
The Will of God, our Sanctification

1 Thessalonians

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Introduction “Paul’s argument in Romans 6-8 establishes Christians as the beneficiaries of Christ’s death and resurrection, called to live in this age as those who belong to the age to come. Living by the power of His Spirit, however, we must do battle with the flesh until the God’s purpose for us is consummated in our resurrection to glory” [Peterson, p.114]. This grand summary by David Peterson of what God has done to provide for and to call us to a transformed life has been the backdrop for our thinking about sanctification. We saw in our last talk how in a carnal, sin living church, the doctrine of our definitive and decisive sanctification was the initial and necessary antidote for their sin. All the exhortations to personal and corporate holiness were grounded in the fact that they had been sanctified and were called to be saints.

In stark contrast to the carnality and worldliness of Corinth, the church at Thessalonica was doctrinally sound and spiritually mature. Yet, they still needed to know how to live pleasing to the Lord in this midst of this crooked and perverse age. So, he sends two letters challenging them to continue in what they have begun well.

In the second letter of these letters, Paul emphasizes again the importance of the definitive and decisive sanctification God has done at their salvation. Listen to 2 Thessalonians 2:13-17:

¹³ But we ought always to give thanks to God for you, brothers beloved by the Lord, because God chose you as the first fruits to be saved, through sanctification by the Spirit and belief in the truth. ¹⁴ To this he called you through our gospel, so that you may obtain the glory of our Lord Jesus Christ. ¹⁵ So then, brothers, stand firm and hold to the traditions that you were taught by us, either by our spoken word or by our letter.

¹⁶ Now may our Lord Jesus Christ himself, and God our Father, who loved us and gave us eternal comfort and good hope through grace, ¹⁷ comfort your hearts and establish them in every good work and word.

We have been chosen to be saved. That salvation is effected by sanctification by the Holy Spirit and by belief in the truth. Here, sanctification by the Spirit is a one time act done at our salvation. It is the Holy Spirit setting us aside from the world and making us God’s own possession. God has called us to this salvation, the salvation that comes through this work of the Spirit and through belief in the truth. The preaching and hearing of the gospel is how this call is effected. It is done this way so that we may obtain the glory of Christ. In other words, there is a glory of Christ that is available. I believe in this text, that glory is the glorified body like that of Christ’s.

Why is this important? Because, as a sanctified people, we are headed towards being glorified. We have not attained it yet. We still live in the flesh, in this world, in this age. We are still in this body of sin and death through which we are tempted. But Paul expects that we will live holy lives, obeying God from the heart, believing God

in an obeying way in view of both what God has done for us in our salvation and what He will do for us at our glorification. It is this kind of thinking, this approach to growing and changing, to walking pleasing to the Lord in all aspects that we are advocating here. You have been sanctified by the Holy Spirit; now live like sanctified people.

We have a previous letter Paul wrote to the church at Thessalonica earlier. I want us to briefly explore how Paul declares that living out our sanctified status is the will of God for God's people.

For Practical Holiness

1 Thessalonians 3:11-4:8

¹¹ Now may our God and Father himself, and our Lord Jesus, direct our way to you, ¹² and may the Lord make you increase and abound in love for one another and for all, as we do for you, ¹³ 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.

Finally, then, brothers, we ask and urge you in the Lord Jesus, that as you received from us how you ought to live and to please God, just as you are doing, that you do so more and more. ² For you know what instructions we gave you through the Lord Jesus. ³ For this is the will of God, your sanctification: that you abstain from sexual immorality; ⁴ that each one of you know how to control his own body in holiness and honor, ⁵ not in the passion of lust like the Gentiles who do not know God; ⁶ that no one transgress and wrong his brother in this matter, because the Lord is an avenger in all these things, as we told you beforehand and solemnly warned you. ⁷ For God has not called us for impurity, but in holiness. ⁸ Therefore whoever disregards this, disregards not man but God, who gives his Holy Spirit to you.

Its Shaping Purpose

(3:11-13)

God works through the ministry of people. Paul's prayer here reflects his own part in their holiness (v.11). So, Paul simply asks God to straighten out the road to them. He is not only asking for guidance, but for assistance. He is offering up his own desires, nourished in the Word of God, and submitting them to the will of God.

The second part of his prayer is that they would increase and abound in love for one another and for all (v.12). Why would Paul pray this for the church there? Because all relational holiness is an expression of loving one another Biblically. This is not calling for an increase in emotions, though that may be an effect. This prayer is expecting that the love of God poured out in them through the Holy Spirit will express itself in loving acts of holiness.

The sanctifying purpose is expressed in terms of *stability* and *holiness* (v.13). The stability is that steady maturity that comes from reliance on God. It is an inner attitude and poise of the heart. It is surrender to God's will and Word that organizes and orients our hearts. It is that inner calm that comes from trust. That our practical holiness begins first as a matter of the heart and then becomes a matter of conduct emerges even from Paul's prayer. This is a holiness that will appear blameless even in the brightness of the coming of Christ.

Its Driving Focus

(4:1-3a)

Through a God-Pleasing Walk

Paul's focus in their holiness was that they be pleasing to God in their walk. Walk here refers to the whole of their lives, their lifestyle. So, the primary focus is on pleasing God. This makes it relational. This moves our practical outworking of sanctification out of the old way and into the new realm. In love, trying to please God, we will be doing what God wants of us. We will be living by grace through faith in God's truth and promises. We will be doing so in according to God's will, in obedience.

With an Increasing Ability

Paul not only has taught them how to live, but expects, even exhorts them strongly to ever increasing faith, obedience, wisdom and purity. As God is working in us, we continue to grow, to strive to live out our identity more and more consistently, more and more faithfully, in more areas of life, with greater sense of resting in Him while obeying from the heart. In other words, no matter how pleasing to God you are, you may continue to advance. We are working to live out this sanctification more and more until we arrive at home in glory. There and then the old age will be ended and the new creation that begun in this world at the resurrection and in us at our salvation will be made full and complete.

By the Apostolic Instruction

These instructions they had received and were to follow are coming with all the authority of the Word of God. These are not options which we can adopt or reject as it suits us. Why is this so? These are the *instructions* they had received before (v.1). These are the *commandments of the Lord* he had given before (v.2) These are the *will of God* in sanctification (v.3) Therefore, they had been instructed by the commandments of the Lord so that they knew what the will of God is. This was not simply Paul writing, but is God directing.

In God's Will

Paul declares that holiness, sanctification in life and living, is God's will. Here is the answer to some concerns some of you have. It sounds to you like new covenant teaching is not concerned about real, practical, outward obedience. We approach the Ten Commandments differently. There is this emphasis on the heart. There is a strong emphasis on faith, believing what God says. But understand this: we are teaching as does the whole Bible that it is God's will that God's people be holy. What we are working toward is a Biblical doctrine of transformation. As Peterson says in the opening of his chapter on transformation, renewal and growth, "A sanctified life will continue to express what it means to be in an eternal relationship with the Holy One, through the work of His Son and by the [power] of His Spirit." [Peterson, p.115]

Some see this phrase here to mean that it is God's will that we progress in sanctification or that progressive sanctification is God's will. Others would say that total consecration is God's will. I will grant that it is God's will that

something represented by the word then prepares us for the instruction or command that follows. While I have argued that we should be careful about using the word “sanctification” as a label for our transformation, I will not argue with you except when that is your sole emphasis. I have rarely heard you (referring to the congregation at the Chapel) speak of a definitive and decisive sanctification. You always talk about sanctification as progress in moral development. Again, this is not the emphasis in the Bible. Further, I contend that because you are speaking this way, the transformation that comes by faith in the completed sanctification of the Spirit is short circuited leaving you struggling with sin.

I want to call you to live out in holiness of character and conduct the sanctified state in which the Holy Spirit placed you. So, God’s will is the holiness or outworked sanctification of His people in the sense that God expects and enables a totally different quality of character and conduct. That is what will follow.

Its Transforming Instruction

(4:3b-6)

The will of God in living out our sanctification, our holiness, is placed before us in a major area of struggle for most Christians. Now, I will not work this out in too much detail. But I want you to carefully notice that Paul gives a command, locates it in the world and in the church, without giving a program of steps to follow. In fact, the Bible rarely does this. Which I believe has led to much confusion for many of you. We want to have a list of steps that take any command and turn it into steps of action. Yet, with rare exception, the Bible does not do this. The Bible locates the commands that express God’s will for holiness within the context of belief and doctrine. In other words, the Bible’s primary steps of action are: believe what God says you are, hear what God says you must do, surrender to what God requires by wanting His will and then do His will by His grace.

Hearing God's Commands

An expression of our sanctification is in the area of sexuality (v.3b). We are to be sexually pure. The Scripture is clear: abstain from immorality. The word here not only means not to do it, but to distance yourself from it. Paul uses the word *porneia* here for immorality of any sort. This word has the broadest application and includes all sexual sins. It includes any sex act outside of marriage and not with your spouse. It includes both men’s and women’s pornography. It includes coveting and desiring as well as the act of sex itself.

Understanding our Situations

There are some exegetical difficulties in this text. I would follow the ESV’s rendering here where it understands the Greek word “vessel” here to be one’s “body”. All believers need to *know how to control their bodies* in holiness (sanctification) and honor. Notice the use of the same word as in verse 3. Abstain from immorality of any sort by controlling you body in the sphere of holiness and in the sphere of honor. What follows works this out.

The key here is on *knowing how*. Is this phrase where all the steps of action and wise put off and put on function? Yes, if the primary *know how* is to be-

believe what God says: you are owned by God and your body is His and your spouses. Do you treat sex with the holiness and honor that the Bible does? There is both the negative and positive side to this. Yes, do not sin by immorality. But also, do not sin by destroying the companionship with your spouse and by denying your spouse what is theirs. Believe by faith what God says. Hear His commands in this area. Surrender your will to His and desire sexual intimacy within the bounds God has set and with all the joy and happiness God expects.

Sanctification is being worked out in terms of personal and practical holiness in an area that is very difficult. I would contend that Christians have always lived in a pagan world, even when it appeared to be largely Christianized. Paul in 1 Corinthians also works out sanctification and holiness in this area as well. Fundamental to holiness and transformation in those texts is the idea that we are owned by God. Being God's possession, soul and body, is the truth that drives the commands. Why and how are we to be holy in this area?

Being Set Apart from the World

Holiness for the Christian means that we will not be functioning like the world. We will not succumb to immorality being driven by passions and lusts like those who do not know God. This statement is to contrast us from the pagan society around us. But more importantly, it reminds us that, because of the sanctifying work of the Spirit, we are no longer in that realm. We are no longer to be driven by the passions and lusts that characterize the world, the old age, the old person we used to be. We have been sanctified. We have set apart from that realm. We are not to be governed by our desires mastering us as cravings and lusts. Rather, we are to repent, that is, renew our minds, change our desires, and then choose and feel what God requires.

Recognizing the Church Body

Not only are we to control our bodies in holiness, but also in honor. We are living out our sanctified status as separated from the world. We are also living out our sanctified status as placed into Christ's body where we are living in spiritual and communal relationships. So, we must not only love God in our purity, we must love others as well.

Paul speaks of this as not transgressing and wronging our brothers and sisters in Christ. Two verbs here are given to us. The first is *transgress*. This word speaks of crossing a forbidden boundary. It is the idea of trespass. It sees the brother or sister's spouse as someone who has a fence around them and signs marked "no trespassing." To love my fellow believer and their spouse means that I honor what is theirs. I do not covet, crave or desire them. I do not cross the boundary.

The second verb is *wrong* your brother. Some translations have this as "defraud". The word means "to get more than what is due or deserved, to take advantage. Thus we must not in our relationships and defraud them of what is theirs alone; that is, the affection, attention and pleasure of their spouse in personal companionship or in physical intimacy. So, whether we are married or not, we must not break covenant with our fellow believers nor must we

take what is not ours. This covers those who are not married as well. If you have sex with a Christian brother or sister who is also single, you have transgressed against them and defrauded their future spouse of what was supposed to be theirs alone.

Because we are a community covenanted together, to have sex outside of marriage with anyone who is not your spouse and whose family is in church is to transgress the covenant and to steal by fraud and deceit what is not your own. This is why the church must rise up and discipline all such sin that is not repented of. God has forbidden it. It is a violation of our covenant community. We are first, brothers and sisters, then we are husbands and wives. This concept is sustained by Ephesians and 1 Peter. And, our discipline is an expression of God who avenges all such actions. He will step in both with natural consequences and with imposed chastening to restore what is right.

Its Empowering Reasons

(v.7-8)

In our modern world we often talk about empowering people, often through knowledge and education. While this is often bent in its use and application by liberalism, it is nevertheless a Biblical idea. We are empowered and motivated to obey God by reasons, by knowledge presented to our minds and wills.

With our Biblical Identity

(v.7)

The purpose of grace in sanctification is not license. We have not been called to impurity but to holiness. God has summoned and separated us to Himself and away from sin. Salvation has holiness as its immediate project and glorification as its chief end.

Under His Ultimate Authority

(v.8a)

To carry on and say that this is just man's perspective and man's word is to reject God who gives us the Spirit to sanctify us. When we reject the commands and warnings of the Word of God, we are rejecting the God of the Word. When we change what God requires, we are challenging God's authority. But notice that the verb is slightly different. It does not denote an open and active opposition, but rather a passive dishonor and disregard. So, even the casual believer who shrugs his shoulders at these commands of God is disregarding God.

I want to suggest something further here. Is it possible that Paul not only has in mind disregarding God's commands, but also disregarding God's truths? In other words, if you disregard, if you think little of God's way to live pleasing to Him, then you are disregarding God. If you think little of your salvation, your sanctification, your calling, your identity in Christ, then you actually think little of God. Why, because of what Paul says next.

By our Spiritual Power

(v.8b)

The Holy Spirit has been given to us in order to bring about our sanctification. He is to teach us, to convict us and to correct us through the Scripture. He applies to us all that Christ is for us and all that we are in Him. He makes real to us the spiritual realities the Bible teaches. He is the power of God's

grace energizing our consciences, our minds and our wills to excel in pleasing God.

So, holiness as an expression of your sanctification in Christ is God's will. Sexual purity as loving God and loving neighbor is required as God's will. The Spirit is ours so that we will know who we are in Christ and how we ought to live as in Christ.

By the Example of Prayer

1 Thessalonians 5:23-24

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.

The conclusion to this book in verses 23-24 is so fitting.

With Expression through a Petition

Paul's petition is in line with what God says He does. God says that He sanctifies His people (Exodus 31:13; Ezekiel 20:12). His people were to keep His commands because He sanctifies them (Leviticus 20:8). Jesus prayed that God would sanctify His disciples through the truth, through God's Word (John 17:17-19). In every case, it is God who is acting. He is the one doing the acting. Every other time the verb is in the past tense with God as the one who acted. Never, is the verb reflexive; that is, never do we sanctify ourselves. God is the one who sanctifies.

So Paul prays for the holiness of the Christians in all their being in all their spheres of life until Jesus comes. He prays that God will do what He says He will do. It is the God of peace who commands peace among His people who is working out our sanctification on such practical terms that we will be blameless at the coming of our Lord Jesus.

With Faith in a Promise

This petition is emerges from a promise grounded in the *character* and *covenant* of God. The aim of Paul's prayer is that we will be blameless before God. God is faithful and He is committed to bringing this about. The petition may loom large as very difficult. The promise of God in the character of God presses us onward to be blameless in all our conduct at the *Parousia* of Christ.

But, this is not the blamelessness of ethical perfection, of living sinless. It is the blamelessness of having been sanctified by God. We strive to be pleasing in life now. We are being transformed because we will be blameless. We will stand ultimately stand blameless before God by His doing, His work in Christ.

Pray, "May God sanctify you." Our response, "Because I have been sanctified and will be blameless, I will live pleasing to God because this is His will."

In conclusion, rather than summarizing and applying the message, let's think together what God is teaching us. Much of this are adapted from David Peterson throughout his book.

We must not lose patience with one another as we, God's sanctified people, are being transformed, renewed and growing in Christ likeness. Particularly with new believers, we must not overwhelm them with all the strictures and requirements that we have long struggled to bring forth in our own lives. Our demands may well distort the gospel. As Peterson says, "The final shape of what they will be is in God's hands, and He will achieve His purpose in His own time and in His own way." [p.49]

While many have not paid proper attention to this, Calvin has rightly noted how Paul's eschatology controls his doctrine of sanctification and transformation. Calvin writes, "The Spirit dispenses a power whereby they may be gain the upper hand and become victors in the struggle. But sin ceases only to reign; it does not also cease to remain in them." [John Calvin, *Institutes 3.3.11*] Through faith we participate in the death and resurrection of Christ. But now, we will experience and express more of the death of Christ than the resurrection of Christ. So we will share more visibly in the pattern of His death rather than the pattern of His glory. [Peterson, p.114]

We will seek to avoid degenerating into moralistic and perfectionistic programs of morality. In New Testament language, we will live as those who have been brought from death to life, delivered from the law, belonging to Christ as His own possession, led by the indwelling and enabling Spirit whose fruit is produced in our lives through a continuing struggle with the flesh. "We are to live with a confidence in what God has already done for us and trust in Him to continue His transforming work in us until we see Him face to face." [Peterson, p.137]

God has called us to express our past sanctification and our future glorification through present holiness. By faith in what God purposes, promises and provides we will be transformed, growing in holiness and Christ likeness. Therefore, as the Spirit makes real to us what Christ has done for us and in us, we will obey God. We will love Him and love our brothers and sisters through holy living. In every area of life, we will seek to be pleasing to God just as we will in the area of sexual purity. And we will pray in line with God's purposes so that we will arrive at glory, blameless in His sight.

Summary

Finally, Charles Wesley's marvelous hymn captures our longings and our prayers.

Finish then Thy new creation,
Pure and spotless let us be:
Let us see Thy great salvation,
Perfectly restored in Thee.
Changed from glory into glory,
Till in heaven we take our place;
Till we cast our crowns before Thee,
Lost in wonder, love and praise.