

Looking to God for Your Sanctification

1 Thessalonians 5:23-24

Halifax: 10 December, 10:30 AM

Introduction

We are quickly coming to the end of Paul's letter to the Thessalonians.

- Just this week and next week should finish us out.

Paul, or perhaps I should say, *the Holy Spirit*, has been relentless about pressing for sanctification throughout this entire epistle...

- Sanctification has to do with being set apart to God—
 - It is being more and more conformed to Him as your God whom you love, obey, rely upon, worship, and serve.
 - You walk in conformity to Him as the true God and as your God.
- If you look back at chapter 1, you will recall how Paul expressed his joy and gratitude that the Thessalonians had demonstrated that they had turned from idols to serve God.
 - Their work of faith, labour of love, and patience of hope in the Lord Jesus in the face of much affliction showed that they were now sanctified to God.
- And in chapter 2, Paul reminds them how he and his co-labourers had poured out their lives in ministry to them that they would (v. 12) “walk worthy of God who calls you into His own fellowship and glory,” (become even more sanctified).
 - He explains in 2:19 that their great desire is to see them faithfully in the presence of the Lord Jesus Christ at His coming.
- And in chapter 3, he explains how much he and his ministry team had wanted to complete their ministry among them from which they had been torn away by Satan.
 - He explains how this is the reason they sent Timothy when the others could not get to them, and how thrilled they were to learn from him that they gave clear evidence that they truly were in Christ—being sanctified to God by Him.
- And because this was so, we saw that at the beginning of chapter 4, Paul urged and exhorted them to abound more and more in their sanctification!
 - He reminded them that it is God's will for them to abound more and more in the ways that please God—in walking in conformity with God according to the commandments they had given them.
- And then we spent the last couple of months looking at specific ways that we are to abound in our sanctification—
 - sexual purity, brotherly love, hoping in the glorious return of Christ, preparing ourselves as children of light to meet Him, living in harmony in the church with the elders, the other members, and with God Himself and His Holy Spirit.

And in today's passage, 1 Thessalonians 5:23-24, sanctification is still at the forefront as we find Paul praying for it and encouraging them (and so us) to look to God for it.

- He is the source of our strength for sanctification.
- Listen carefully as I read this passage to you—1 Thessalonians 5:23-24.
 - Remember that this is the very Word of God.

1 Thessalonians 5:23-24: “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. He who calls you *is* faithful, who also will do *it*.”

What an encouragement this is!

- Perhaps after hearing so much about the holy life to which God has called us, you were starting to feel overwhelmed.
 - Perhaps you were saying, “How can I do all of these things?”
 - And you are certainly right.
 - I have sought to remind you all along the way that your strength is in Christ and in the working of His Spirit.
 - You can live for God because you are united to Christ Jesus and are made alive together with Him to walk in newness of life.
- But right about now, we can certainly use an entire sermon that turns our focus to God as the One who sanctifies us.
 - You do not have the strength in yourself to do anything at all, but your help comes from the Lord who made heaven and earth.

I. See in our text first of all how the Holy Spirit points you to look to God to sanctify you.

- The Spirit does this in verse 23 by providing us with Paul’s example of praying for the sanctification of the Thessalonians.
 - Paul knew that they could not sanctify themselves, and so after all of his calls to them to abound in a holy walk with God, look at how he prays for this.

A. Learn from him to pray for total sanctification.

1. First, that God would sanctify you *completely* or *fully*.
 - a. The word used here is a rare word that speaks of reaching a goal—in this case of reaching the full conformity to God to which we are called...
 - namely that we would be entirely like Jesus Christ—as those who no longer come short of the glory of God in our lives...
 - that we would be those who love God with all our heart, soul, mind, and strength, and who truly love one another as Christ has loved us.
 - b. In Romans 8:29, we are told that we have been predestined to be conformed to the image of God’s Son.
 - Obviously, this is the will of God—and nothing less than that;
 - and obviously, it ought to be our will also—that we would attain to this perfection, to the measure and stature of the fullness of Christ.
 - Furthermore, it is obvious that you cannot bring yourself to this perfection, or even keep yourself as one on the way to this perfection...
 - That is the reason you ought to pray earnestly for this...God has promised it and you can’t do it yourself, so pray for it!
 - Neither can anyone else—so pray fervently.

- c. Understand, of course, that the work of sanctification will not be completed until the last day when our bodies are raised up.
 - Even your spirit will not be perfected until the day that you die and it (your spirit) goes to be with Christ—where it will then wait for your body to be raised.
 - And since we do not attain to this goal as long as we live in this world, this is something you ought to continually pray for.
 - As long as you are here, it is an ongoing process that God is involved in all along the way.
 - When we you sin in your life, pray that God would sanctify you by purging that sin—be specific in your prayers...
 - When you face trials and difficulties, pray that God will use them to enable you to grow in your relationship with Him.
 - When you are blessed and prosper, pray also that God will bring about your sanctification through the prosperity.
 - When you engage in the means of grace, reading His word, coming to church, then pray for your sanctification to be advanced.
 - And don't just pray for your own sanctification, pray also for the sanctification of others.
 - It is God's will for us to be sanctified, and we can't do it in our own strength, so pray earnestly for it.
- In addition to praying for *complete* sanctification...
- 2. We are taught here to pray also for sanctification in every part of us.
 - a. Paul shows us this in that he prays for the **whole spirit, soul and body** of the Thessalonian believers.
 - Learn from this that you should pray for every part of you—
 - The word *whole* literally means *all the parts*, or *the whole lot* so that no part is excluded.
 - b. Do not be like those who only look for God to sanctify them in one part.
 - 1) You will meet some Christians whose whole focus is on what they do or don't do.
 - They don't pay any attention to their motives or their pride or their selfishness—they focus on their behaviour.
 - The Pharisees were like this—Jesus described them as being like whitewashed tombs that were beautiful on the outside, but within were full of dead man's bones.
 - 2) And then you meet others who are the opposite...
 - They are not so worried about their conduct—they are looking to experience God in worship, to feel love for Him in their hearts...
 - They don't think too much about excess in alcohol or even living in immorality—because, as they would say, their heart is right.

- 3) And then there is a problem that is especially prominent in our day...the problem of those who confuse lust with temptation.
- Do you know what I mean by that?
 - There are two kinds of temptation—
 - There are the temptations like Jesus had in which He was called to do something or endure something in this fallen world that is not good in itself—like suffering...
 - And then there is the kind of temptation that rises up because of sinful lusts and desires in you that cry out to be satisfied.
 - The first sort of temptation is not sinful in itself, but the second kind is and needs to be put to death.
 - Because it is deeply embedded in your passions, people want to say that there is no sin in these wicked desires—but there is!
 - For example, take our sexual desires.
 - There are those that are in themselves holy and pure, but temptation can arise for those who are not married or are hindered by sickness or other reasons from satisfying those desires.
 - But to lust after someone to whom you are not married, or after children or someone who is the same gender as you is not a holy desire, but a sinful wicked desire that needs to be crucified and put to death.
 - Of course you should avoid carrying out those desires—by all means—but you should also seek to crucify the sinful desires.
 - This is true of things like worry and fear...
 - These have a proper role, but they can also be sinful passions that we need to put to death and stop excusing.
- c. And did I mention that you are not able to do this?
- That is the very point!
 - That is the reason we need to pray earnestly to God for sanctification in every part—because it is impossible for us.
 - If you decide that certain sinful passions cannot be changed, you sell yourself short in praying for your sanctification.
 - Indeed, it might take years before you are able to crucify them, but that does not mean you should not keep asking God to enable you to do it!

TRANS> Pray for nothing less than that God would sanctify you through and through.

- This is to be an ongoing prayer for yourself and for others in the body of Christ.
- Now let's look at the second thing that Paul shows us to pray for:

B. Pray that you would be wholly sanctified in order that you would be **preserved blameless at the coming of Jesus Christ.**

1. The idea here is that when Jesus comes, we would be among those who are sanctified—who are being sanctified because we are in Him.

- a. In other words, that we would be found to be real Christians—those who have been truly made alive in Jesus Christ and so are growing.
 - The Bible teaches throughout that if we are not holy, we will not see God.
 - As it says in Hebrews 12:14: **Pursue peace with all people, and holiness, without which no one will see the Lord:**
 - Jesus tells us that at the last day there will be many who are surprised when they are not accepted by Him.
 - Matthew 7:21-23: **Not everyone who says to Me, ‘Lord, Lord,’ shall enter the kingdom of heaven, but he who does the will of My Father in heaven. ²² Many will say to Me in that day, ‘Lord, Lord, have we not prophesied in Your name, cast out demons in Your name, and done many wonders in Your name?’ ²³ And then I will declare to them, ‘I never knew you; depart from Me, you who practice lawlessness!’**
 - They were religious and they went to church and they did many works in His name, but they were not those who were being sanctified.
 - Their lives testify against them and show that they are not in Jesus.
 - b. Those who are being sanctified will be **blameless** before Him in that day.
 - To be **blameless** means that there is nothing that disqualifies your claim to be a Christian—no fault can be found with your profession to prove that it is not true.
 - You will be able to stand in the Day of Judgment as one who truly is in Jesus Christ—as one who is being sanctified through life with Him.
 - Matthew Poole says: And those that are preserved to that day...will be found blameless; and their whole man, spirit, soul, and body, being first sanctified, and then preserved, shall be saved and glorified. The apostle insinuates in the word *blameless*, the strict discovery [or exposure] that will be made of persons at that day, in which some will be blamed, and in which others will be found without blame.
 - So those who are not blameless will not stand in the day of judgment.
2. The scripture, in many places, lists things that overthrow a claim to be in Christ.
- One typical example is Galatians 5:19-21 which mentions things that if practiced would show that a person’s profession is false...it says:
 - **Gal 5:19-21: Now the works of the flesh are evident, which are: adultery, fornication, uncleanness, lewdness, idolatry, sorcery, hatred, contentions, jealousies, outbursts of wrath, selfish ambitions, dissensions, heresies, envy, murders, drunkenness, revelries, and the like; of which I tell you beforehand, just as I also told *you* in time past, that those who practice such things will not inherit the kingdom of God.**
 - A person practicing such things should be put out of the church by the elders if they refuse to repent.
 - Such a person is to be warned that they do not have the marks of being among those who are being preserved as blameless in Christ.

- They need to be told that until they repent, they have no grounds for saying that they belong to Jesus Christ.
 - That instead they are carrying in them the marks of apostasy and indicating that they are not truly in the faith.
3. And you see, the prayer is that we would be preserved as those who are being sanctified—blameless...not perfect, but as one truly being sanctified in Christ.
- a. It is a prayer that we would persevere in grace to the end.
- That God would keep us in Christ so that we bring forth the fruits of life until the end.
 - This does not mean that we are justified by our works—of course not.
 - Our works cannot stand in the day of judgment—
 - But neither can our claim that we are trusting in Christ stand if our faith in Him has not brought transformation in our lives.
 - Many take comfort in the promise of Romans 8 that there is now no condemnation to those who are in Christ Jesus,
 - but to take proper comfort you need to read the rest of the verse in which it describes those are in Christ Jesus:
 - Listen to the whole verse:
 - Romans 8:1: ***There is therefore now no condemnation to those who are in Christ Jesus, who do not walk according to the flesh, but according to the Spirit.***
 - The reason we are not condemned is because we are in Christ...
 - But the way we know we are in Christ is because we **do not walk according to the flesh but according to the Spirit.**
 - We are now serving God through Jesus Christ our Saviour.
 - Our profession is validated by walking in the Spirit.
 - So to put this prayer that we would be preserved blameless until the day of Christ in the language of Romans 8,
 - we are asking God to keep us in Christ and therefore to keep us as those who are walking in the Spirit and not in the flesh till Jesus comes...
 - We are walking as those who are crucifying the flesh with its affections and sinful desires because we are in Christ Jesus.
- b. In effect, Paul is praying here for what he spoke of back in chapters 2 & 3 as his great goal for the Thessalonians...
- That he would see them in the presence of Christ at His coming!
 - Remember in 2:19 how he said: **For what is our hope, or joy, or crown of rejoicing? Is it not even you in the presence of our Lord Jesus Christ at His coming?**
 - And then in chapter 3 how he told of his great concern that the tempter might have tempted the Thessalonians so that their labour might be in vain (3:5)—
 - meaning that they would not be found with Christ in the day of His coming...

- and how he rejoiced when Timothy, as he says, **brought us the good news of your faith and love (3:6)...**
 - and how he said that **now we live, if you stand fast in the Lord?**
- We need to pray that we and others would **be preserved blameless at the coming of our Lord Jesus Christ...**
 - That we would be kept by the power of God through faith for the salvation that is ready to be revealed at the last day.

TRANS> So you see that on the one hand, Paul is praying for something that we will not attain in this life—that we would be completely sanctified...

- but on the other hand, he is praying for something that believers *will* have in this world—continuing sanctification until Jesus comes so that we will be found blameless when He does.
- The Holy Spirit gives us Paul’s example of praying for these things to teach us to pray that God would sanctify us also.
 - He is the only one who can.
 - But there is yet another great encouragement for you here as well.

II. In these verses, the Spirit assures us that we can count on God to answer these prayers for ongoing sanctification.

- There are two encouragements for us about this...

A. The first encouragement is that God is called *the God of peace*.

1. This name reminds us that He is the source of peace for us.
 - Peace in the Bible refers to the wholeness that we have just been seeing that we need to pray for.
 - This reminds us that God is a God who is able to bring this wholeness of life to us.
2. How true it is that He is the God of peace.
 - He loves us so much and He is so committed to bringing us this peace that He sent His only Son into the world to make peace between us and Him.
 - The Son of God Himself was sent to purchase our peace by becoming a sacrifice for our sins.
 - As we considered recently on Sunday afternoon, by rejecting God as our God, we left the greatest injustice ever on the record.
 - It was an injustice that God who is truth had to put right...by punishing us for what we had done—which called for eternity in Hell...
 - or, through God’s gracious provision, the death of His Son, God the Son, as a sacrifice for our sins.
 - And that is what the God of peace provided for our peace.
3. And so it is that when we come to Christ to be made whole,
 - the God of peace not only immediately forgives us and accepts us in Him...
 - And immediately He begins to sanctify us—to give us the new life in Christ that we now seek—to give us peace or wholeness before Him.

- As the God of peace, He is both willing and able to completely sanctify us and to preserve our whole spirit, soul, and body in that work of sanctification so that we will be found blameless when Jesus comes at the end of the age.

TRANS> It is the God of peace Himself who does this and that is what makes us confident.

- That is the first encouragement we have that our prayer will be answered and the second is closely related.

B. Paul tells the Thessalonians that God will surely do this work of sanctification in them.

- Look at verse 24: **He who calls you is faithful, who also will do it.**

1. Isn't that marvellous?

- We can confidently ask God to do the work of totally sanctifying us with certainty that He will do it.
- It is such a high thing—such a grand thing—to be totally sanctified throughout our whole person...
 - To truly become like Jesus Christ—not His divinity, but as He is in our humanity—to truly love as He loves!
- Here, brothers and sisters, you are told that God will do this in you!
 - This is our confidence in our prayers for this complete sanctification and for this preservation!

2. Paul attaches the faithfulness of God to this certainty!

- a. He can do this because God has promised to sanctify all who come to Christ.
- That means that if He does not, He would be unfaithful to His promise!
 - In John 6:37, Jesus said: **All that the Father gives Me will come to Me, and the one who comes to Me I will by no means cast out.**
 - And in John 10:27-29, Jesus said: **“My sheep hear My voice, and I know them, and they follow Me. ²⁸ And I give them eternal life, and they shall never perish; neither shall anyone snatch them out of My hand. ²⁹ My Father, who has given *them* to Me, is greater than all; and no one is able to snatch *them* out of My Father’s hand.”**
 - The Father has made a covenant with us in Christ in which He says:
 - **Heb 10:16-17:** **“This is the covenant that I will make with them after those days, says the LORD: I will put My laws into their hearts, and in their minds I will write them,” ¹⁷ then He adds, “Their sins and their lawless deeds I will remember no more.”**
 - You see, there is forgiveness, but there is also the promise of His law being put in our hearts to stay so that we will serve Him.
 - In Jeremiah 32:40, it is explained like this: **I will make an everlasting covenant with them, that I will not turn away from doing them good; but I will put My fear in their hearts so that they will not depart from Me.**

- b. Now you tell me, can the Lord God go back on His word?
 - Can He be unfaithful to His promise that if we come to Christ, He will put His fear in our hearts so that we will not depart from Him?
 - He cannot! He is never unfaithful...
 - He can only be true—unfaithfulness is not possible for Him.
 - And not only that, but to be unfaithful in this matter would be a great insult to His Son—as if His suffering was not good enough!
 - And perhaps as if He were not powerful enough to sanctify us.
 - He would never offer His Son such an insult!
 - c. He has made a covenant and He has promised that anyone who comes to Christ will be saved...and will be kept by His power to the end.
 - We may fall even into grievous sins like David did...
 - And when we do, we may lose our assurance like David did...
 - But if we are truly in Christ, the Lord will pray for us as He did for Peter that our faith will not fail—
 - And it will not fail—the seed of faith will remain in us and we will be graciously restored.
3. But how can you know if these promises are yours?
- a. There are people who seem to come to Christ and who apostatise.
 - Some of them were baptised as infants and professed their faith when they got older—and then fell away,
 - And some of them come to Christ from the world and are received into the church by profession and baptism, but then depart.
 - With such persons, it is not that God has been unfaithful—that cannot be.
 - We already saw what Jesus said to those who had professed Him—depart from me for I never knew you.
 - They made an outward profession, but they never truly came to Him for salvation.
 - b. You can know that these promises are yours if you have been called by God into this salvation.
 - Do you see what Paul calls God when he speaks of His faithfulness here?
 - He refers to Him as “He who calls you.”
 - God’s call can be looked at in a couple of different ways.
 - It can be seen as the outward call in which people are privileged to hear the gospel.
 - Those persons can know for certain that if they respond to that call, they will be forgiven and they will be preserved as those who are being sanctified in Christ.
 - As we saw, if anyone comes to Him, He will not cast them out.

- Once you have answered God's call to come to Christ, then your call is no longer only an outward call...
 - Now it is an effectual call—a call that God added His power to so that it produced life in you...
 - so that by God's Spirit you saw and were convinced that you were a sinner and you saw that Christ was the only Saviour and that you need Him, and you came to Him—
 - you received Him and put yourself entirely in His hands for salvation.
 - Philippians 1:6 says: **being confident of this very thing, that He who has begun a good work in you will complete *it* until the day of Jesus Christ;**
 - **Romans 8:30 says: Moreover whom He predestined, these He also called; whom He called, these He also justified; and whom He justified, these He also glorified.**
 - It is right here that you can know, beyond any shadow of a doubt, that He who calls you is faithful and will do it!
 - He will not only pardon your sins, but He will also put you into this work of sanctification and keep you in it until Jesus comes.
 - You can pray with confidence and He will do it!

Conclusion: What an encouragement this is for all of you who have been called to salvation in God's Son!

- This beautiful life that Paul has been telling us that we are to abound in more and more is possible for us...
 - Not because we are able,
 - But because God has promised and He is able to give us this life.
- So my brothers and sisters in Christ,
 - Pray that the God of peace Himself will sanctify you completely; and may your whole spirit, soul, and body be preserved blameless at the coming of our Lord Jesus Christ. He who calls you is faithful, who also will do it.