

Message #11

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1 Thessalonians

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THE HEALTHY CHURCH

AND THE PURSUIT OF HOLINESS

1 THESSALONIANS 5:23-28

I.

In 1 Peter #1 vv. 15 & 16 (PROJECTOR ON--- 1 PETER 1:15-16) the Bible tells the followers of Jesus, "**...as he who called you is holy, you also be holy in all your conduct, since it is written, 'You shall be holy, for I am holy.'**" That is a pretty high standard, isn't it? We Christians are supposed to be like God in our behavior. Occasionally we may think that we are doing pretty well in our Christian life. But then we are brought up short by something that we find ourselves doing or saying. The experience of many of us is that as we grow as Christians, we grasp in a deeper way just how holy God is and how far short of holiness our behavior falls. So the command of God can be discouraging and frustrating.

This command cited for Christians to be holy like God is not unique to the Apostle Peter. Peter was citing the Old Testament law. In several places in Leviticus the people of God were commanded to be holy. For example (LEVITICUS 19:1-2), in Leviticus #19 vv. 1 & 2 we read, "**And the Lord spoke to Moses, saying, 'Speak to all the congregation of the people of Israel and say to them, You shall be holy, for I the Lord your God am holy.'**"

This need for holiness was also a concern of the Apostle Paul. (PROJECTOR OFF) In the Book of 1 Thessalonians, which we have been studying on Sunday mornings, in #4 v.3 you will notice that he says, "**For this is the will of God, your sanctification...**" Literally the term is "holiness."

What does it mean that we are supposed to be holy like God? How is a person supposed to accomplish that? It seems like an impossible task. Hopefully the passage before us this morning will answer these questions. Hopefully our study of it will also encourage us rather than discourage us in terms of our responsibility to be holy like God.

We have come to the last message in our series on 1 Thessalonians. I have in mind that next week we will move into 2 Thessalonians, which is even shorter than 1 Thessalonians. We have seen that the Apostle Paul had a short stay in the city of Thessalonica. (PROJECTOR ON--- THESSALONICA MAP 2) But the short stay had good results. A healthy church was established there. Paul calls it a model church. It

was not a perfect church, but the Christians were successful in demonstrating faith, love and hope. These are virtues which are essential to any healthy church.

We have seen how Paul understands that these virtues should be worked out in a healthy church. We have seen that it includes love that is to be reflected in respect for church leaders and meaningful relationships among Christians. It includes hope that is to be reflected in an eager anticipation of the return of Christ. It includes faith that is reflected in a dependence upon God to resist the temptations of sin. Today we shall see that a healthy church will be concerned about the development of holiness, and we will find out something about what that involves.

II.

So we learn from vv. 23 & 24 of #5 that THE HEALTHY CHURCH WILL PURSUE HOLINESS. (PROJECTOR ON-- II. THE HEALTHY CHURCH WILL...) Paul writes in these two verses, "**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.**"

The term "sanctify" is one of those religious words whose exact meaning is a bit foggy to many of us. Our English words related to "sanctify" are actually more confusing than the original Greek terms. So I let me tell you about the Greek words that lie behind our English term "sanctify."

(HAGIOS- ADJECTIVE...) The word for "holy" in Greek is *hagios*. This is an adjective. (HAGIOS- HAGIOI) The noun form that is used to describe people who are holy is *hagioi*. Literally this means "holy ones." But in English we use the noun "saints." The connection with "holy" is not as obvious as it is in Greek. (HAGIOS...HAGIOSMOS) The noun form used to describe the quality of being holy in Greek is *hagiasmos*. Literally it is "holiness." But our English translations of the Bible typically use the word "sanctification" instead. Again the connection with "holy" is not as obvious as it is in Greek. (HAGIOS...HAGIAZO) The verb form for "holy" in Greek is *hagiazō*, which literally means "to make holy." But the English word that our translations of the Bible typically use is "sanctify." In the original Greek the connection of all of these words is more obvious. But now you know that all of these English terms have to do with holiness.

The corresponding Hebrew word in the Old Testament, *qadosh*, means "to set apart." (PROJECTOR OFF) It was used of God to describe how He was different than man and than other supposed gods. The word then came to be used of things and places that were set apart for God's use. It was also used to describe people who were set apart for His use. These were priests. They were holy men.

Eventually the Hebrew word for "holy" came to be used of the characteristics of the God who was set apart from man and from false gods. God's people were then told to emulate these divine

characteristics. Thus God tells the Israelites, "**You shall be holy; for I am holy.**" Jewish followers of Jesus carried over this Old Testament understanding of holiness into the New Testament and into their use of the Greek family of words involving *hagios*, or "holy."

It is important also for us to understand that the term "sanctification, or "holiness," is used in different ways in Christian theology and in the New Testament. If we don't have that in mind, we will get confused. Sometimes holiness and sanctification are used to describe what happened to us in the past when we became Christians. Referring to the time in the past when his readers trusted in Christ as their Savior (PROJECTOR ON--- 1 CORINTHIANS 6:11), Paul writes in 1 Corinthians #6 v. 11, "**And such were some of you. But you were washed, you were SANCTIFIED, you were justified in the name of the Lord Jesus Christ and by the Spirit of our God.**"

At the moment that we trusted in Jesus we were sanctified, we were made holy, we were set apart to God. At that moment we became holy ones, or saints. In the Biblical sense saints are not in some elite category of super duper religious people. They are not people who have been canonized by the church, or who are deserving of special attention because of their religious character. In the Biblical sense every genuine Christian is a saint.

Thus it is that at the very beginning of Paul's First Letter to the Corinthians (1 CORINTHIANS 1:1) the apostle writes, "**Paul, called by the will of God to be an apostle of Christ Jesus, and our brother Sosthenes, (1 CORINTHIANS 1:2) To the church of God that is in Corinth, to those sanctified [made holy--- something that happened in the past] in Christ Jesus, called to be saints [holy ones] together will all those who in every place call upon the name of our Lord Jesus Christ, both their Lord and ours.**" Anyone who calls upon the Lord Jesus Christ with a trusting faith becomes a saint and is sanctified, set apart, in Christ Jesus. As you read through 1 Corinthians, you find out that these saints at Corinth had a lot of problems and sins and immaturity. They were not especially godly in their behavior. Yet in Paul's view, they were saints. They had been changed by the work of God in their lives.

Besides this past aspect of sanctification, or holiness, there is also a future aspect. In 1 John #3 v. 2 (1 JOHN 3:2) the Apostle John writes, "**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 Christ comes back, we Christians will be transformed. We will finally be set apart to God. Our character will be made like His. Our sin nature will be eradicated. We will be made holy. The term for sanctification, or holiness, does not appear in this verse. But the theological concept is here. In Christian theology we often refer to this as "future sanctification."

Besides past sanctification and future sanctification there is also an aspect of present sanctification. We Christians are now in the process of being made holy in our behavior and character. (2 CORINTHIANS 7:1) Paul writes in 2 Corinthians #7 v. 1, "**Since we have these promises, beloved, let us cleanse**

ourselves from every defilement of body and spirit, bringing holiness to completion in the fear of God." Notice that this present sanctification involves a cleansing from defilement.

If we look more closely at the context of our passage in 1 Thessalonians, we see that there is also this present sanctification described here. (PROJECTOR OFF) Back in v. 22 Paul spoke about abstaining from every form of evil. Then also turn back to #4. Notice in vv. 3 & 4 that Paul wrote, "**For this is the will of God, your sanctification: that you abstain from sexual immorality; that each one of you know how to control his own body in holiness and honor...**" Then down in v. 7 also in #4: "**For God has not called us for impurity, but in holiness.**"

Some of you know the name Charles Ryrie from the Ryrie Study Bible. He compares this sanctification process with its past, present and future aspects to a little girl coming out of a candy store with a lollipop. (PROJECTOR ON--- GIRL WITH LOLLIPOP) This little girl sees a friend coming down the street. To avoid having to share her acquisition with her friend, she licks the lollipop on each side. Now the lollipop is truly set apart for her. This is like past, or positional, sanctification. The little girl keeps on licking the lollipop, bringing more and more of it inside of her tummy. This is like present, or ongoing, sanctification. Then finally, as she comes to the last remnants of the lollipop on the stick, she consumes the last little bite, and it becomes totally her possession. Thus it is with future sanctification. (PROJECTOR OFF)

It is very important that we understand that this sanctification deal is something primarily that God does. We have a responsibility in the process. But it is ultimately God who is doing the setting apart of us to Himself. That is why Paul in our verses is praying that God will sanctify the Thessalonian Christians.

If this is something that God primarily does, what is our responsibility? The first responsibility is to make sure that we are truly Christians. Our foundational responsibility is to trust in Jesus Christ as our personal Savior. We have to admit our sin and our need for the Savior. We must recognize that Jesus was God and man and that He died on the cross to pay the penalty for our sins. We then must embrace Him, put our trust in Him.

In regard to our responsibility for the present, or ongoing, work of sanctification, we are to be obedient. In the verses just before our passage Paul tells Christians not to repay another with evil for evil, to rejoice always, to pray without ceasing, to always give thanks, to avoid quenching the Spirit, to stay away from evil. We will never do this perfectly. But we can claim forgiveness from a gracious God. We do all of this by faith in God, trusting Him to give us the power to do these things.

Last week I cited a story about Corrie ten Boom from her book *The Hiding Place*. (PROJECTOR ON--- THE HIDING PLACE) There is another story in that book that illustrates the connection between the human

responsibility and the divine role in sanctification. After the war and after her release from the concentration camp Corrie went to Germany to tell people about God's forgiveness. After one talk she spotted a man who had been one of the guards in Ravensbruck who had watched the women prisoners as they marched naked to the showers. She wrote:

"Now he was in front of me, hand thrust out: 'A fine message, Fraulein! How good it is to know that, as you say, all our sins are at the bottom of the sea!'"

"And I, who had spoken so glibly of forgiveness, fumbled in my pocketbook rather than take that hand. He would not remember me, of course--- how could he remember one prisoner among those thousands of women?"

"But I remembered him and the leather crop swinging from his belt. I was face to face with one of my captors, and my blood seemed to freeze.

"'You mentioned Ravensbruck in your talk,' he was saying, 'I was a guard there.' No, he did not remember me.

"'But since that time,' he went on, 'I have become a Christian. I know that God has forgiven me for the cruel things I did there, but I would like to hear it from your lips as well. Fraulein,' and again the hand came out--- 'will you forgive me?'"

"And I stood there--- I whose sins had to be forgiven again and again--- and could not forgive. Even as the angry, vengeful thoughts boiled through me, I saw the sin of them. Jesus Christ had died for this man; was I going to ask for more? 'Lord Jesus,' I prayed, 'forgive me and help me to forgive him.'

"...And still I stood there with the coldness clutching my heart. But forgiveness is not an emotion--- I knew that too. Forgiveness is an act of the will, and the will can function regardless of the temperature of the heart. 'Jesus, help me!' I prayed silently. 'I can lift my hand. I can do that much. You supply the feeling.'

"And so woodenly, mechanically, I thrust my hand into the one stretched out to me. And as I did, an incredible thing took place. The current started in my shoulder, raced down my arm, sprang into our joined hands. And then this healing warmth seemed to flood my whole being, bringing tears to my eyes.

"I forgive you, brother!" I cried. 'With all my heart.'

"And so I discovered that it is not on our forgiveness anymore than on our goodness that the world's healing hinges, but on His. When He tells us to love our enemies, He gives, along with the command, the love itself.

"For a long moment we grasped each other's hands, the former guard and the former prisoner. I had never known God's love so intensely as I did then. But even so, I realized it was not my love. I had tried and did not have the power. It was the power of the Holy Spirit." --- And such it is with our sanctification. Our responsibility is to stick out the hand. It is God's work to supply the power and supernatural love.

His desire is to make us holy. (OSWALD CHAMBERS) Oswald Chambers was a British chaplain and Bible teacher in the early 1900s. He died as a young man. Many Christians have been positively impacted by his devotional book *My Utmost for His Highest*. In it he writes (OC QUOTATION), **"God has one destined end for mankind... holiness. His one aim is the production of saints. God is not an eternal blessing machine for men; He did not come to save men out of pity: He came to save men because He had created them to be holy."**

This sanctification program is individually structured. Some of us are enrolled in challenging courses: Unemployment 101, cancer 203, divorce 302, bankruptcy 405, widowhood 507. All of these courses are sovereignly designed to make us more holy. Our responsibility is to respond by doing the right thing, by trusting in the Lord to follow the instructions in our owner's manual. (PROJECTOR OFF)

Back in our text notice that it is "the God of peace" who does this sanctifying. Both the Greek and English words for "peace" suggest the idea of an absence of conflict. By training Paul was a Jewish rabbi. He was writing here in Greek, but I suspect that he had the Hebrew notion of "peace" in mind. *Shalom* is the Hebrew term. It means much more than the absence of conflict. *Shalom* refers to overall well-being and prosperity. Thus it is that the God of well-being is at work to sanctify us entirely. He wants us to be well, to be holy entirely.

Paul further explains the goal in v. 23 by adding, **"...may your whole spirit and soul and body be kept blameless..."** God wants our total being to be all that He created us to be. It is the process of sanctification that brings this to pass.

There is debate among theologians about the nature of us human beings. Some theologians here notice that Paul describes human beings as composed of three parts: spirit, soul and body. The body is the physical part of us humans. The soul is regarded as the totality of our personality and that part of us that involves self-consciousness. The spirit is that part of us which is capable of knowing and communicating with God.

Some theologians point to other verses in the Bible that assume that we humans are composed of body and spirit, or body and soul. They argue that man is really composed of only two parts. The theological terms that are used to describe these two viewpoints are dichotomy and trichotomy.

My own take on this is that the debate is often overdone. Human beings are complex creatures. We can be categorized and analyzed in different ways. We can understand and visualize the distinction between material and immaterial aspects of our being. But when we get into the immaterial side of the picture, it is more difficult to be too firm in our partitioning. Most importantly the Scripture writers seem to describe and categorize the immaterial part of our being in different ways. When Jesus was asked about the greatest commandment (PROJECTOR ON--- MARK 12:30), He responded by saying, "**And you shall love the Lord your God with all your heart and with all your soul and with all your mind and with all your strength.**" Someone could argue from His statement that we are really composed of four parts.

Paul further describes the goal of this sanctification process at the end of v. 23 by speaking about being "**kept blameless at the coming of our Lord Jesus Christ.**" (PROJECTOR OFF) "Blameless" means "to be without legitimate grounds for accusation."

Back in #3 v. 13 Paul used the same word. He said that he wanted the Thessalonian Christians to grow in love "**so that he may establish your hearts blameless in holiness before our God and Father, at the coming of our Lord Jesus with all his saints.**"

Earlier in #5 Paul talked about the return of Christ. In v. 6 he warned Christians, saying, "**...let us not sleep, as others do, but let us keep awake and be sober.**" The idea seems to be that Christians can choose to live, at least for a time, like unbelievers. They can have a carnal lifestyle. When Christ does come back, they will be taken to heaven. But they are not without blame. They miss out on something of the glory of the occasion.

In v. 24 of our passage Paul adds, "**He who calls you is faithful; he will surely do it.**" The stress is again upon God's work in sanctification. God provides the program and the power. At the very end He will conform the character of Christians to Christ. We will make it to heaven. In the meantime we have decisions to make about how cooperative we will be in the sanctification program that He has laid out for each of us as individuals.

Let me also note briefly that there are different understandings about the process of sanctification within Christendom. The Catholic Church has traditionally held that at baptism our past sins are forgiven. The Christian then achieves progress in sanctification by penance and good works. In the Book of Galatians, however, Paul stresses that just as our salvation is by grace through faith, so also is our growth as a Christian by grace through faith. It is not human effort and good works that produce sanctification.

John Wesley argued that love is the true measure of sanctification. He claimed that Christians can be delivered from willful sin and can fulfill God's law of love in this life. He spoke of the "optimism of grace." But is it possible to love the Lord our God with all of our heart and soul and mind and strength all of the time?

Some offshoots of the Wesleyan tradition like the Nazarenes and some Pentecostals claim that entire sanctification and even sinless perfection are possible in this earthly life. We can be successful in following and fulfilling God's law. The experience of most of us, however, suggests that we can't achieve perfect holiness on this side of heaven. This view of sanctification usually involves an emphasis on living by an external set of rules which do not get at the heart of sin. Most evangelicals recognize that sanctification involves a process with ups and downs where perfection will never be reached until we get to heaven.

The main thing that we need to understand is that God wants to make us holy. In order to develop that holiness he brings experiences into our lives that are not always fun and enjoyable. This sanctification process begins when we truly become Christians. At that point we are set apart to God. When we finish this earthly life, we will be completely set aside to God. In the meantime He is at work in making us more like Christ. Our responsibility is to obey Him and trust Him in the process, acknowledging our shortcomings when we become aware of them.

III.A.

We are reminded in vv. 25-28 that THE PURSUIT OF HOLINESS INCLUDES several items. (PROJECTOR ON-- III. THE PURSUIT OF HOLINESS...) In v. 25 Paul mentions PRAYER. (III. THE PURSUIT OF... A. PRAYER) Paul says, "**Brothers, pray for us.**" He is including female as well as male Christians in this.

Prayer is foundational to our sanctification. We need to keep in touch with God. Paul also regards prayer as essential to his ministry. This is the Apostle Paul who is requesting prayer for himself and his coworkers. On one hand we might think that someone who is so close to God, who is so greatly gifted and talented, who is being mightily used of God to bring the gospel to various places in the Roman Empire would not need prayer.

Also the people to whom he is writing are new Christians. Yet Paul recognizes that the prayers of all Christians, even new Christians, are essential to the work that he and his cohorts are doing.

Christian leaders need prayer. Pastors, elders, committee members, church musicians, missionaries need prayer. Charles Spurgeon (CHARLES SPURGEON) was only a young pastor when he took over leadership of New Park Street Chapel in London in the late 1800s. But his congregation quickly grew and he came to have a great evangelical impact upon England. He was once asked if there was any secret that he had for the success of his ministry. He replied simply, "**My people pray for me.**" He had a large group of prayer warriors who met in the basement of his church to pray for him before he preached. We preachers and pastors can always use prayer.

Praying in private is a Biblical thing to do. So is praying corporately. We are always glad to have people join us for prayer on Wednesday mornings at 7:30 in the library in the other building. We also pray before the church service on Sunday mornings at 8:15 in my office. All of you are welcome to join us at any time for these prayer opportunities.

B.

The pursuit of holiness includes LOVE OF THE BRETHREN. (III. B. LOVE OF THE BRETHREN) Verse 26 describes a manifestation of that. Paul writes, "**Greet all the brothers with a holy kiss.**" He includes within his greetings those whom he may have criticized in this letter. They, too, are part of the family of God. It is as if Paul is telling the recipients of the letter to say hello to everyone for him, or to give everybody a hug. He uses almost the same words in his final instructions to the Corinthians at the end of his first letter to them.

Early in the history of the church this greeting with kisses was made part of the communion service. (JUSTYN MARTYR QUOTATION) Church leader Justin Martyr wrote in the 200's, "**Having ended the prayers, we salute one another with a kiss.**" Given what we know about the culture of this time, it seems most likely that men and women limited their kissing to fellow Christians of the same gender.

In the 400's a document (APOSTOLIC CONST. QUOTA.) from the early church says, "**Salute one another with a holy kiss... ..the clergy salute the bishop, and the laymen the laymen, and the women the women.**" (*Apostolic Constitutions*, Book VIII) Some Christian traditions continue to practice this holy kiss, especially in regard to the communion service.

C.

The pursuit of holiness must also include ATTENTION TO GOD'S WORD. (III. C. ATTENTION TO GOD'S WORD) In v. 27 Paul writes, "**I put you under oath before the Lord to have this letter read to all the brothers.**" The apostle has a strong tone here. He recognized the importance of his message and the need that the Christians at Thessalonica had to hear it. He wanted to make sure that all of the Christians there heard it. Copy machines were in short supply back then, and not everyone could read. Probably Paul expected this to be read at a Sunday service.

D.

The pursuit of holiness also requires GRACE. (III. D. GRACE) Thus Paul concludes in v. 28, "**The grace of our Lord Jesus Christ be with you.**" In the first verse of this letter Paul said, "**Grace to you and peace.**" He begins and ends with grace.

In his earlier life Paul had been trained as a Pharisee and as a rabbi. So he was well versed in the Old Testament Law. This had been his guide and his foundation for living. On top of the Old Testament itself the Pharisees had added hundreds of specific rules to cover every aspect of daily living. Paul had been taught that sanctification, being holy like God, came from human effort to live according to religious rules.

Furthermore Paul had become a persecutor of Christians. He had been directly involved in arresting Jewish Christians and perhaps in condemning some of them to death. But on the way to Damascus with letters from the Jewish leaders in Jerusalem intended to help him to arrest Jewish Christians in that city, he had an encounter with the risen Christ. His life was transformed, and he was commissioned by Jesus Himself to bring the gospel to the Gentiles. Later he wrote (1 TIMOTHY 1:15) in 1 Timothy #1 v. 15, "**The saying is trustworthy and deserving of full acceptance, that Christ Jesus came into the world to save sinners, of whom I am the foremost.**" Paul had been a terrible sinner.

As a result of his transformation he became a teacher of grace. His life and ministry became focused upon proclaiming the grace of God. This grace was available even to Gentiles who would simply trust in Jesus as their Savior. It is that same grace which is available to us today. It is this grace which is essential to the sanctification process. (PROJECTOR OFF)

So it is that God calls us to be holy. He has made us holy by virtue of our trust in Christ. But He continues to work in us and on us to make us more holy in practice. He provides the spiritual resources to do that. He also brings along trials and opportunities and blessings to make us more like Jesus. The Lord wants us to cooperate in the process. In the end we can look forward to a graduation. The assurance of the Book

of 1 Thessalonians is that Jesus is coming back for us. The promise of 1 John #3 v. 2 (PROJECTOR ON--- 1 JOHN 3:2) is this: **"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."**