

“Pursuing God’s Work in Us”

1 Thessalonians 5:23-24

January 9, 2022

Greetings from Art

Prayer Retreat with Connor (thinking through joint phil of ministry together)

Scripture Reading: *1 Thessalonians 5:23-24*

The Christian life has been described as a race. The finish line, of course, is heaven where we reach our final destination in the immediate presence of Jesus and we are transformed into His likeness, forever free of sin. Until we reach the finish line, there is a lot of striving to be done, yet God gives us His strength to run the race with endurance. Sometimes we run with vigor.

Other times we run with wearied perseverance. Yet in every season God’s grace is sufficient for us to run. And so, Hebrews encourages us to throw off everything that encumbers us, and the sin which so easily entangles us, and run with endurance the race that is set before us, fixing our eyes on Jesus, the author and perfecter of our faith (Heb 12:1).

In a very real sense, Paul’s prayer for the Thessalonians is that God will give them the strength to run well to the finish line on the road of sanctification. Here’s the encouragement for us to glean from today’s passage: ***We can confidently pursue God’s call to a life of God-pleasing obedience, because God Himself is faithful to do His sanctifying work in us.***

The dominant theme in Paul’s prayer of blessing (1Thess 5:23-24) is *sanctification*. Technically, Paul is not teaching in these verses. He is praying. Yet, because His prayer arises out of robust theology, it is instructive for us. But before we take a deeper dive into vss. 23-24, let me remind you of the broader teaching of the NT on the doctrine of sanctification.

The word sanctify means to be “set apart,” or “made holy.” Something that is holy is set apart as pure, something not intended for common use but devoted to divine purposes. For example, the crystal goblets in the cupboard above our fridge are set apart for uncommon use. They are only used for special occasions. Our lives are sanctified in the sense that they are

set apart from common worldly use, for God’s purposes alone. Our lives belong to God and are to be lived for God, not for ourselves or the world.

When we take in the whole of the NT’s teaching on sanctification, we discover that there are 3 aspects to sanctification: past, present, future. So we can say that we have been sanctified (past), we are being sanctified (present), and we will be sanctified (future). Let me explain.

▪ **Positional sanctification** (past salvation): *“We have been sanctified”*

Sanctification begins positionally with salvation. When we are born again, we are *set apart* from the world as God’s children. We are transferred from the kingdom of darkness to the kingdom of God’s beloved Son (Col 1:1-3:14) and given the Holy Spirit to live God-pleasing lives. This is why Hebrews 10 says, “we have been sanctified by the offering of the body of Jesus Christ once for all” (Heb 10:10, 14). So, *our past, positional sanctification speaks to our new identity as children of God. We belong to Him.*

▪ **Progressive sanctification** (present transformation): *“We are being sanctified”*

Progressive sanctification speaks to the present on-going change that is taking place in our lives as we seek to grow in obedience and strive by the Spirit’s power to imitate the character of Christ. We also call this the pursuit of holiness (cf. 4:7). There are a number of places in the NT where we are called to pursue a pure life of sanctification:

- 1Thess 4:3: “This is God’s will for you, your sanctification; that is, that you abstain from sexual immorality.
- Heb 12:14: “Pursue...the sanctification without which no one will see the Lord.”

So, sanctification (Christlikeness, holiness) is something that we are to actively strive after. *Progressive sanctification has to do with our ongoing spiritual growth—growing in likeness to Jesus by living a God-pleasing life through the power of his grace.*

Let me illustrate the relationship between positional and progressive sanctification. Imagine my wife and I adopted and child from Bolivia. That child would be officially set apart as belonging to us on the day of the adoption when the papers were signed. This is akin to positional sanctification. Yet there would still be a lot of change ahead for that child as they are brought into a new culture, and begin a new life not only in America, but more importantly as a member of the Spens family—eating like a Spens, talking like a Spens, and owning the values of the Spens family. In the same way, we need to keep growing up into our new identity as children of God. So, *positional sanctification* has to do with our change of *status* as children of God whereas *progressive sanctification* has to do with our growth in *maturity* as children of God.

- **Perfected sanctification** (future glorification): “*We will be sanctified*”

Our sanctification will always be somewhat incomplete on this side of heaven. But we are promised that when we see Jesus, “we shall be like Him for we shall see Him just as He is” (1Jn 3:2). This is what we call *glorification* (our heavenly state), *when we will be finally and fully delivered from the presence of sin and our lives will bear a true reflection of the heart and character of Christ.*

So we can say that sanctification begins positionally with salvation, it progresses experientially through present ongoing transformation, and it will be permanently perfected when we enter our glorified state.

Paul’s prayer here is 1Thess 5:23 reflects the call to ongoing, progressive spiritual growth until Christ comes. *Paul’s prayer reflects 6 realities about our pursuit of sanctification:*

1. **The God who makes peace with us through *salvation* is also the God who preserves and transforms His people through *sanctification* (23).**

Paul begins by praying to the God of peace for this sanctifying work: “*May the God of peace Himself sanctify you...*” It’s important to notice the relationship between peace and sanctification here. God is the source of both peace and sanctification. But why does Paul pray to the God of *peace* if His request is for God to *sanctify* them? The peace that Paul is referring to here is probably not so much circumstantial peace, though he most certainly would want that for these persecuted believers. We can only have peace in life’s trials by being in a relationship of peace with God Himself.

He’s probably referring to the peace that God makes between Himself and us through the cross. Remember, sanctification begins with salvation. So Paul is likely praying that God, who has made peace with them in salvation, will bring that salvation to its intended purpose of producing mature, sanctified believers. Or as he says in Phil 1:6, “*I am confident of this very thing, that He who began a good work in you will perfect it until the day of Christ Jesus.*” So in essence Paul prays, ‘May the God who began His saving work in you, bring it to full fruition.’

From an experiential perspective, it’s essential that we do not divorce our desire for God’s peace from our call to progressive sanctification. In fact, *the peace of God is most accessible on the road of sanctification.* If you truly want to experience the peace of God in your life, you need to clear away the debris of sin and the world that keeps you from intimacy with Jesus. So often we stumble into sin because we are seeking circumstantial peace in this world which leads us to compromise rather than standing in the peace of God regardless of the worldly cost. The road of repentance, faith, obedience, and worship leads to the wonderful peace of God.

2. **Sanctification is ultimately the work of God Himself (23).**

Paul is praying that God Himself will do the sanctifying: “*may the God of peace Himself sanctify you...*” But wait a minute! Aren’t we supposed to walk the road of sanctification? Aren’t we responsible to obey God and turn from our sin and pursue holiness? Yes, we are! So is Paul having a case of role confusion here? No. He’s acutely aware that even in our repentance, faith, and obedience, we are absolutely dependent on the grace of God and the power of the Spirit for true change to be affected in our lives. Jesus did not

say, “This is what I expect of you, now go do it!” Rather, He said, “Apart from Me you can do nothing....Abide in Me!” (John 15:5).

Certainly we are called to pursue a life of obedience and growing holiness on the road of sanctification—sanctification does not happen without diligence on our part. But even as we do these things, He is the one who affects the change in our lives. We obey. He sanctifies. So, we are to pursue the sanctification that God Himself does as we take steps of faith and obedience. This is what Paul was getting at in [Phil 2:12](#) when He commended the Philippians for their obedience and then says, “*work out your salvation with fear and trembling; for it is God who is at work in you, both to will and to work for His good pleasure.*” So in a very real sense, our pursuit of sanctification is the pursuit of God’s work in us through a life of obedience that displays the work of His saving and sanctifying grace.

Take special note of this. Obedience and sanctification are not merely a matter of self-will, or self-effort, or human striving. If God is the one who sanctifies through our obedience of faith, then it is absolutely essential that any steps of obedience we take are done in an abiding relationship with Jesus, whereby we are depending on and trusting in the power of His grace and the Spirit’s enabling to obey God with integrity. Our active obedience must be accompanied by a spirit of surrender to God, knowing that apart from His grace, our obedience will be empty. The Christian life is never pulling ourselves up by our own bootstraps, but rather taking hold of the hands of Jesus who pulls us up.

3. **Sanctification is meant to be comprehensive in our lives** (23).

Paul prays in vs. 23 that God’s people be sanctified “entirely.” Other translations use the word *completely, wholly, or through and through*. Paul’s request is that God’s work will be brought to its full intended outcome of making them like Christ. Paul goes on to say, “may your spirit and soul and body be preserved complete, without blame.” The idea here is that their whole person will be affected by the transformational process of sanctification. The Greeks made a sharp distinction between the soul and body which allowed them to rationalize immoral behavior with their physical bodies. But in reality, we are integrated beings—body, soul, spirit—

called to honor God not only with our minds and hearts, but also with our bodies which are the temple of the Holy Spirit (1Cor 6:19-20).

Our tendency is to think that if we are generally spiritually mature or healthy in most our life, that we can give ourselves a pass in one or two areas of encumbering sin. And as a result, we can find ourselves signing peace treaty with sin. Or we begin to think that if we look like a good Christian to other people, we can grow lax on fighting some of the hidden sins in our life, like lust, pride, or a critical spirit, rather than going to war against our sin to put it to death. The goal is not outward appearance or behavior, but inner purity which transforms external behavior. Sanctification is meant to be comprehensive in our lives. Our goal is please God in all aspects of life, beginning with the heart.

4. **Sanctification allows us to walk the road of life free from the burden of guilt** (23).

Paul is praying that the believer’s will be found “without blame” when Jesus returns. That is, living holy lives that bear evidence to the *Holy Spirit’s* progressive work in their lives. This is the mark of a genuine Christian—one who stands blameless before God because of the atoning work of Christ which is bearing fruit in his life. I came across something really interesting in my study this week. In Thessalonica, where this letter was sent, archeologist have discovered that Christian tombs have the Greek word *amemptos* inscribed on them. That is the very word in verse 23 that we translate “without blame.” In Christ we are blameless and our lives should increasingly reflect this new identity.

Sometimes, we have a negative impression of the process of sanctification or the call to holiness because it requires repentance and a fight against the sin that entices us. The road of sanctification is not easy—it requires putting to death the deeds of the flesh. But the benefit of walking this road is greater freedom from the guilt and bondage of sin. No one really enjoys guilt. True freedom is freedom from sin’s bondage which is only found on the road of sanctification. Romans 8:6 says, “*the mind set on the flesh is death, but the mind set on the Spirit is life and peace.*” Either we kill sin or sin will kill us. The road of sanctification is one of life and peace.

5. Sanctification is to progress until Jesus comes (23).

Paul ends vs. 23 by pointing the goal. If sanctification is a life-long marathon, the finish line is the return of Christ when we see Him and are made like Him (1Jn 3:2). This is our steadfast hope, that a day is coming when God will complete the work that He has begun in us (Phil 1:6). When we see Jesus, we will be glorified, finally delivered from the power of sin, and the presence of sin. Just as a student keeps studying until the final exam or an expectant mother keeps doing everything she can to nurture the baby for a healthy delivery, so we continue to pursue the holiness that will be perfected when we see Christ.

In Matt 24, Jesus said that in the end lawlessness will increase and most people's love will grow cold, but *"the one who endures to the end will be saved"* (24:12-13). Earlier in Mt 10 Jesus said, *"you will be hated by all on account of My name, but it is the one who has endured to the end who will be saved."* This is why Hebrews 12:14 tells us to pursue the sanctification without which no one will see the Lord. Yet ultimately that sanctification is not merely the result of our work, but Christ's work on our behalf. And so Paul writes in Romans 6, *"having been freed from sin and enslaved to God, you derive your benefit, resulting in **sanctification**, and the outcome, eternal life."* In other words, *salvation* (spiritual rebirth) begins the process of *sanctification*, and both salvation and sanctification are empowered by our union with Christ. We are *saved* through our union with Christ, and we are *sustained* through our union with Christ. This means that the effort we put into obedience does not earn righteousness. Rather, our righteous living is empowered by our union with Jesus. We might say that **Sanctification is the fruit of obedience that comes from abiding in Christ.**

Consider 1Cor 1:30-31: *"By God's doing you are in Christ Jesus, who became to us wisdom from God, and righteousness and sanctification, and redemption, that, just as it is written, "Let him who boasts, boast in the Lord."* Christ is our sanctification. Our sanctification is fulfilled in Christ by virtue of our union with Him. May God give us an insatiable desire to be more like Christ as we abide in Him until we see Jesus face to face!

6. A life of growing obedience and Christlikeness (sanctification) is possible because God Himself is faithful (24).

What hope do we have that we will persevere to the end when the battle with sin can be so ugly at times? We have this promise in vs. 24: *"Faithful is He who calls you, and He also will bring it to pass."* Or again, as Paul wrote to the Philippians: *He who began a good work in you will be faithful to complete it until we see Christ* (Phil 1:6). God will not leave His saving and sanctifying work undone.

Paul's prayer in vs. 23 is not a mere wishful (but unlikely) desire. Paul is praying with strong confidence that God Himself will sanctify these believers because God has the character and will to do it. *God is faithful!* Paul can call the Thessalonians to a life holiness, hope, and love—a life of practical obedience—because God is faithful to bring His saving work to completion in their lives.

From start to finish, we can be confident in God's gracious working. Paul captures this so powerfully in Romans 8 where He highlights God's divine work in the whole salvation process: *"Those whom He foreknew, He also predestined to become conformed to the image of His Son...; and these whom He predestined, He also called; and these whom He called He also justified; and these whom He justified, He also glorified"* (Rom 8:29-30). On that day when we see Jesus face to face, we will not boast in our works, obedience, or faith. We will boast only in the grace and faithfulness of God.

It is the power of Christ and His Spirit in us that empowers us to live God-pleasing lives as we abide in Him, by walking in an intimate relationship of dependence, trust, and obedience to our Savior and Lord. And so the call today is not to strive harder with mere human effort or to be driven to obedience by guilt. The call is to pursue intimacy with Jesus; to abide in His love that motivates and empowers us to live obedient, God-pleasing lives.

- What area of your life is most in need of a renewed pursuit of holiness?
- Have you been living your Christian life primarily in your own strength, or have you been abiding in Christ through daily communion with Him?
- Ask Jesus to revive your heart with a renewed desire to love and serve Him with your whole heart.