

Made Whole in Holiness

1Thessalonians 5:23-28

I've always liked working with wood.

I enjoy the smell of a wood shop.

I enjoy running pieces of lumber through various machines, watching those machines reshape and resize the wood in various stages until a project begins to emerge.

I often say that cutting wood always makes me feel a bit closer to the LORD, because Jesus was a carpenter.

I have had the chance over the years to do a number of different projects.

I've done a bit of framing, I've made some cabinets and selves, I've made a few picture frames, I've made an axe throwing target, and various other little projects.

In all those projects there is something that invariably happens along the way.

I make mistakes.

I have also noticed that the kind of project that I am working on effects how I feel about the size of mistake that is made.

If I am framing a wall for a house and I miss a measurement by 1/32" that is a mistake I probably won't even notice, but if I am trying to make a picture frame that same 1/32" will likely end up being very noticeable.

Sometimes those mistakes can be corrected and sometimes I'm left with a choice to either start over or live with the imperfection.

I can tell you what often happens when I start from the beginning, there is another mistake.

That is both frustrating and educational.

I hate starting over again or being reminded of my mistake every time I look at the finished product, but I also learn a bit about how to do things better the next time around.

I doubt I will ever make a perfect project, but I also know the more I keep trying to closer I will get.

[In many ways that is like pursuing holiness in the Christian life. We make mistakes don't we, and no matter how much we improve we can always do better. In fact, I have found that the more progress I make the more I realize just how far away from perfection I am. What should we do with that? Should we be content with good enough? Should we throw up our hands and say, "Why even bother trying?" Our text for this morning **1Thessalonians 5:23-28** has some helpful things to say to us on this subject. As the apostle has written to this church encouraging them to *'live out the hope of the gospel'* he brings his letter to a close with a prayer, some final exhortations, and another prayer. As he sounds these final notes for the church in this book he

fixes his attention on believers being made more like Jesus from day to day. That is the focus of his prayer in verse 23 and how he prays here shows us that...]

Point #1 – Complete holiness is God’s goal for everyone in Christ. (Verses 23-24)

When the Lord calls people from death to life He does so with an unrelenting resolve to make His people fully alive in His Son forever.

Listen to the beginning of Paul’s prayer in verse 23a.

It is always good to think about who it is we are praying to when we pray.

Here Paul refers to the LORD as the ‘God of peace’.

The idea of the word peace here is more than simply the absence of conflict, it is the idea of wholeness of relationship which brings to mind an important question, “What causes people to lose peace with God?”

Sin does! When we violate God’s laws our relationship with Him is broken and we become His enemy.

That is how we start out as human beings.

Every single person who has ever lived has inherited a sinful/fallen nature from his/her parents and on account of that nature we all willfully disobey what God says.

Thankfully, the LORD is the ‘God of peace’ and seeks a restored relationship with His people.

That happens through the work of Christ which is why the Bible says, “*Therefore, since we have been justified by faith, we have peace with God through our Lord Jesus Christ.*” (Rom. 5:1 ESV)

The one that believes in Christ is declared right in God’s sight because of Jesus’ merits being credited to us.

That is what it means to be justified.

God’s peace though goes beyond justification, His work of peace also means sanctification.

The word sanctify means to make something holy. That is to set something/someone apart as belonging to God and things that belong in God’s presence are things that are pure.

So the prayer here is that God would make believer completely free from sin.

Look again at **verse 23** and let’s see the scope of this prayer.

As human beings we have a physical/material part to us, being our bodies, and an immaterial part to us being our soul/spirit.

It is a mistake to pit the physical against the spiritual as many have done in the history of the church.

Both are important and our hope as believers is that when Jesus comes the entirety of our being both the physical and the spiritual will be made completely pure and therefore get to enjoy being at peace with God, that is enjoy the fullness of a relationship with Him forever.

That is the work of God being prayed for here,
now look at what he says in **verse 24**.

Why do people belong to God in Christ? Because God calls us!

This God who calls people to peace is also 'faithful'.

That is a glorious truth about the LORD that is revealed to us throughout the scriptures.

The Old Testament word that is often translated as 'love' means faithfulness/loyalty.

It means that God is relentlessly committed to His people.

What is He relentlessly committed to here? Making His people completely whole in holiness at the coming of Jesus.

That is the process that is being prayed for now! This is what God is working at in the lives of His people now!

[The bible gives us a few different images of this. It talks about God's people being like clay on the potter's wheel, it talks about believers being refined like gold, and there is the image of washing or the removal of dirt. God's not done until the vessel is exactly how He wants it, until every impurity is removed from the gold, or until every spec of dirt is gone and our robes are the purest of white. Unlike us He never gets to the place where He gives up and tosses those in Christ into the scrap bin. He continues until the job is done.]

That is one of the primary works of the Holy Spirit in our hearts.

He shows us our sin and gives us a distaste for it.

He shows us that our sin only leads to death and destruction and He enables us to turn away from what is wrong towards what is right and life giving.

That is why Paul makes this a matter of prayer, because this is the work of God in our lives.

It is a work that He will be faithful to complete because it has to happen in order for us to live with Him both body and soul forever.

[There will be no shred of evil in eternity because God is sanctifying us and will make us completely whole in holiness. That is an amazing prayer to pray over the church and having prayed that prayer he moves to give these believers some final exhortations and I believe these instructions are closely connected to the prayer for God to sanctify believers completely. I believe the commands given in the next three verses show us that...]

Point #2 – Believers help one another pursue holiness. (Verses 25-27)

As we seek to walk in a manner pleasing to the LORD we must see our journey as a team effort and assist one another along the way.

Look with me at the instruction he gives to these believers in verse 25.

I love that Paul sees himself as being down in the trenches with other believers.

Here is a guy who Jesus appeared to in order to call him from a life of hatred for the church to a life of dedication and service to Christ and His gospel.

The zeal with which he followed the Lord is as great as anyone in the history of the church.

Here is a guy who was given authority by the LORD and inspired by the Holy Spirit to write the bible.

Even with all of that authority and spiritual advantage, he asks for prayer from regular everyday Christians.

If the apostle Paul has that need to continue on in serving the LORD, how much more do you and I need the prayers of God's people?

I agree with commentator Gene Green who suggests Paul is expecting the Thessalonians to pray for him like he has been praying for them in this letter.

That would mean prayers of thanksgiving, praying for the increase of love for the Lord and fellow believers, and for the sanctifying work of the Spirit to continue on day by day.

Let's all ask ourselves a hard question, "Do I spend more time praying for people in the church or more time complaining, grumbling, and gossiping?"

If that is upside down brothers and sisters we are in trouble!

We need to be praying for one another. To that Paul adds this in **verse 26.**

Commentators point out that this was a common greeting in the time and place in which Paul is writing.

It showed love between family members and close friends, it was used to show honour and respect, and it also was used as a symbol of reconciliation.

It was most commonly done on the forehead or cheek and in the early church it was practiced only between people of the same gender so as to avoid any impression of immorality.

While many people in our day still practice this in our immediate families, it has fallen out of everyday life for the most part.

The closest equivalent we have in our culture is likely a handshake or of hug.

While I think we have lost some affection in the way we greet one another today, I am sure the type of greeting is not nearly as important as quality of the greeting.

Judas greeted Jesus in the garden with a kiss and it was with evil intent rather than love.

It is the 'holy' aspect of the greeting that is critical here.

If brothers and sisters greet one another with a 'holy kiss' they do not turn around in the next moment and stab their fellow Christian in the back.

A 'holy kiss' is given in sincerity rather than manipulation.

A 'holy kiss' is given out of a genuine and deep affection rather than a cold hearted obligation.

It is a sign that we want what is best for one another and we are committed to living that out.

On top of prayer and affection he gives this instruction in **verse 27**.

The first readers of this letter were likely the church leaders and they are being placed under and oath to read the letter to the whole church.

Paul is conscious of the fact that he has been given the authority to speak for Jesus to the church and so this comes out of a desire for the people of God to hear firsthand the word of God.

In the early church there would have been many people in the congregation who could not read, and in addition to that, the expense of paper and the need to copy everything by hand made having a copy of this letter for every member of the church impossible.

Reading it out loud for all the members of the church to hear gave people direct access to God's Word which is absolutely vital to the pursuit of holiness in the Christian life.

All of these things, praying for one another, having a sincere and devoted affection for one another, and sharing the word of God with one another all serve to encourage each other towards becoming more like Jesus in our everyday life.

[How many of you have ever heard of a bike race called the Tour de France? It is a 21 stage race covering about 3500km. There is usually about 200 riders in the race and no body, particularly the winner, gets to the finish line on their own. They ride in teams, they have chase vehicles for bike repairs, water, and food. Typically teams will have 20-30 staff members who are non-riders just to look after the competitors.]

That is how we should see ourselves in the church.

We fix spiritual flat tires, we patch each other up after a crash, and we encourage one another to press on towards the finish line.

Anyone who hears those glorious words from Jesus, "Well done good and faithful servant" is someone who has been prayed for, cared for, and pointed to the word of God by others who are walking along the same road.

[I'm so very thankful for those of you who pray consistently for the people in the church. I am so very thankful for those of you who are genuine and sincere in your affection for your fellow believer, and I am thankful for those of you who consistently point others back to the Word of God. Praise God for you! I fully believe God sustains us as a church because people are doing

that. Just imagine if we all did that a bit more! I imagine if we did our pursuit of holiness would improve. When that happens in our lives as individuals and in the church as a whole it is something to rejoice in, but we also need a word of caution. Because of our tendency towards pride, our growing in holiness might lead us towards self-righteousness. That is why I'm thankful the apostle ends this letter the way he does. He without a doubt has a great desire for us to pursue godliness in our lives, but he also reminds us here that...]

Point #3 – Everyone in Christ needs grace in the pursuit of holiness. (Verse 28)

Any effort we make towards righteousness is always stained with the evil that remains in our hearts, so no matter how far we come we are always in need of the LORD showing kindness to us based on Jesus' merits rather than our own.

If you go back to verse 12 which is likely marks the beginning of Paul's concluding remarks of this letter and then count all the commands given down to verse 27 there are roughly 20 commands that are given to believers.

That is a lot to take down in a short number of verses.

We've broken these verses down into several sermons, but if you read this flurry of instructions all at once what do you think to yourself?

I'll tell you what my first thought is, it is failure!

I know every single one of these commands is for our good!

I know every single one of these commands is important and we need to take them seriously.

I also know I fall short on every single one.

If we were left with command after command knowing that we can never measure up to God's standard I would get really discouraged really fast.

Thankfully we are given something more than commands. **(Verse 28)**

This brings us full circle in the book of 1Thessalonians.

Turn back with me for a moment to the first verse of chapter one of this book. **(1Thess 1:1)**

The very first thing he says to them after the formal introduction is "Grace to you and peace".

Now at the very end of the letter he calls our attention back to peace and grace.

God is making peace, that is He is actively working to make our relationship with Him fully restored, and that process is all about making us holy.

When we look at the list of commands in this passage and in the Bible as a whole we do not yet see perfection but we ought to see progress.

We see that progress because God is at work sanctifying His people.

Why does He do that?

Because He is gracious towards His people.

It is always good to be reminded of what grace is.

The simplest way to understand grace is to think of it as receiving a gift that we do not deserve.

We do not deserve the LORD's kindness towards us.

We did not deserve God sending Jesus into the world, to take upon Himself genuine humanity so that He could live in perfect obedience to God for the purpose of offering Himself as a substitutionary sacrifice for us.

We do not deserve the righteousness of Christ that is placed upon us when we look by faith to the cross and empty tomb for our forgiveness.

We do not deserve the gift of the Holy Spirit Who makes us alive in Christ and changes our hearts so that we want to chase after what is right and good in God's sight.

We don't deserve any of that, but we receive all of those things because of God's grace towards us.

Without that this would all be for nothing.

[Recently I was introduced to working with a lathe. A lathe is a machine that spins wood and as the wood spins you use tools to shape the wood as it turns. One of the things I attempted to make was a tiny Christmas tree. On my first attempt I was almost finished and the wood split in half. My second attempt went very much as the first. There was no saving them I just had to start over.]

That is where we would be without the grace of God, we would be irredeemable creatures and lost forever.

Instead the LORD looks at our brokenness and chooses to act in order to make us whole again.

He is completely resolved to remove from us every stain and every imperfection.

He is working on that now and will bring His work to fulfillment at the coming of Christ because He is faithful.

He has given us the gift of one another so that we might help each other strive towards that goal.

And let us always do so in great humility because no matter how much progress we may make we will always be people who desperately need grace.

What an amazing way to live in a broken world, to seek wholeness in holiness.