



The Reverend Dr. David V. Silvernail, Jr.
1 Thessalonians 5:23-28

July 19, 2009
English Standard Version

“Faithfulness That’s Reliable”

This is the 10th sermon in the series on 1 & 2 Thessalonians entitled,
“Life for the Long Haul.”

1 Thessalonians 5:23-28

“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.”

Heavenly Father, we have come to Your Word again this morning and we find that we still need to learn a lot about what it means to be made holy. We don’t understand how someone as sinful as we are could ever be made to be like Jesus. It seems far too difficult. So Lord, once again open our eyes and ears to truly hear and understand and apply this Word to our lives. Use it to sanctify us. Do this for each of us, this morning, in His name, and for His glory, Amen.

INTRODUCTION: *Get My Underwear Off Of Your Head!* ¹

Perry Noble is the Pastor of NewSpring Church in Anderson, South Carolina and he writes a really insightful blog which I’ve come to appreciate. And this week he wrote the following about learning about God from the strange behavior of his daughter, who is a toddler.

¹ The Introduction is adapted from the weblog by Perry Noble, NewSpring Church, Anderson, SC, 7/16/09, www.PerryNoble.com

He writes ...

“On Sunday I came home, changed clothes, put a load of clothes in the wash and then went into the kitchen to get some food ready ... About a minute later Charisse [his toddler daughter] came into the room with a pair of my underwear over her head.

NOW...let’s stop here for just a second and admit – underwear, no matter how they are designed, are GROSS!!! There is just no way around it ... So ... I told her, “Charisse, can you please take daddy’s underwear off of your head and go put them in the dirty clothes?”

She left the kitchen ... but about a minute later walked back in with my underwear STILL ON HER HEAD! (And I think she was singing!)

This caused me to act with a little more urgency ... I know she thought what she was doing was cute ... but it had already caused me to throw up in my mouth just a little ... and I wanted her to STOP IT...

SO ... I once again expressed my desire for her to “repent” of “underwear head” and do what I had told her ... to which she, once again, walked out of the room as if she intended on doing what I had commanded.

BUT ... instead of obeying me she walked into the living room and began to dance ... WITH MY UNDERWEAR STILL ON HER HEAD!

I began walking towards her...and my voice became just a touch more elevated ... She finally got the point and took my drawers off of her noggin. I told her to put them away ... and though she wasn’t fond of the idea ... she obeyed!

I’ve thought about this episode a lot this week and have concluded the following ...

#1 - Many times what we see as “fun” and “harmless” our heavenly Father sees as something far worse!

#2 - Just like I didn’t want Charisse to stay in a really nasty situation ... our heavenly Father wants for us to repent of sin because He knows the destruction it will eventually bring.

#3 - Just like Charisse; many times we delay obedience because of our perceived enjoyment and our misguided thoughts that God is actually out to ruin our lives.

#4 - The sooner we obey God the sooner we are able to escape what has us blinded!

#5 - The voice of the Father and not our own voice, is the one we should be obsessed with!

#6 - His kindness and love, not His anger and hatred, is the reason He wants the junk out of our lives!

Just some thoughts that God is using my daughter to teach me!”

Now what does this funny story have to do with today’s passage from the end of 1 Thessalonians 5? Quite a bit, actually ... because this passage is about Sanctification, which is the process of increasing holiness in our lives. Last week Rich mentioned that in the ten verses prior to these, there were something like 19 different commands. Now, I think for a lot of us, when we see those lists of commands, they can be a little discouraging, because we quickly realize ... **we’re not keeping them** nearly as well as we should be. Sadly, I also think that’s a pretty common reaction when we read verses like **1 Thessalonians 5:15-18**, “*See that no one repays anyone evil for evil, but **always** seek to do good to one another and to everyone. ¹⁶ Rejoice **always**, ¹⁷ pray **without ceasing**, ¹⁸ give thanks in **all** circumstances; for this is the will of God in Christ Jesus for you.*”

And you read that, and you think ... yeah, I know that's good stuff, and I know that's what God wants, and I try to do that, but to tell the truth, there's lots of times when I **don't** seek to do good, when I **don't** rejoice always, when I **don't** pray constantly, when I **don't** give thanks ... and it kind of feels like I'm walking around with **dirty underwear** on my head ... and worse yet, it doesn't bother me a whole lot ... because I've gotten so used to it ... and you and I can wind up feeling like some sort of "**Loser Christians**."

And **that's not the intent of Paul's letter**. He doesn't want us to either feel or act like "Loser Christians," and so he wants to let us know that our sanctification doesn't totally depend on us. There's another player in the sanctification process ... and that's God Himself, working in us, through His Spirit, to make us more and more like His Son Jesus.

And so Paul starts by telling us that he is ...

v. 23-24: PRAYING FOR OUR SANCTIFICATION ²

"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."

Immediately we are confronted with this word that is uncommon to our normal vocabulary. It is the word "**sanctify**". The word means, "*to be set apart*". It is a word that comes from the word holy. When something was "sanctified" it was devoted to God's service.

Here Paul is praying for God to make us like those who are "set apart". If you will, he's praying that God would help us to be more **like Jesus**. In theological terms this process of becoming "*set apart*" for God is called **sanctification**. It is what Paul may have been thinking about when he wrote **Romans 8:29** which says, "*For those God foreknew He also predestined to be conformed to the likeness of His Son, that He might be the firstborn among many brothers.*" It is easy to get hung up on that word "**predestined**" and miss what it is that God has predestined us to be. He desires that we "**be conformed to the likeness of His Son**" and to be a part of God's family.

So, here's the question: How does this happen?

I see at least two principles from these verses on what it means to grow up to be like Jesus. And the first principle is that we should ...

- **Honor Christ Fully in All We Do and Are** ³

Paul wants us to be "**set apart**" through and through. He wants us to belong to God in our spirit, soul and body. Some people have made a big deal out of the fact that Paul here talks about the "**spirit, soul, and body**." They believe this tells us that there are really three parts to man. However, if you search the Scriptures this is the only time in the Bible where these three words are used.

Jesus tells us in **Mark 12:30**, "*Love the Lord your God with all your heart and with all your soul and with all your mind and with all your strength.*"

In most cases the Bible talks about "body" and "soul" or "flesh" and "spirit." Don't read too much into Paul's words that you miss his point. His point is that a person is becoming like Jesus when they honor Christ in every part of life.

This is important for a couple of reasons.

² The Exposition of the text is adapted from *The Gospel & The End of Time: The Message of 1 & 2 Thessalonians* by Dr. John R. W. Stott, pages 132-135; the sermon "Growing Up to Be Like Jesus" by Rev. Bruce Goettsche, Union Church of LaHarpe, IL, 8/13/06.

³ C.S. Lewis quote comes from his book *The Joyful Christian*, page 77.

First, it counters the tendency to compartmentalize faith.

In other words, we're Christian when we're at church and we are godless when we are at work. We're Christian when we're with one group of people and non-Christian with another group of people. I hope this sounds ridiculous to you. Unfortunately, people are increasingly seeing no incongruity to such actions. They say, "faith is faith" and "fun is fun." The Bible consistently points to the fact that if Jesus is not Lord **OF** all, He is not Lord **AT** all.

Second, it contradicts the notion that salvation is a one-time affair.

On occasion we seem to give the impression that the Christian faith involves saying a prayer, performing some act, or having some experience. When in reality trusting Christ is about having a whole new orientation and passion for life. It's an ongoing and continual process. Faith is not simply an agreement we make with God — "You died for me, I receive that provision". Saving faith is entering into a relationship with God.

In his book, *The Joyful Christian*, C.S. Lewis writes, "When I was a child, I often had a toothache, and I knew that if I went to my mother, she would give me something which would deaden the pain for that night and let me get to sleep. But I did not go to my mother--at least not till the pain became very bad. And the reason I did not go was this: I did not doubt she would give me the aspirin; but I knew she would also do something else. I knew she would take me to the dentist the next morning. I could not get what I wanted out of her without getting something more, which I did not want. I wanted immediate relief from my pain; but I could not get it without having my teeth set permanently right. And I knew those dentists; I knew they would start fiddling about with all sorts of other teeth which had not yet begun to ache."

Our Lord is like the dentists. Dozens of people go to Him to be cured of some particular problem. He will cure the problem, but he will not stop there. God is not content to simply remove the pain, He wants to deal with the true problem — your heart.

The Bible talks about our holiness (or sanctification) in three different senses. First, there is **Positional Sanctification**.

Hebrews 10:10 tells us, "*And by that will we have been sanctified through the offering of the body of Jesus Christ once for all.*"

It speaks of holiness in the past tense. In this dimension of our sanctification, when Christ's sacrifice was applied to our lives, God declared us holy. It was like a Judge declaring us "Not Guilty." The issue is settled. The debt is paid. Perhaps another way of looking at it is ... You injury your knee badly. Perhaps it needs surgery. You talk to the surgeon after the operation and you are told, "Everything went well. The damage is repaired." In this sense you are already healed.

Second, there is **Perfect (or future) Sanctification**.

The Bible also talks about a day when we *will be* made perfect. When we die we will be freed from the sinful nature. Our desires will be adjusted. Our struggles will be conquered. Our hearts will be pure. Most of us will admit that we haven't arrived at this point being perfectly holy yet. To go back to the surgical illustration, after the surgery you were healed, the injury was repaired, but you still couldn't walk. Your leg was still swollen and hurt. You looked forward to the day (sometime in the future) when you would once again be able to walk and run without pain or limitation. This would be the total healing.

And Third, there is **Practical sanctification**.

This is what takes place in between these two times. In **Philippians 2:12** Paul writes, "*Therefore, my beloved, as you have always obeyed, so now, not only as in my presence but much more in my absence, **work out your own salvation** with fear and trembling.*"

In other words, we are to apply our salvation in our daily living. This is what Paul has been urging throughout all these commands in 1 Thessalonians 5. He wants us to apply our salvation.

Let's go back to the surgery illustration; this practical sanctification would be the equivalent of Physical Therapy. There is discipline, there is exercise and there are skills you need to re-learn.

We **have been** sanctified, we **will be** sanctified, and we **are being** sanctified. All are true at the same time. We should be seeking all three.

The first principle is that we should honor Christ fully. The second principle we get from these verses is to ...

- **Put Our Confidence and Trust in God and not Ourselves** ⁴

If you're like me, you look at your life and you may feel like Paul in Romans 7, where he says, **Romans 7:15, 19**, "*For I do not understand my own actions. For I do not do what I want, but I do the very thing I hate. ...* ¹⁹ *For I do not do the good I want, but the evil I do not want is what I keep on doing.*"

I look at myself in the mirror and I see that I'm a long way from being holy. I get angry over petty things. I get frustrated and take it out on others. My mind wanders to places I wish it wouldn't go. My appetites and desires seem to control me sometimes. Like the person with the injured leg, I sometimes wonder if it is true that I have been made right with God. Am I really healed of my sinful past?

Notice again the words of Paul, "*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.*"

We aren't in this alone. God doesn't expect us to achieve this holiness in our own strength. We don't have the needed strength to become holy in ourselves. God is the One who will sanctify us. He is the one who will "keep us" (the picture is of something that is put under guard). He is committed to our growth and development. God has given us His Holy Spirit (to act somewhat like the Physical Therapist). The Spirit prays for us in groans too deep for words. He guides us, equips us with various spiritual gifts, He comforts us and He is working to develop Christlike character in us.

Like a good coach He's guiding our development; The Lord is giving us direction and instruction. Our job is **to learn to trust the wisdom of God** much like we would trust the wisdom of the coach or the Physical Therapist (even though he or she seems like a masochist bent on our destruction). God's not concerned so much about our mimicking certain behaviors as He is about us deepening our relationship *with* Him and deepening our dependence *on* Him.

Paul says the decisive thing in verse 24, "*He who calls you is faithful; He will surely do it.*" Right thinking says: God's faithfulness combined with God's call proves He will do it! "*He who calls you is faithful; He will surely do it.*" What's the **IT**? The "it" is what Paul's been commanding and what he's been praying for, namely, **sanctification**. God will do it.

So my conclusion is that 1 Thessalonians 5:23–24 really does teach that God is the one who sanctifies **NOW**. He does it through commandments and incentives that appeal to our minds and our motives. He does it through prayer. But however He does it, and however slowly it comes, and however imperfect we feel, the main thing is that **God does it**, and we have the

⁴ A small part of this section is adapted from the sermon "God Sanctifies His People" by Dr. John Piper, Bethlehem Baptist Church, Minneapolis, MN, April 12, 1992, desiringGod.org

promise that “*He will surely do it.*” That is the ground of our assurance. “*He who calls you is faithful; He will surely do it.*” Assurance does not come from making holiness optional. It comes from knowing God is faithful.

So Paul starts out by praying for our sanctification. But having prayed for us, he turns the tables by ...

v. 25-27: ASKING FOR US TO PRAY (AND DO).

“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.”

As Paul, the great theologian and Pastor closes his letter he makes several final requests. And first and foremost, he asks for prayer. He tells the church to greet each other warmly, as mid-easterners often do with a kiss (the equivalent in our culture of shaking hands or giving hugs). It was common in Paul’s culture, as in many cultures today, to **greet** friends with a kiss on the cheek. The men greeted other men this way, and the women did the same with other women. Such a kiss communicated personal affection, not romantic love. By urging this practice Paul was encouraging an outward physical expression of true Christian love in a form that was culturally acceptable in his day. The kiss was to be **holy**, not passionate.

There are ways we can encourage each other with a touch that are not inappropriate. Yes, you have to be careful. Yes, you have to be trusted by the other person. Yes, you can touch people so that they’re encouraged and not offended. The reality is ... there’s a lot of people in our world today who are dying for a hug. There is this sense of Christian affection that Paul wants us to develop. He says, “*Greet all the brothers with a holy kiss.*”

Then he tells them to make sure everyone hears what Paul has written. Many people couldn’t read, so reading his letter aloud was the only way everyone in the congregation could learn from it.

However, it’s the first request that’s key ... “*Pray for us.*” Paul understood that life is difficult. We are under assault from our internal nature, from the enemies of the gospel, and from the Devil himself. Jesus understood the power and importance of prayer. In the gospels we read of Jesus spending an entire night in prayer. Prayer is our lifeline to the Father.

If we’re going to grow to be like Jesus ...

- **First, we must pray.**

Prayer is like communication in marriage, you can’t grow in Christlikeness if you don’t spend time in prayer. Just like you can’t grow in a relationship, any relationship, if you don’t communicate with each other. Prayer puts us in touch with the heart of God. It helps to renew our focus. It opens our hearts to the work of God’s Spirit.

We need to understand the truth of what Jesus said in **John 15:5**, “*I am the vine; you are the branches. Whoever abides in Me and I in him, he it is that bears much fruit, for apart from Me you can do nothing.*”

“Apart from Me, you can do nothing.”

Our strength is not found in our programs, our talents, our persuasive words, our graphics, our vision statements or our organizational pyramid. Our strength is in the Lord.

We can make slick presentations; only God can change hearts.

We can make strong arguments; only God can generate faith.

We can work hard; only God can bring fruit from that labor.

We can build great buildings; only God can empower ministry.

We can develop insightful theories; only God is truth.

Apart from the Lord, we are like a car without an engine. We can look good on the outside but we are powerless on the inside. We must pray.

- **Second, we must seek prayer.**

Paul, the great apostle never passed up an opportunity to ask others to pray for him. When we ask for prayer we are asking people to help support us because we know our weakness. When we seek prayer we are becoming more accountable to those around us. I think one of the reasons we don't ask for prayer is because we don't want to admit weakness. We don't want to admit that we can't do this on our own. When we hide our needs we soon end up pretending in every area of life.

- **Third, we must pray for others.**

There is not a single person in this room that doesn't need your prayers. Just as you need the prayers of those around you, so they need your prayers. It's important that we pray for those in a crisis. God's strength can see people through horrible times. God's ability to heal exceeds that of the doctors.

However, we also need to pray for each other before the crisis hits. We need to pray that God would shield us from evil, that He will help us resist temptation, that He will develop within us an appetite for His glory. We need to pray for each other, "*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. He who calls you is faithful; He will surely do it.*"

Make a note of the people sitting around you today. Write their names down and then make it a point to pray for these people this week. If you don't know their names, write down a description, (Lady in the blue dress, Man who fell asleep etc. God knows who you mean). You may not know what their needs are but God does. Pray the prayer that Paul prayed for the Thessalonians on their behalf. Ask God to help them be set apart for His service.

And finally, after praying for us, and asking us to pray, the Apostle ...

v. 28: BLESSES US WITH GRACE

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

A concluding reference to grace was almost Paul's signature, so central was it to his whole theology. He had begun the letter by wishing them grace; he now ends it in the same way. It's no empty, conventional formula, however; for grace is the heart of the gospel, indeed the heart of God.

If a local church is to become a gospel church, it must not only receive the gospel and pass it on, but also embody it in a community life of love and prayer. Nothing but the grace of Christ can accomplish this.

Now I was wondering what all of this might look like ... and lo and behold, that day I received a prayer letter from some of my favorite missionaries, Wallace and Barbara Pouncy. And now I think I know a little bit better what all of this is supposed to look like.

CONCLUSION: *The Ministry of Tomatoes and Bread*⁵

Wallace and Barbara Pouncy served as missionaries in South America for many years. Due to age and health issues, they accepted an assignment a few years ago to serve retired missionaries at the New Tribes Mission Homes in Florida, some of whom are probably younger than they are. And this week I received their latest prayer letter. And as I read it, I thought it

⁵ The conclusion is adapted from the email newsletter of Wallace and Barbara Pouncy, missionaries to the New Tribes Mission Homes in Sanford, FL, 7/8/09.

was a great illustration of what verses 23 and 24 actually look like in real life.

Wallace writes ...

“We love being able to minister as your missionaries here at NTM Homes. Each new day presents us with opportunities to be a blessing to God's retired saints that have given so many years serving Him and now need to be served.

We try to do things above and beyond our required job descriptions. This summer, I planted 18 tomato plants to be able to provide fresh home grown tomatoes to our retirees. Many are on fixed incomes and to pay almost \$2.00 a pound for tomatoes is more than some can afford. God blest these 18 plants beyond belief! We had loads to share. Some we put out so anyone could get some. Others, I would put on front porches of others that I knew really needed them. It has been a lot of work but it sure has been worth it. One resident told me that she and her husband never bought tomatoes because they cost too much. For them to find 6 huge tomatoes on their door step was indeed a blessing from God.

Speaking about needs, I was doing a maintenance job in one widow's duplex. Her husband had recently passed away. As I was working, I asked how she was doing financially. (I am on the deacon's board here and part of our ministry is keeping tabs on needs with our folks.) She related this story to me, “Back when my husband was nearing the end, things were kind of tough for me financially. Then you guys shared \$300 with me to help with whatever I needed. At that time, all our funds were being taken for my husband and I was eating the bread from the Bread Room. But praise the Lord; I never went without eating ... even if it was just bread. He is faithful ... always has been and always will be!”

I thought of **Proverbs 30:8**, “*Keep falsehood and lies far from me, give me neither poverty or riches, but give me only my daily bread.*” (NIV) Here was a retired missionary woman who gave years of loyal service to the Lord. Even though she was just eating just bread, she never complained yet remained loyal and is still faithful today to her Lord. She just views it as a time to be drawn closer to the Lord. There are more stories like this one that make it a joy for us to serve here. Thank you for your support that makes this possible. We love each of you dearly and pray for you. Until next time, Wallace for Barbara.”

I think in some small way ...that's what sanctification looks like.
And that's how we're supposed to be living.
Think about that. You need to pray.

Take a moment to do that, and then I'll close.

Heavenly Father, we thank You for the church in Thessalonica. Thank You for their faithfulness in the face of affliction. And thank You for their faithfulness to pursue holiness. Thank You that they received and accepted the Word of God and so they prayed for each other and they loved each other. May we do the same. We ask that You would do this within us ... in the Name of Your Son, who lives and reigns with You and the Holy Spirit, One God, now and forever. Amen.

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Philippians 2:12-13

Therefore, my beloved, as you have always obeyed, so now, not only as in my presence but much more in my absence, work out your own salvation with fear and trembling, for it is God who works in you, both to will and to work for His good pleasure.