicated when we minister in song. His word is communicated when we pray. And none of these activities are done in the inspiration of the Holy Ghost. So we prove all things and hold fast that which is good and abstain (v.20) not just from every manifestation of evil – but every appearance of evil. If something is good but has the potential for being viewed as bad – abstain from it.

This is our obedience to Christ, then. These things are the fruit of our sanctification. These exhortations describe for us the things that God's Spirit will empower us to do. You should expect to find from God the enabling power to submit, the enabling power

to minister, and the enabling power to exercise spiritual discernment all in an attitude of patience and joy and thanksgiving.

If you would be wholly sanctified, then, you must see God as the source of your sanctification. You must see obedience as the fruit of your sanctification. And finally – if you would be wholly sanctified you do so:

III. By seeing Ministry as a Contributing Force to Your Sanctification –

There is a very clear emphasis throughout this epistle to the Thessalonians on the need for Christians to minister to each other.

Look at what Paul says in:

4:18 – *Wherefore comfort one another with these words.*

5:11 – *Wherefore comfort yourselves together, and edify one another, even as also ye do.*

5:14 – *Now we exhort you, brethren, warn them who are unruly, comfort the feebleminded, support the weak, be patient toward all men.*

Do you notice who is to carry on the warning and comforting and supporting? Paul is not personally warning them or comforting them or supporting them in this text. He is rather telling them to carry out this ministry among themselves.

I see this point as being essential to our very existence as a church. I heard a rather alarming statistic on the radio some time ago. It was reported that the church in America was no longer the pillar to our culture that it used to be. At this point in time more than half of all the churches in America have 75 people or less. And these churches are going under at the rate of 50 a week.

The devil has succeeded seemingly to a very large degree in destroying the church as an institution in America. Now in some respects I suppose that report should be regarded as good news because there are unfortunately many churches that we are probably better off without. But what will keep a church from becoming one of those urban casualties?

Some churches will look for new and creative and contemporary innovations that will enable them to broaden their appeal. And they'll seek to win the world by becoming more like the world. May God lead us not into temptation but deliver us from evil. This will not be the way we survive in this church. In fact it would be better to fold than to dishonor God and make a mockery of the gospel.

What then can we do? What must we do to avoid becoming another urban casualty – one of the 50 a week that go under? Let me just say that we must first fall back to the truth that Christ has said He would build His church and the gates of hell would not prevail against it. So let's not be pulled down by a pessimistic outlook that becomes

self-fulfilling. Let's instead look to our Savior and remember who He is and what He has done and what He has promised to do –

And then let's build each other up spiritually. We must take each other to heart. We must be willing to submit to warnings when we receive them. We must be willing both to be comforted and supported and to minister that comfort and support to others within our ranks. And in this fashion we will be moving forward – because God will be sanctifying us wholly. I do not and will not believe that any church that is engaged in this scriptural and spiritual practice of ministry need fear failure.

And so may 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.