

He Is Faithful

1 Thessalonians 5: 23-28

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What is God's calling for your life? What is his will for you? If we were to ask much of the Western world, the answers would mostly be quite predictable. "*God's will for my life is for me to be happy, for me to live a life true to myself, for me to be successful, or even for me to live a good life and be a good person.*" If I were especially to poll self-professing Christians, I might get these as well as answers like "*God's will is for me to have faith, to trust in Jesus for salvation, to spread the gospel, to love others.*" While those answers especially are by no means wrong, they're missing one. How many of y'all, if honestly asked that question, would answer that it's God's will for you to be holy, to be Christ-like, to be sanctified? If we're being honest, even as good Presbyterians, that may not be the first answer.

However, that's exactly what Paul is primarily concerned with in 1 Thessalonians and, indeed, all of Scripture paints the picture that faith in God must be accompanied by a changed life. To put it another way, we are saved by grace alone through faith alone -- yes and amen -- but that faith never remains alone! You must know that every single Christian, whether single or married, rich or poor, very young or very not-so-young, is called to be sanctified, to be holy, to be made more and more like God. That's God's calling for your life.

Theologians, using the term sanctification, describe this process as a gradual and lifelong work of God in our hearts, renewing and restoring all that has been broken by sin, recreating the image of God in us after the perfect picture of the true image of God: Christ Jesus. If you hadn't caught it, that's what Paul is so concerned about in chapters 4 and 5. Especially in the last sermon, we heard a long list of commands -- 14 of them -- that bear upon how Christians, how we ought to live in light of the news that Christ has died to free you from sin, slavery, and death.

You see, it's God's will for you to be holy, but take heart, don't be discouraged; God is faithful. And so we see that encouraging and emboldening faithfulness of God working out in this passage in three ways: That God himself will sanctify you, that God will sanctify you completely, and that God will sanctify you in community.

In the first place, let's contemplate the fact that God himself promises to sanctify you. We read in verse 23 that Paul prays for the "God of peace himself to sanctify you" and later in verse 24 he restates his point with even greater clarity. "He who calls you is faithful; He will surely do it." How wonderful it is that at the end of a very long list of work for us to do Paul soothes our concerns and worries, assuring us, God has it. God is faithful; he will surely do it.

Now such a radical message might lead one to conclude that this conflicts with the fact that we're supposed to work. That is, how in the world can I be the one working if Paul is telling me that God will do it?? Well, hypothetical question asker, your question is not an easy one to answer. I wracked my brain for quite some time considering just how to illustrate this, but nothing in the world could convey the appropriate depth and weight, so I'll simply let Scripture speak for Scripture.

In Leviticus 11 and all through the New Testament, the people of God are told, "Be Holy as the Lord your God is holy." That is, work to be like God! Yet, when Psalm 37 paints a picture of that walk of holiness, we're told that "the steps of a man are established by the Lord when he delights in his way. Though he fall, he shall not be cast headlong for the Lord upholds his hand." Similarly, we're told in Philippians that "God who began a good work in you will bring it to completion" at the Last Day and that it's God "at work in you to will and to work for his good pleasure." Yet, nestled in between those two concepts in the very same letter, Paul exhorts all Christians to "work out your salvation with fear and trembling!" Then again, the writer of the book of Hebrews exhorts us to "strive for . . . holiness without which no one will see the Lord" and in Colossians we're told to put to death what is earthly in us, putting on instead Christ and all righteousness. And again, we're simultaneously told in Romans 8 that those whom God

“foreknew he also predestined to be conformed to the image of His Son.” That is, predestined to Christlikeness, holiness!

Throughout Holy Scripture, we are painted the picture that holiness requires work, striving, running the race and fighting the fight. Yet, at the same time, it portrays this striving, this effort, as a work that is actually being done by God, if it is genuine, in a heart made new by his redeeming power. I would humbly make the case based upon our passage and all of the Bible that unless you take hold of that tension, your sanctification simply will not happen. We live in a society and a context which prides itself on industrious individualism. Pulling yourself up by your bootstraps is applauded. But if you try that in the realm of the Christian life, you’re setting yourself up for failure. Unless you’re drawing strength from God and especially from the person of the Holy Spirit who dwells within every believer, you will not have the strength to stand against the world, against temptations to sin, and against the devil. You may have success white-knuckling it for a time, but that will not last. It would be like living without food or sleep. Yeah, you could exist for a time, but that would fade quickly.

Rather, you must be challenged by this. Do you trust in God as you seek to live out the life he calls you to? First, you must recognize that he calls you to be sanctified, but then you also must realize that you cannot hope to do that on your own. So how do you do that? Well, quite simply, you ask God and you use every means of grace at your disposal to draw strength from him.

Sometimes you do not have because you do not ask; are you asking for strength to stand against temptation as you pray? Sometimes you’re malnourished because you don’t avail yourself to eat from the spiritual food offered in God’s word; are you making an effort, however much or little, to meditate upon God’s word and put it into practice? If we do not seek God in these ways and seek his strength, we go out to live out God’s will for holiness without anything to sustain us.

But don’t let the challenge remain without the comfort. Hear it again, “God who calls you is faithful. He will surely do it!” Dear Christian, you are not alone in this fight, no matter how battered and isolated you feel. The God who spoke all

things into being by his word is working in you for his glory and your ultimate good. **God's will is for you to be holy, but take heart; God himself will sanctify you.**

In the second place, we ought also to reflect upon God's faithfulness in sanctification as we see that God will sanctify you completely. Paul prays that the God of peace himself would sanctify you "completely, and so may your whole spirit and soul and body be kept blameless at the coming of our Lord Jesus Christ." Paul's desire here is not just for you to know that God will sanctify you, but that this sanctifying work concerns everything about you, your spirit, soul, and body; your heart, soul, mind, strength; all that you think, say, and do. It naturally follows that since sin and brokenness has impacted every aspect of life, all that we are, that sanctification, the redeeming of that brokenness, would encompass everything as well.

And doesn't love, true love, teach us that this is only right? If a man were to say that he loves a woman, desires to marry her, but as they approach their wedding vows he were to tell his bride-to-be "I love you and give to you my thoughts, my emotions, my very heart . . . but my actions, what I do with my body, that's up to me; I'll keep that." Obviously, that's gonna be a no, that's not love. Or what about the same situation, but the man says, "Darling, I love you and swear to you my words, my actions, all of my time . . . but my thoughts and emotions are up to me; I'll keep that." Again, that ain't it. We intuitively know that love, true love, requires commitment and sacrifice that is whole-personned, everything about us. How much more ought we to surrender all of ourselves to the one who did not spare his only Son but gave him up for our sake?

Don't shy away from the challenge here. What aspect of your life are you holding back? Perhaps you give to the Lord your regular attendance in worship and regularly you sit down to read his word, but you continue to hide and harbor idols of greed, envy, materialism in your heart. May it never be! Or perhaps you're deeply involved in the life of the church, even volunteering and teaching, yet you speak to your loved ones with selfish disdain and contempt. May it never be. Or perhaps you're going about telling everyone about Christ and his salvation, but you go around like a glutton and a drunkard. May it never be! Don't you see, the call of

God to be born again and live in light of that new birth will not allow you to withhold anything for long! God desires you to be holy, to be sanctified completely.

But lest anyone despair, be comforted once again in knowing that it is God's work in you and he is faithful; he will sanctify you completely. If you felt described in any way just a moment ago and feel convicted, know that the very fact that you despise your inconsistency, the sin that yet remains in you, is evidence that God is doing something wonderful in you. You will stumble, you will fall, and God's work in sanctifying his people will not be perfect, will not be complete, until the Lord Jesus comes again and our bodies are renewed to be like his glorious body. Not until this life ceases will the battle with sin end. So for those who are frustrated, feeling beaten-down and attacked from every side by sin, for those who are fed up with the back and forth, two steps forward and one step back of the fight against sin, know this: that day will come when all your heartache, all your tears, all the anguish will cease. **God's will is for you to be holy, but take heart; God will sanctify you completely.**

Thirdly and finally, let us reflect upon the fact that God's faithfulness in sanctification can be seen in the fact that he will sanctify you in community. Following that beautiful prayer in 23-24, Paul offers three seemingly separate instructions: "Brothers, pray for us. Greet all the brothers with a holy kiss. I put you under oath to have this letter read before all the brothers." I would propose that these simple instructions take that lofty ideal of sanctification and bring it down to the level of where we are now -- to the community, the church, the assembly of the faithful. Just like we spoke of earlier that God doesn't leave you on your own to work out the Christian life but works in you, he also provides for that need by graciously giving us a family, a community of believers as the context of the Christian life, that's why he uses the term "brothers" three times in these three verses! His desire is that we embrace the bond of faith that creates a family beyond the limitations of blood.

Paul first requests prayer, "Brothers, pray for us," and as simple as it sounds, I wonder if we put this into practice as much as we think. Do you pray for one another? It's so easy to get caught up in our own needs as we pray, but Scripture

tells us that prayer ought not be a merely self-focused exercise. Pray about your brothers and sisters in the faith and don't just pray for them, pray with them! Yes, it may be a little awkward at first, but it gets better over time. If we neglect this, we neglect the richness and depth of what God has for us in community.

He then commands that all the brothers be greeted with a holy kiss. Now, we may not be so European as to do such a thing (even in Louisiana), but the general principle remains: welcome one another as God has welcomed you! This is easy when it comes to the people we naturally "click" with in church, isn't it? We see one another and can't help but rejoice! But don't lie, there are times when you see a fellow church-member in the grocery store and you very quickly avert eye contact and avoid interaction at all costs? Perhaps I'm wrong, y'all are Southern, in fact. But again, the point remains that we ought to embrace one another, welcome one another, no matter how much we may feel a lack of connection with the other person because Christ has so welcomed you. This also goes for what we do when new people walk in the doors. If you're new today, welcome, I'm not the usual guy up here, but I hope you'll stick around. If you've been here a long time, it can become so easy to get comfortable in your group and not to reach out to the isolated new person. Greet one another with warmth and a sincere heart because God has taken you warmly into his own arms; you and all his people.

He also puts the Thessalonians under oath to gather and to read this letter. We have an interesting example here of the fact that Paul is considering his own letter to be on par with the pre-existing Old Testament Scriptures, but without diving into those depths, we simply ought to notice the fact that he presupposes that they're regularly gathering together, presumably for worship! We may talk a big game about the family of faith, but the reality is that if we don't at least show up and allow it to take hold, it's not gonna do much! So pray, greet, and gather, all the while being encouraged and thanking God for the fact that this place, this group of people, is your inner circle. This is your safety net, it's your accountability group, it's the group of friends that stick closer than a brother. God's will is for you to be holy, but take heart; he will sanctify you in community.

As we close for this morning and close on this letter, I want you to notice two things: the title Paul uses for God and the benediction. Paul specifically uses

the title, “God of peace” when referring to his sanctifying work. Why? Well, I think it at least, in part, has to do with the fact that peace, true peace, as in, true meaning and worth in life, is only found in this calling. Again, ultimate meaning and purpose in this world cannot be found outside of God and particularly outside of the work of sanctification he does in the hearts of his people.

But how? How could that be? Isn't that just a bunch of rules to follow? If that's how you feel about God's commands and the call to holiness and have listened to nothing else so far, hear this: only when we know the grace of the Lord Jesus Christ in our deepest heart can we find peace and that peace is found in being renewed in his likeness. Without knowing that Christ has offered himself once for your sins, completely paying them in full, and giving you his perfect righteousness as a gift, without that, the commands of God are just rules. But once you know that Christ has set you free from slavery to sin, you'll come to realize that true beauty, true worth is only found when we take hold of his instructions, take hold of the call of sanctification and pursue it with courage and by his power. Only then does the law which once condemned become a guide to life. You're not saved by your works, thank God, but he has saved you to work by his grace and his power. God's will is for you to be holy, but take heart: He is faithful. He will surely do it.