

Foundations of a Flourishing Church

The Holy and Blameless Life (1 Thessalonians 5:23-28)

Preached by Pastor Jason Tarn to HCC on March 21, 2021

Introduction

- ❖ This morning we're wrapping up a series through the book of 1 Thessalonians. That's been our normal practice here at HCC – to preach through books, usually going back and forth between NT and OT books. So after a couple of messages for Palm Sunday and Easter in the next two weeks, we'll start up a new series through the OT book of Malachi.
 - **Now we called our series *Foundations of a Flourishing Church* because 1 Thessalonians offers a snapshot of a relatively healthy, flourishing church.** A church that the Apostle Paul planted and cares deeply for. Despite the mounting opposition and persecution they faced – which cut short Paul's stay in their city and his opportunity to disciple them in the faith – yet the Lord was gracious and their foundation was strong. **This fledgling church continued to grow in faith and to grow a reputation for brotherly love and generosity.**
 - In this letter, Paul explained that he was worried for them, fearing their afflictions might result in a shipwreck of faith. So he had sent Timothy to check on them and upon his return with a good report, Paul penned this letter to express his thankfulness and affection. So unlike other letters, he's not correcting false teaching or confronting bad behavior. **He's mainly encouraging believers with constant reminders that all the wrongs they're experiencing will be righted when Christ returns.** And all that they're striving for in their salvation will be completed on that glorious day.
- ❖ We've seen how so far every chapter in the book has ended with a reference to the Second Coming. Chapter 5 is no different. **The eighth and final reference to Christ's Return is in v23, and it's mentioned within a concluding prayer.** Paul likes to do that in his letters. He'll suddenly shift from addressing his recipients to directly addressing God in prayer. If you recall, he did it earlier at the end of chapter 3 where he prayed for God to "*establish your hearts blameless in holiness before our God and Father, at the coming of our Lord Jesus with all his saints.*" (3:13) As you can tell, that's the same sort of prayer as in our text.
 - **In light of Christ's Return, Paul is praying for their holiness – that they be kept blameless in holiness.** He's praying for their sanctification. That's that life-long process by which God, through his Spirit, conforms us into the likeness of his Son. Back in chapter 4, Paul explained how sanctification – our conformity to the image of Christ in our thoughts, words, and deeds – *that* is the will of God (4:3). **God's will – his eternal purpose, his divine decree, his ordained plan – is for every believer in Christ to be sanctified completely, to be made perfect in the image of Christ.**
- ❖ **Now consider that – in light of the Bible's clear testimony that God's will will always be done.** No purpose of his can be thwarted (Job 42:2). If he plans it, it will occur. If he decrees it, it will be done. So if God's will is your sanctification – for you to be blameless in holiness – then you *will* be blameless in holiness. There is no question. There is no doubt.
 - What blessed assurance! That's such an encouraging thought. **Especially when you consider how hard it is to change and to grow in holiness.** If we're honest, each of us would admit that there are habitual sins in our lives that have plagued us for years.

- ❖ Who knows how many times we've confessed? How many times we've repented? How many times we said to ourselves that things will change. But sadly, they don't. **We continue to struggle with those same sins year after year.** That selfish pride. That bitter envy. That faithless anxiety. That hurtful tongue. That untamable anger. That unquenchable lust.
 - **The persistent struggle with habitual sins is a common experience for Christians.** If you thought you were the only one, at least be encouraged to know how common it is. How hard it is for all of us to change and to grow in holiness. But I guess that's as encouraging as being told a year ago that we're all susceptible to COVID-19. It's good to know we're not alone, but it's still demoralizing to have to live through a pandemic. **In the same way, it's good to know we all struggle with habitual sins, but it's still demoralizing to have to deal with the same sinful propensities no matter how old you get.**

- ❖ But this is why Paul's prayer needs to be studied and to be adopted into our own prayer lives. **We need a better grasp on the biblical teaching of sanctification.** Those of us in Christ are called to a holy and blameless life. That is God's will for us. We can take comfort in knowing that his will will be done. Especially when Jesus finally returns. But what can we expect until that day – in each day before us? What is God's role in the work of sanctification and what is ours? Those are the questions we hope to tackle.
 - Let's consider three observations about your sanctification. First, your sanctification is a work in progress. Second, your sanctification is a work you are called to do. Third, your sanctification is a work that God will surely complete.

Your Sanctification is a Work in Progress

- ❖ The first thing we observe about your sanctification is that it is a work in progress. **Sanctification is not a one-time event that occurs in your life – like your justification.** Your justification was that moment in time when God declared you righteous because of your union with Christ. You went from alienated and estranged from God to being in a right relationship with him. That happened at your conversion to Christ – when you turned from your sins and trusted in him as Lord and Savior. That's your justification – a one-time event. It's what we typically mean when we speak of "being saved" or "becoming a Christian".
 - **But your sanctification is a work in progress. It's the process where you incrementally grow more and more like Christ.** This process begins the moment you're converted and is not completed until the Second Coming of Christ. It's what we typically mean when we speak of "spiritual growth" or "growing in holiness".

- ❖ Now these concepts are actually here in our text. Let me show you in v23, "*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.*" The emphasis of that prayer is clearly on their sanctification. Paul is praying for them to be sanctified completely and for their whole spirit, soul, and body to be kept blameless when Christ returns. **In other words, he's asking God to wholly sanctify the whole person for each of these believers.**

- ❖ But notice with me how the prayer is that they “*be kept blameless*”. **Well, if they have to be kept blameless, then that implies they already were blameless.** If you’re trying to keep your car spotless, that implies your car already is spotless. There was a moment in time when the car was cleansed and made spotless. In the same way, there was a moment in time when the sinner was cleansed and made blameless.
 - **So in one sense, if you’re a Christian, you already *are* blameless.** We could even speak of you having already *been* sanctified. Scripture sometimes speaks of sanctification in the past tense. For example, in **Hebrews 10:10**, the author says, “*we have been sanctified through the offering of the body of Jesus Christ once for all.*” We have been sanctified. Past tense. And it occurred through the offering of Jesus’s body – that is, on the cross – once for all. A moment-in-time sort of event.

- ❖ When sanctification is spoken of in the past tense in Scripture, it’s referring to what we call **positional sanctification**. This aspect of our sanctification relates to that idea of being set apart from the world and consecrated unto God, which takes place at the moment of your conversion. **You are made holy – not in the sense of being morally perfected – but in the sense of being set apart for God.**
 - It’s the same way Scripture speaks of holy ground, a holy day, or a holy place. They’re holy – not in terms of moral perfection – but in terms of being set apart and different from ordinary ground, ordinary days, and ordinary places. They’ve been consecrated *by God for God*. That’s what it means when it says Christians have been sanctified. **We are a holy people – not in the sense of moral perfection – but in the fact that God already sees us as holy in Christ.** We are positionally holy in his eyes.

- ❖ **And that’s why, when Paul writes to churches, he’s always addressing church members as saints, which literally means ‘holy ones’** (Rom 1:7; 1 Cor 1:2; 2 Cor 1:1; Eph 1:1; Phil 1:1; Col 1:2). To be honest, I find it awkward to be called a saint. I don’t feel worthy of that label. If someone called me St. Jason, I would laugh at that. I wouldn’t take it seriously.
 - But just take his first letter to the Corinthians as an example. He address his letter, “*To the church of God that is in Corinth, to those sanctified in Christ Jesus, called to be saints.*” (1:2) Now if you know anything about the Corinthian church and how unhealthy it was; and how divided its members were; and how arrogant they had become – you should be encouraged that Paul still calls them saints. Because we’re no better than them. **If the Corinthians can be called saints, then clearly it’s not a term reserved for the morally superior. If they’re saints, then so are we.** We are positionally holy before God by means of our union with his Son.

- ❖ So positional sanctification is an aspect of our sanctification that occurred in the past, in a particular moment. But sanctification must also be understood as an ongoing work in progress. We call this **progressive sanctification**. That’s what v23 focuses on. We were already made blameless in the past when we were justified in Christ – but now we must also be kept blameless. **We are already holy in Christ – but now we must grow in holiness and complete our sanctification.**

- ❖ Note how v23 implies that your sanctification is not yet complete. Paul prays, “*may the God of peace himself sanctify you completely.*” **You see, when your sanctification is complete then you will perfectly resemble Christ in all of his moral perfections.** But until then, every Christian is experiencing progressive sanctification. It’s a daily process with the goal of becoming more and more like Jesus. **Positionally you’ve been set apart for God as a saint (even if you don’t feel like one), and now progressively you need to grow up and mature into a person worthy to be called a saint.**

- ❖ Let’s consider an illustration. Think of the **Prodigal Son**. When he deserted his family and left home, positionally he was considered lost and dead to the family. But when he returned in repentance, his position was immediately changed from dead to alive, from lost to found. **He was positionally restored as a son to his father** – the instant his father’s robe was thrown over his shoulders and the family ring was slipped onto his finger (Lk 15:22).
 - But underneath that robe, he was likely wearing tattered clothes, stained by mud from a pig sty. The hand that bore that ring was probably dirty and stank of the slop he fed to swine. So progressively, he needed to be cleansed and changed – with a literal bath and change of clothes. **But he also needed to grow up and mature as a son within his father’s house.** To grow into a son worthy of trust and responsibility. That won’t be instantaneous. It’s going to take time. It’ll be a work in progress. While his position in his father’s house is secure, he still has a lot of growing up to do.

- ❖ Brothers and sisters, the same could be said of us. Our position before God the Father is secure because we are united by faith with his Son. We are now adopted children of God. That’s our positional holiness. **But we still have a lot of growing up to do.** We must continue to mature in our progressive holiness.

Your Sanctification is a Work You are Called to Do

- ❖ And that leads to our second observation. Not only is your sanctification a work in progress – it’s a work you are called to do. **We’ve saw how – in a progressive sense – our sanctification won’t be instantaneous. There is no expectation that God will just one day zap you with maturity.** It’s not that simple. You’re going to have to work at it. You’ll have to contribute if you expect to grow in holiness.
 - This is the work you’re called to. Notice the language of calling in v24. “*He who calls you is faithful.*” Calls you – to what? Look back to chapter 4:7. There Paul says that God has called us in holiness. He calls us to live a life of holiness. **That’s the work you are called to do as a Christian – to progressively grow in your holiness.**

- ❖ **But just as it’s not an instantaneous growth, it’s important to stress that your progressive sanctification is also not a steadily exponential growth.** That’s a myth we need to bust. Many Christians assume that sanctification is a continuous process of growth in an upwards direction. **They assume that the normal Christian experience is to exponentially increase in holiness, day by day and year by year.**

- ❖ But the reality is more complicated. **In the course of your Christian life, there are going to be seasons of increase, seasons of decrease, and seasons where you plateau – where there is no discernible increase or decrease in your holiness.** Where you feel stuck.
 - But, in the end, we take comfort in knowing that God’s will will be done. **So if his will is your sanctification, then you know that in the big picture there will be an overall pattern of increase.** But along the way, it could be a bumpy ride with more seasons of decrease or plateauing than you realize now.

- ❖ Just think about the **Dow Jones Industrial Average**. When I check the stock exchange app on my phone, it gives you options of different scales to view the average. If you look at the one-day average, it might be red – there might be a decrease. If you scale back to the one-week or one-month average, it might be the same story. **But if you scale back to the three-month, six-month, one-year, two-year average, then you might see green – there might be an overall pattern of growth.**
 - Later today, if you check the Dow Jones’ one-year average, you’ll see a fairly steady increase with only smaller ups and downs. But just remember the huge crash that took place at the beginning of March last year when the nation shutdown. So we’re experiencing a steady increase because there was such a dramatic decrease.
 - That’s a good illustration for progressive sanctification. **In the Christian life, there could be crashes.** Seasons where your spiritual vigor and passion for God takes a nose dive. Where you’re more susceptible to temptation and overwhelmed by sin and shame. But, again, our comfort is knowing that God’s will will be done. **If he wills to complete your sanctification, then you know that if you scale back all the way to the entirety of your life – there will be, by the will and grace of God, an overall pattern of growth.**
 - If you don’t have a category for ups and downs in your progressive sanctification – if you were expecting steady exponential growth – then you will be sorely disappointed and disillusioned.

- ❖ That’s why it’s important that we have a sound grasp of progressive sanctification. That we understand it’s not instantaneous and it’s not steadily exponential. **Instead, we should see our sanctification as a hard work that we are called to do – and to steadily do it even if we’re going through a season of decrease.**
 - In other words, you can’t sit back, passively waiting for God to make you holier. It was in chapter 4:3 where Paul says your sanctification is the will of God. **And from that point on in the text, he issues plenty of commands to obey in order to work out your sanctification.** Last week’s text, in vv12-22, was a litany of commands that we are to obey if we seek to grow in holiness.

- ❖ **Now it’s harder to see in our text, but in the final few verses closing out the letter, there are actually three examples of what you can do to work out your sanctification.** Listen to vv25-27. *“²⁵Brothers, pray for us. ²⁶Greet all the brothers with a holy kiss. ²⁷I put you under oath before the Lord to have this letter read to all the brothers.”*

- ❖ **So here we have a call to prayer, to fellowship, and to the reading of Scripture.** V25 is an obvious call to pray for one another. In v26, Paul mentions a standard form of greeting in biblical times where you kiss someone on the cheek. But it was an expression typically reserved for close friends or family. **Yet here Paul is encouraging that kind of affection and fellowship to be shared between members of the church – because in Christ we are family.** And he describes it as a “holy” kiss because our fellowship as brothers and sisters in Christ is set apart from ordinary relationships. That’s what makes it holy.
 - Now in v27, he’s commanding the leaders of the church to read this letter to the entire congregation when they assemble. **That became a practice in the early church where Paul’s letters were recognized to possess apostolic authority.** In their worship services, there would typically be a reading from the OT Scriptures, and then an epistle of Paul (or another apostle) would be read in parallel. That communicated the early church’s implicit understanding that Paul’s letters are a part of Holy Scripture on par with the OT (cf. 2 Pet 3:15-16).

- ❖ **Now I know it seems fairly basic, but the biblical prescription for growing in holiness is to commit yourself to prayer, to Christian fellowship, and to the reading of Scripture – both in private devotion and corporate worship.** For some, that’s going to sound too obvious and too simple. They have this impression that sanctification involves some kind of mystical approach or requires advanced spiritual discipline. Prayer, fellowship, and Bible reading is too simple – even a child can do that.
 - But that’s the point. We have a tendency to complicate matters. We use big theological words like ‘sanctification’, which makes it sound like something for advanced Christians. **But remember, ‘progressive sanctification’ is just a ten-dollar word for spiritual growth.** Every Christian, from the smallest child who believes, is meant to grow spiritually – to grow progressively more sanctified. And the practice of prayer, fellowship, and Bible reading are essential for that work.
 - Let me ask you: **Which one of these three do you need to give more attention to in your sanctification?** Once you identify one to work on, see if another believer at church wants to work out your sanctification together. Sharpening one another. Keeping each other accountable.

Your Sanctification is a Work That God Will Surely Complete

- ❖ But as you dedicate yourself to the task of working out your sanctification, it’s essential to remember that only God can complete it. That’s the heart of Paul’s prayer. And that’s the third thing we observe about your sanctification – it is a work that God will surely complete. Look at v24 again, *“He who calls you is faithful; he will surely do it.”*
 - Our second observation was that your sanctification is a work that you have to do, but ultimately (and fundamentally) it’s a work that God will surely do. **In other words, God is going to work through your work. His work is foundational and essential to your work ever coming to completion.**

- ❖ In **Philippians 2:12-13**, Paul tells believers to “*work out your own salvation with fear and trembling, ¹³for it is God who works in you, both to will and to work for his good pleasure.*” Notice the similar emphasis. **Notice how the reason why you can work out your own salvation is because it is God who is working in you.** He is working through your work. His working out of his good pleasure in your life is foundational to your sanctification.
 - Earlier in Philippians, in chapter 1:6, Paul similarly stressed the faithfulness of God to complete whatever he starts. He will surely do it. Listen to **Philippians 1:6**, “*And I am sure of this, that he who began a good work in you will bring it to completion at the day of Jesus Christ.*” That day of Jesus Christ is the same thing as the day of the Lord – the day of Christ’s Return.
 - So Paul in Philippians is identical to Paul in 1 Thessalonians – praying for the whole spirit and soul and body of the saints to be kept blameless at the coming of our Lord Jesus Christ (5:23).

- ❖ Think about what that means. **Especially for those of us discouraged by how little spiritual growth we’ve experienced so far.** We thought we’d be further along by now in our holiness, in our growth in godliness, in our struggle with those nagging, habitual sins. We’re ashamed by the meager amount of spiritual fruit we have to show.
 - But if God is working in us both to will and to work for his good pleasure; if he is faithful to always bring to completion the good work he started in us; if he will surely complete our sanctification and keep us blameless – then rest assured. **For no matter how far along you get in your progressive sanctification, at the coming of the Lord you will arrive at perfect sanctification.** Your sanctification will be complete.
 - When Christ appears, Scripture says, “*we shall be like him, because we shall see him as he is.*” (1 Jn 3:2) We’ll be caught up in the clouds and in a moment, in the twinkling of an eye, we will be changed (1 Cor 15:51-52). We will be perfected in spirit, soul, and body. In our whole person, we will be like Christ.

- ❖ **This image of Christ appearing on the scene in a glorious return and instantaneously ending all our struggles and completing our sanctification – that makes me think of those epic scenes in the Lord of the Rings movies.** Where either Gandalf suddenly returns with the Riders of Rohan or Aragorn returns with the Army of the Dead or the Eagles come swooping in to save the day. Instantaneously, the tide is turned in the battle. The good guys – who were on the brink of defeat – are suddenly the victors. The battle is suddenly complete.
 - Critics, at the time, panned those particular aspects of the films. They were too convenient plot devices. Wrapping up scenes too quickly and short changing the audience. We don’t get to see the full struggle of the main characters. Their final victory came too quickly once a missing character appeared on the scene.

- ❖ But that’s the point, isn’t it? That’s our blessed hope. Critics from the outside will find fault. **But those on the inside – in the midst of the epic struggle for holiness in this life – our only hope is that one day soon a missing character will appear and wrap things up quickly.** We long for his return to complete our holiness and perfect our sanctification.