

God Will Complete His Work in You (1 Thessalonians 5:23-28)

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It's a good time to be a runner in Central Virginia. The weather has finally cooled off and the big Richmond race weekend is a month away. After finishing the full marathon last year, I decided to dial the miles back a bit and focus on the half. Lord willing, I'll finish with a Personal Record in just a few short weeks.

However, the more I run (and the older I get), the more I realize (and experience) how many things can go wrong. I could get sick the week of the race. I could strain my patella tendon again after one too many 14-mile workouts. I could have trouble sleeping the night before. I could get a low blood sugar. I could tire at the halfway mark and lose my mental edge. As my wife, Aliza, loves to remind me, mind doesn't always win over matter. A host of physical and mental issues could come up and keep me from crossing the finish line. I want to make it, but there are a host of challenges to overcome and I don't have any guarantees.

Sometimes the Christian life feels that way. In the second half of 1 Thessalonians 5 alone the Lord gives us 17 different commands to obey. That's on top of all the other commands Paul issues in chapter 4 and the first part of chapter 5. 4:1-*please God more and more*, 4:3-*abstain from sexual immorality*, 4:4-*control your own body in holiness and honor*, 4:9-*love one another*, 4:12-*"walk properly before outsiders,"* 5:6-*remain spiritually "awake" and sober-minded*, 5:8-*practice faith, love, and hope*, 5:11-*encourage one another and build one another up*. If that's not hard enough, try 5:16-*"rejoice always"*, 5:17-*"pray without ceasing,"* or 5:18-*"give thanks in all circumstances."*

If that's our spiritual race God has set before us, the only thing that feels guaranteed is my inevitable failure at multiple points. The sheer difficulty of doing what we're supposed to do and not doing what we're not supposed to do as Christians can be overwhelming. To the degree we feel that, we can respond in a variety of ways.

Sometimes we tap out. Maybe a better woman could cut it, but not me. I just don't have it in me. I'll let all the rest of you do the whole Jesus thing. Sometimes we try to work as hard as possible for as long as possible hoping, despite the odds, that we eventually attain the status of a godly man or woman. Sometimes we play the curve. I'm not as bad as that guy in the news. I completely agree that God should

judge and condemn those people, but I'm a decent person. Surely God understands no one's perfect.

Sometimes we play the get-out-of-jail-free Jesus card. Check it out, preacher man. The whole point of the gospel is that NO ONE can obey God's commands, but Jesus obeyed for me. He did it all. He kept the law so I don't have to be all worked up about obedience anymore. For freedom Christ has set us free, right? So it doesn't really matter how I live as long as no one gets hurt. God knows I love Him, and I'm sure Jesus will take care of everything in the end. I'm just going to kick back, relax, and enjoy the flight.

Friends, the Bible rejects every one of those responses to the challenge of obeying God's commands and becoming holy as He is holy. In the final verses of this letter, the Apostle Paul urges us to embrace an altogether different attitude, to take heart in a simple promise. The faithfulness of God guarantees the completion of his sanctifying work in our lives.

The end of Chapter 5 actually mirrors the end of Chapter 3 where Paul writes in verse 13, "May the Lord...establish your hearts blameless in holiness before our God and Father, at the coming of our Lord Jesus with all his saints." Between 3:13 and 5:23, chapters 4 and 5 are filled with detailed instructions for how we are to live as followers of Christ. But you will never experience *enduring joy* in the work of obedience let alone *hope* for your present and future spiritual growth if you lose sight of the bookends.

So what are the bookends? What's the context in which we must hear and obey the Lord's instruction to us? The bookends, and 5:23-28 in particular, are a resolute declaration to every Christian of the faithfulness of God to finish the sanctifying work He began in your life.

1) OUR SANCTIFICATION IS A WORK OF GOD (verse 23)

The Apostle Paul could not be clearer from the outset of Chapter 4 that sanctification is God's goal for our lives. 1 Thessalonians 4:3, "For this is the will of God, your sanctification." Sanctification isn't a word we use very often, so what exactly does Paul mean by it? **To be sanctified means to be holy as God is holy.** When you become a Christian, when you choose to make the Lord your shepherd instead of running to other people and things as your refuge, you are sanctified in three senses – past, present, and future.

First, you HAVE BEEN sanctified. If you're a Christian, God has brought you into the realm of the holy. He rescued you from sin and death through the work of His Son, Jesus Christ, bringing you out of the kingdom of Satan and into the Kingdom of God. Through Jesus, you have been forgiven, cleansed, and set apart for God's priorities and purposes. Hebrews 10:10, "And by that will we have been sanctified through the offering of the body of Jesus Christ once for all."

Second, you ARE BEING sanctified. Through the power of the Holy Spirit, God, right now, is at work in your life transforming you from one degree of glory to another, progressively changing you into the image of His Son. Hebrews 10:14, "For by a single offering he has perfected for all time those who are being sanctified." Or as Paul said to the Romans in Romans 6:22, "But now that you have been set free from sin and have become slaves of God, the fruit you get leads to sanctification and its end, eternal life."

Third, you WILL BE sanctified. When Jesus returns, He will finish the sanctifying work He began. The image of God in you will be fully restored. You will be, in act, attitude, and nature holy as He is holy, free from sin and unable to ever sin again. The judicial gift of righteousness Christ has already given you - the gift by which you are loved, welcomed, and accepted by the Father, will come to experiential fruition in your life. 1 John 3:2, "Beloved, we are God's children now, and what we will be has not yet appeared; but we know that when he appears we shall be like him, because we shall see him as he is."

When Paul says in 1 Thessalonians 5:23, "Now may the God of peace sanctify you," he's primarily talking about the **PRESENT** aspect of our sanctification, the progressive work God is doing in the life of every Christian right now to make us more like Jesus. And in verse 23, he makes three assertions about that process.

First, God's sanctifying work is personal. Did you catch the reflexive emphasis in verse 23? "May the God of peace *himself* sanctify you completely..." Making you more like Jesus is not something God has delegated. Nor is it something he has merely ordained. He's actually doing the work. Think about that. The God who created the universe, the One before whom nations and kings are as dust on the scales, the One who died on the cross so He could make an end of evil without making an end of you and me, is personally working in your life, doing in you and for you what you cannot do in or for yourself. He's making you more like Jesus.

Too often we buy into this idea as Christians that God gives us power to change, but it's ultimately our work. Do we have a role to play? Absolutely. We'll talk more about that in a few minutes. But let's rid ourselves of the arrogant joy-sapping notion that God is merely the spiritual supply wagon, handing out ammo, armor, and maps, and then watching from the sideline to see if we'll manage to do what we're supposed to do. It's simply not true.

On your good days, on your bad days, when you're aware of it, and even when you're not, King Jesus never stops working in you. You're His body. You're His bride. You're His chosen treasure. You're not chilling on some kind of spiritual assembly line run by angelic automatons. He's the Potter and you're the clay. Our sanctification is a work of God because it's something He's personally doing.

Second, God's sanctifying work is holistic. Verse 23, "May the God of peace sanctify you completely..." Then just to make sure didn't miss the point, what does Paul do? He drills down on that word (completely) with a parallel statement, "And may your whole spirit and soul and body be kept blameless..."

The point of piling up those three words (spirit, soul, and body) isn't to make us speculate about the difference between our spirit and our soul. Paul's point is that every conceivable aspect of who you are is part and parcel of the extensive work God is doing to sanctify you. In other words, God's sanctifying work isn't like visiting a spiritual concierge desk. I'd like to become more kind and loving to my wife, but I'd also like to stay in charge of the entertainment I watch or the substances I use.

To the contrary, if you're a Christian, Jesus purchased every part of you, including your physical body, at the cost of His own blood. Having redeemed all of you, He is fiercely committed to sanctifying all of you. Don't try to limit his work. Submit to His work. Why? Because it's the only way you'll experience true peace.

When Paul says, "May the God of peace sanctify you completely," He reminds us that God already enjoys the greatest possible sense of well-being and provides the same for His people by conforming us into His image. The path of peace is the path of sanctification. The path of peace is the path of godliness. There are not multiple paths to peace. There's one and only one. If you want to experience true peace, you must become more like Jesus. Why? Because that's exactly what we were created to be! Sanctification isn't just right. It's good. It's beautiful, because it's the key to experiencing the joy of enduring peace.

Third, God's sanctifying work is necessary. "May your whole spirit and soul and body be kept blameless at the coming of our Lord Jesus Christ." What's going to happen when Jesus returns? He will judge the world in righteousness. John 5:28–29, "...For an hour is coming when all who are in the tombs will hear his voice and come out, those who have done good to the resurrection of life, and those who have done evil to the resurrection of judgment."

Your sanctification could not be more important, friend, for unless you are sanctified you will not be saved. That doesn't mean we earn eternal life through our good works. Eternal life (and deliverance from the judgment we deserve!) is a gift God solely grants us as the reward of faith, of our trust in what Jesus has done to make us right with God. Yet genuine faith, without fail, authenticates itself through a life of good works. Thus Hebrews 12:14 warns us, "Strive...for the holiness without which no one will see the Lord."

Friend, unless you have surrendered every area of your life to the sanctifying work of Jesus Christ before you die, you will be condemned before the one assize that matters most. You desperately need to be "kept blameless," preserved and protected on the path of obedient submission to God, so you are ready when Jesus returns. And if, as you hear me say those words, your look within and perceive the paltry insufficiency of your own willpower and recognize you are perpetually prone to wander, you need to know two things.

One, you're not alone. The acute inability you feel within your own heart is shared by every man and woman in this room, whether they know it or not. Two, the Lord has good news for you and all of us as brothers and sisters in Christ. Look at verse 24, "He who calls you is faithful; he will surely do it." Our sanctification is a work of God.

2) GOD COMPLETES THE SANCTIFYING WORK THAT HE BEGINS (verse 24)

Imagine if Paul had stopped with verse 23. "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." We could easily conclude God's sanctifying work is merely a spiritual wish, a hopeful sentiment on Paul's part for the Thessalonians, kind of like a hallmark greeting card. Nice thought, Paul, but clearly not a guarantee that any of it will come to pass.

Then we might look at ourselves and see all our continued spiritual struggles. We might look at our brothers and sisters in Christ and see all the ways they're struggling, and easily conclude - "There's no way. It's just not possible. I've sinned one too many times. They've been stuck in the same pattern of rebellion for too long." I can't see anything good about the trajectory of my life or theirs," at which point many Christians give up. I spoke with someone recently who shared how hard it was for them to even want to resist the temptation of pornography. "It's no use," they said. "I know I'll eventually give in, so why even bother fighting?"

Sometimes we give up. However, many times we do the exact opposite, especially when another Christian we deeply love isn't changing the way we want them to change. So we declare war and begin a subtle (or not-so-subtle) spiritual pressure campaign. "You know, you really should read your Bible more. When was the last time you prayed? If you really want to change, why don't you go up for prayer at the end of the service this Sunday? Hey, I heard this really good John Piper sermon the other day. I sent you the link so you can listen to it on your way home from work."

Is it wrong to admonish the idle, encourage the fainthearted, and help the weak? Absolutely not. Read 1 Thessalonians 5:14. But there is a world of difference between doing all of those things with your hope set in their ability to change themselves or your ability to change them and doing all those things with your hope set in the Living God who is the Savior of all men, especially those who believe.

Even with the best intentions, we can leave those we love the most feeling like they it's all up to them. We're so busy "suggesting" (or demanding) they grow and reminding them how long we've been waiting for them to grow that we fail to communicate the slightest bit of confidence that God is at work in their life. Or if we do, it's merely an afterthought, a thin slice of consolation on top a massive pile of demoralizing criticism.

In either situation, friends, whether we're despairing of our own lack of sanctification or someone else's, what do we need? *We need an abiding confidence in the faithfulness of God.* Verse 24, "He who call you is (what?) **faithful. He will surely do it.** The saving and sanctifying call of God doesn't just exist, friends. It is effectual. It brings to pass and accomplishes the very work it summons us to embrace.

Being sanctified completely and kept blameless at the coming of our Lord Jesus Christ isn't what Paul hopes will happen in the Thessalonians or could happen in

the Thessalonians if they get with the spiritual program. It's what he was utterly convinced would happen to the Thessalonians and will happen to every believer because God will make sure that it happens. Why? Because it's His work! And God always completes the work he begins. Even when we don't see how it could possibly happen, God will surely do it.

That's not just what we need to hear, friends. That's what we need to relentlessly declare to one another over and over again. Don't assume the believer you're talking to remembers that, even if they're in a position of spiritual leadership.

Examine your heart and be honest. What are your expectations for the future of your spiritual life or those you love built on? What defines them, sustains them, fuels them, and preserves them? Is it your power, their power, or God's? Is it your faithfulness, their faithfulness, or God's? It is what you or they have resolved to do or what God has promised to do? Confidence in yourself or other people will always disappoint you. Confidence in God will never disappoint you. Why not? Because He's faithful. He always does what He says He will do.

Abiding confidence in the faithfulness of God to sanctify his people will enable you to **practice patience and joy** on the front end as you **wait** for spiritual growth and change to happen. "Lord, no matter how long this takes, I believe you when you say you will complete the work that you began. I trust you to do it. Help me remember it's ultimately your job, not my job, not their job, and not the church's job. Do what only you can do and make me and those I love more like Jesus."

Abiding confidence in the faithfulness of God to sanctify his people will also enable you to **practice humility and gratitude** on the back when as you **watch** the Lord bring spiritual growth and change to pass. "Father, I give you all the praise, all the credit, all the glory for the good things that are happening in my heart or in their life. Thank you for doing what only you can do. Thank you for giving me a glimpse of your faithfulness amidst all the brokenness inside me and around me."

Gordon Fee, "For the Thessalonians this is the needed reminder that neither their 'sanctification' nor their being 'preserved blameless' ...is dependent on their own personal struggling for it, but on their trusting the God who has already called them to himself, and who will thus bring to pass in their lives what God has begun. In the end everything depends on the single reality that God is faithful."

Do you believe that, friend? Not just for yourself, for every other Christian you know, especially the ones that are hard for you to love or are not changing the way you want them to change. Sanctification is a work of God and, praise the Lord!, God completes the sanctifying work that he begins – guaranteed.

3) GOD USES OUR EFFORTS TO ACCOMPLISH HIS WORK (verses 25-27)

Paul does something a bit surprising after the climactic declaration of God's faithfulness in verse 24. He immediately launches into another list of things the Thessalonians must do. At first glance, it almost seems like a contradiction. God will surely sanctify you completely. Now here's what you need to do. Hold on a second. Which one is it? Does God do the work or do we?

God is faithful to do the work, brothers and sisters. He is ultimately the one who changes us, and He uses various means to accomplish his supernatural work, including his Word, suffering, community, and the choices we make. None of those exists outside his sovereign work. They are all expressions of this sovereign work, which is why the instructions in verses 25-27 follow immediately on the heels of the promise in verse 24. In abbreviated form, Paul flags three means of sanctification the Thessalonians need to embrace, three means by which God accomplishes his sanctifying work in our lives.

First, he flags the means of prayer. Verse 25, "Brothers, pray for us." It's a striking example of humility. Paul's asking them to pray for Him even though He's the apostle of the Risen Christ who led them to faith in Christ. It's also Paul's way of helping the Thessalonians understand that God will accomplish the sanctifying work He has promised to do in Paul's life through their prayers. Talk about an encouragement to pray! Whenever we intercede on behalf of a brother or sister, asking the Lord to sanctify them, we're participating in the work of God Himself, a work He has sovereignly willed to accomplish through our prayers.

Second, he flags the means of community. Verse 26, "Greet all the brothers with a holy kiss." In the ancient world, a kiss was not strictly an expression of romantic affection like it is many western cultures today. It was more akin to what a kiss expresses in Hispanic or Latin American culture, a communication of love, respect, and friendship. What's the underlying principle? That God will be faithful to accomplish his sanctifying work through our tangible demonstration of love and care for one another as members of the family of God.

Third, he flags the means of scripture. Verse 27, “I put you under oath before the Lord to have this letter read to all the brothers.” Did Paul say that because a church council had yet to decide whether 1 Thessalonians was actually the inspired Word of God and therefore Paul had to do his best in the interim to convince people his letters were important? No. Paul wrote with a self-conscious awareness that God was using him as an apostolic eyewitness of Christ to deliver God’s inerrant word to his people. He knew that as the Thessalonians meditated on the Word God spoke through him, the Lord would accomplish his sanctifying work in their lives. His Word has the exact same effect in our lives today.

We are no different than Paul and the Thessalonians, friends. We need the means of prayer, community, and Scripture in order to be sanctified. We don’t embrace those gifts because they are our contribution to the work of sanctification, as if God’s the majority stakeholder but we still own 2% of the company. No, we embrace those gifts because through them God does what only God can do! He sanctifies us completely.

CONCLUSION

The parting greeting in verse 28 couldn’t be more different than the ancient custom. Many letters in Paul’s day ended with the simple injunction, “Be strong.” It was their way of saying “goodbye.” Paul seizes the opportunity to do something very different. “The grace of our Lord Jesus Christ be with you.”

Every good thing we have, every good thing we will ever receive, every way we become a little bit more like Jesus and the believers around us follow suit is an undeserved gift from God. It’s grace. We don’t deserve for God to be faithful to us. We struggle to remain faithful to Him. So we praise Him for His grace, because even when we are unfaithful, He remains faithful.

We need to remember the bookends, friends. There’s a reason Paul ends these chapters where He begins – by recounting the sanctifying work of God and directing our hearts to hope in his faithfulness. The faithfulness of God guarantees the completion of His sanctifying work in our lives. That’s our confidence for the present and the future. Does God use means? Yes. But it’s ultimately his work, not ours. Let’s pray and ask for help to trust His faithfulness.