

Thessalonians, Part 13: The God of Peace Himself Sanctifies Us Completely

1 Thessalonians 5:23 ESV (Pg. 574) 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. **24** He who calls you is faithful; he will surely do it. **25** Brothers, pray for us. **26** Greet all the brothers with a holy kiss. **27** I put you under oath before the Lord to have this letter read to all the brothers. **28** The grace of our Lord Jesus Christ be with you.

- I. After a 13-week journey, we have arrived at the close of 1st Thessalonians. In this letter, Paul has reconnected with the Thessalonians, shared his ongoing love for them, commended them for their spiritual progress and love for one another, as well as the example they are setting for the other believers in their region. He has helped them to understand events surrounding the coming of the Lord, so that they might not grieve as unbelievers. He has encouraged them to be sexually pure, joyful, prayerful, thankful and discerning, and assured them of God's power.
 - A. They have a lot to consider, and Paul, aware of that, selects his final words carefully. As he has done throughout the letter, he continues to encourage them; his aim to help them carry on in their new identity as followers of Christ Jesus.
 1. Think again for a moment about what they are experiencing: severe persecution, death of people in their fellowship, a need for rootedness and spiritual maturity as they dwell in a city rife with idolatry and paganism.
 2. If Paul were to give them one more spiritual "to do" item, they may become overwhelmed. But if he doesn't keep holiness before them as the goal, they could become slothful and start to conform to the culture around them.
 - B. So instead of doing either, he points to God as the source of their endurance and hope. He isn't saying either "try harder" or "take it easy". He isn't focusing on them in these final words at all! He points away from them, directing them to look to God. **"Now may the God of peace himself sanctify you completely..."**
 1. Notice first he doesn't refer to the Lord as a God of power or justice (which he certainly is!), but instead Paul calls him "the God of peace".
 - a) Do you understand that only people who have been redeemed by Christ can call him this? God cannot be called a God of peace by those who have rejected and rebel against him. Those people must only fear him!
 - b) **Psalm 7:11 ESV** God is a righteous judge, and a God who **feels indignation every day. 12 If a man does not repent, God will whet his sword; he has bent and readied his bow; 13 he has prepared for him his deadly weapons, making his arrows fiery shafts.**
 2. Peace with God is not something everyone can claim; nor is it something we have earned, or acquired by our goodness. Any peace that someone has with God was purchased for them on the cross of Jesus. There the righteous wrath of God (that we all deserved) was satisfied for those who would believe on him, and cry out for his mercy. Outside of the cross, you have nothing to expect from God but certain judgement for your constant sinning.
 - C. But what an unspeakable blessing to be able to praise him as the "God of peace" because of what Jesus has done! Colossians tells us that he made

- “peace by the blood of his cross”¹. Because of Jesus’ obedience to God, there has been a cessation of hostilities between us! We’re no longer at war with God!
- II. And this is no uneasy cease-fire. Paul doesn’t say “Now **may you** sanctify yourselves for the God of peace”. He puts God in the driver’s seat: “**Now may the God of peace himself sanctify you...**”! God’s working makes us holy, not ours!
- A. By “sanctification” we mean the process by which we are transformed from people who are under slavery to the power of our sin natures into people who increasingly reflect the holiness of God, and bring glory to him more and more.
1. Sanctification isn’t just moral improvement undertaken by hard-working, vow-making religious people. In sanctification, God puts his power to work and makes more like himself by convicting us of sin, empowering us by the Holy Spirit, and by working in us to change our innermost desires.
 2. Our salvation is accomplished by God alone. We would not even desire to be saved, nor could we take any action to be saved, if God did not first call to us, causing us to be reborn of the Spirit, and giving us faith to believe.
- B. But sanctification works differently. **Philippians 2:12b ESV work out your own salvation with fear and trembling, 13 for it is God who works in you, both to will and to work for his good pleasure.**
1. Sanctification is a joint effort. (“work out your **own** salvation”...“it is God who works **in you**”) As God convicts, we repent. He empowers, and we obey. The initiative is God’s. Like a parent teaching their child to ride a bike, he shouts “you can do it!” (and shows us how) while holding tightly to the bike.
 2. Paul says in this passage that God is not only working in us so that we will do his good pleasure, but so that will we **desire** to do his good pleasure.
- C. If personal holiness is going to happen in us, God is going to have to work in us, so he gets all the credit! Paul says that our hope of changing is not found in all of our blood, sweat and tears, but rather in the active working of God **himself**.
1. Stop and consider what a wonderful thing you have just heard! This God, who was once at war with you, sharpening his sword and bending his bow towards you, has now taken a loving, active, personal interest in you!
 2. His Hand is extended toward you to patiently recreate you as the potter shapes a beautiful, useful vessel from clay. He is a “hands on” God! He didn’t just clear your account so you could work to get your ducks in a row! Paul says here “may the God of peace himself sanctify you **completely**”.
- D. If you have some false sense of how good you are, this won’t mean anything. If you think you’re doing pretty good, mostly keeping it together, and generally a decent person, this promise to sanctify you completely will produce no praise from your lips. But if you find yourself crying out **Romans 7:24 ESV “Wretched man that I am! Who will deliver me from this body of death?”**; if you recognize the presence of remaining sin in your soul, and hate it, this will mean something.
1. Paul prays, “**may your whole spirit and soul and body be kept blameless at the coming of our Lord Jesus Christ**”. We often think of salvation being a benefit primarily for the immaterial part of us, as in “Jesus saved my soul”.

2. But Paul is indicating that God does not restrict his purifying fire to some spiritual region of our being. His prayer is that the whole person be sanctified - spirit, soul and body. What a glorious promise is contained in this prayer!
- E. This means that through the sanctifying work of “the God of peace” himself, when Christ comes, your spirit will be completely purged of all sinful desire and self-centeredness. Your soul will never again be tormented by anxiety, depression, and out-of-control emotions. And your physical body will no longer be polluted by disease, injury, brokenness, deterioration and death ever again.
1. Though he eludes again to the return of Christ here, his use of present tense language should give us all hope that God’s work of re-making us is already in progress; and all believers should be able to see evidence of his refining.
 2. The things that will finally be perfected and completed in you when Jesus appears will be the result of a process that began when you first believed.
- F. Knowing this frees us to be honest about our faults and failures even now. I don’t have to pretend to be something I’m not in the “here and now” because I recognize that while I’m not who I want to be, I’m not who I was! I’m still on the assembly line, and so are you. The power of the church is that we can serve each other by cheering each other on in our growth towards holiness.
1. **Hebrews 10:23 ESV** Let us hold fast the confession of our hope without wavering, for he who promised is faithful. **24** And let us consider how to stir up one another to love and good works, **25** not neglecting to meet together, as is the habit of some, but encouraging one another, and all the more as you see the Day drawing near.
 2. These verses tell us a few vital things to remember...
 - a) Don’t let go of the hope found in the gospel, which is the assurance of your salvation at the time you believed, and your sanctification in the present, and your glorification with Christ when he appears in the future. Our basis for clinging to that hope is God’s faithfulness, not our own.
 - b) Part of our assignment as the people of God (the church) is to “stir up one another” through mutual encouragement that we might always pursue love for each other, and behave in ways that glorify God.
 - c) This happens best when we are spending time together. This means at church for sure, but also when we are sharing life and carrying each others burdens in the “real” Sunday through Saturday world.
 - d) Our commitment to each other should grow as our awareness of the coming of Jesus Christ increases. Like Paul said earlier in chapter 5 of 1st Thessalonians, “**let us not sleep, as others do, but let us keep awake and be sober.**” Stay awake, and help each others to do so as well.
- G. Paul concludes this series of thoughts with a sure promise. “**He who calls you is faithful; he will surely do it.**”
1. I am not a craftsman, or repairman, or mechanic by any stretch of the imagination! My ignorance in the use of tools is legendary. I’m certain I could bring Chip and Joanna Gaines to tears! When you visit my house, you will most certainly find things needing repair and unfinished projects because my ability was soon outpaced by my enthusiastic ambition for said projects.

2. But God is not like me. What he undertakes, he finishes. And he only makes masterpieces. None of his saints will be held together by spiritual duct tape and bailing wire. Don't judge God's ability by what you see right now! You're still a work in progress. **Philippians 1:6 ESV** *And I am sure of this, that he who began a good work in you will bring it to completion at the day of Jesus Christ.* The Bible says that Jesus does all things well!²
- III. Before concluding his letter, Paul makes a couple of simple but urgent requests. In chapter 1, Paul told the Thessalonians he had constantly prayed for them. In chapter 3, he prays they would be reunited, and that their spiritual progress would be unimpeded. But now, near the end, he says, **"Brothers, pray for us."**
- A. Charles Spurgeon, who preached to thousands and was considered the "Prince of Preachers" once remarked, "For myself, personally, I say this morning that no man can do me a truer kindness in this world than to pray for me! I reckon, Brethren, that the more of prayers I have the wealthier I am in real riches, in that form of personal estate which is better than gold and silver."³ I say a hearty amen. I long and plead for your prayers. They matter more than you know.
1. Both Paul and Spurgeon call the people they are addressing "brothers". Though Paul is a spiritual father, who bears some authority, he does not demand their prayers, or imply that they are under compulsion to give them.
 - a) Though they have differing assignments from the Lord (they are the body at Thessalonica, and he is an Apostle), he recognizes his equality with them as a sinner saved by grace. He is not "elite" and they are not inferior. On the contrary they are "brothers" from the same Father.
 - b) As such, he lays out a need for their support. As he prays for them, he asks that they would lift his name before God in return. I have no shame in asking you, brothers and sisters, that you show me the same kindness.
 2. We may not ever know in this life what prayer has done (or could have done!); but we do know that the promises the Bible attaches to it are almost limitless! **Matthew 7:7 ESV** *"Ask, and it will be given to you; seek, and you will find; knock, and it will be opened to you."* Let's begin to ask!
- B. But after asking for prayer to be offered for himself, he has something to say about how they should continue to regard each other. He says, **"Greet all the brothers with a holy kiss."** Most of us have seen Middle-Eastern (and some European) people freely greet each other with a kiss. It is the way that certain cultures have expressed warmth, friendship, and acceptance for millennia.
1. Now (take a deep breath) I'm not suggesting that we return to that form of custom. But I also think if we write this instruction off as archaic, we do so to our own detriment. You might be interested to know that of all the "one another" commands in the New Testament, this one is the second most often repeated⁴, right after "Love One Another". It must be pretty important!
 2. Whether we express it with a hearty handshake or a friendly hug, Christians should be people of obvious affection for one another. Isn't that a mark of healthy families? Churches shouldn't be stiff, cold, formal places, but places where love for each other is evident to all who would examine our lives.
- C. Paul also says in closing, **"I put you under oath before the Lord to have this letter read to all the brothers"**. There were churches that had been planted in

close proximity to the Thessalonians in the region of Macedonia at Berea and Philippi. If the Thessalonians were confused and had questions, chances were pretty good that the other churches did too. So Paul says “share the Word!”

1. Sunday mornings are only part of how we do this. We do it through life groups and Bible studies. You share on Facebook and Twitter. You can never share the Word enough. It’s what people really need (more than our opinion!).
 2. If you’re unsure about something concerning Jesus or scripture, strike up a conversation with someone who could help you understand. And when you learn something new, don’t keep it to yourself. Share it with someone else.
- D. Paul began this letter with his customary greeting (some version of which is found in most of letters), when he said “Grace to you and peace”⁵. Grace is the means by which we can stand boldly, accepted before God. Peace signifies the nature of our relationship to him because of Jesus. Paul’s final words in this letter are **“The grace of our Lord Jesus Christ be with you.”**
1. Your life in Christ can only begin by grace. Ephesians tells us that “by grace you have been saved through faith. And this is not your own doing; it is the gift of God, (it is) not a result of works, so that no one may boast”⁶.
 2. But your life in Christ only continues by grace. You are sustained by the grace of God, drawn by the grace of God, renewed by the grace of God. All is of grace, all of the time, and without grace we have nothing. Paul spoke of the “grace by which we stand”⁷.
- E. Whether you are just starting out in Christ, or you are in the middle of your race, or you are nearing the end, may you cling to grace! May you appreciate grace! May you proclaim and boast in grace! Truly may the grace of our Lord Jesus Christ be with you.

Benediction: “The Lord bless you and keep you; the Lord make his face to shine upon you and be gracious to you; the Lord lift up his countenance upon you and give you peace.” (Numbers 6:24-26)

¹ Colossians 1:20

² Mark 7:37

³ From “Intercessory Prayer”; a sermon delivered on Lord's-Day morning, May 5, 1872, by C. H. Spurgeon, at the Metropolitan Tabernacle, Newington. (<https://www.ccel.org/ccel/spurgeon/sermons18.xxii.html>)

⁴ see also Romans 16:16; 1 Corinthians 16:20; 2 Corinthians 13:12; 1 Peter 5:14

⁵ 1 Thessalonians 1:1

⁶ Ephesians 2:8-9

⁷ Romans 5:2; cf 1 Peter 5:12