

“Perseverance of the Saints”
1 Thessalonians 5:23-28
(Preached at Trinity, January 5, 2020)

I’m supplying these notes for the benefit of busy pastors who may be engaged in bi-vocational work, feeling the pressure of preparing to preach twice on the Lord’s Day while trying to balance full-time secular work as well as caring for their families. While the notes of another man are no substitute for personal study, I pray that these may aid in the process of preparing to preach.

Disclaimer: These are the actual notes I bring with me to the pulpit, which I follow loosely. They are not designed for publication. While I try to make every effort to give proper credit to my sources from the pulpit, adequate citations will sometimes be absent from my notes. If anyone feels their intellectual material has been used without adequate citation, please contact me and I’ll make immediate correction giving credit.

1. Technically Paul began the final portion of his letter at the beginning of **Chapter 4**. This entire section has had the practical emphasis of sanctification in view.
1 Thessalonians 4:1-3 NAU - "Finally then, brethren, we request and exhort you in the Lord Jesus, that as you received from us *instruction* as to how you ought to walk and please God (just as you actually do walk), that you excel still more. ² For you know what commandments we gave you by *the authority of the Lord Jesus*. ³ For this is the will of God, your sanctification"
2. Beginning with **Verse 12** Paul gave some final words of admonition regarding Christian attitudes and conduct and then he brings his letter to a close.
Paul closes with his usual warmth.
 - A. He refers to them as his brethren in **Verse 25**. The word is ἀδελφοί. In the plural it often refers to the family of Christians. We are brothers and sisters, the children of God. We collectively call God our Father. The Lord’s Prayer is a family prayer. We pray, “Our Father, which art in heaven . . .”
 - B. In terms of translation this is often a point of dispute. How much should we maintain the literal sense of the original? The NIV translates it “brothers and sisters.” The new NASB to be released in 2021 is also reported to follow this pattern. This philosophy of translation has led to other gender-neutral translations.
 - C. It is best to maintain literal accuracy to the original text and allow teachers to explain the meaning. The term “brethren” is an expression of unity, of fellowship, of family.
3. Paul seeks their prayers – “Pray for us.” The success of the Gospel is dependent upon prayer. This is important instruction for our church. We cannot expect to see our church prosper and souls saved apart from continual, fervent prayer. Are you praying?
 - A. Then he encourages their continued love for one another.
1 Thessalonians 5:26 NAU - "Greet all the brethren with a holy kiss."
 1. The kiss was very much a cultural practice and it was not particular to the church. A kiss on the cheek during the first century was the cultural equivalent of a handshake today.
There are many cultures today that still practice cheek kissing.
 2. We shouldn’t try to artificially export it to our Western world of the 21st century or view the kiss with our western concept of kissing.

3. This stresses the moral principle of Christian love. While the culture at large may have practiced kissing as a form of greeting Paul called it a "holy kiss."
Christianity added an additional dimension to the cultural kiss. Holiness permeates every aspect of the Christian life. It marks us and defines us. Holiness is inseparable from our salvation.
 4. We must remember the wonderful unity and love we share in Christ. We are the church of Christ. We are the body of Christ, the covenant community, fashioned in love.
- B. As with most of Paul's letters, this letter was meant to be treated as a circular letter to be read by all – **Verse 27**
4. As Paul closes his letter, he draws our attention back to his teaching on the second coming of Christ. This must remain our focus. God is preparing us for that great day.
1 Thessalonians 5:23 NAU - "Now may the God of peace Himself sanctify you entirely; and may your spirit and soul and body be preserved complete, without blame at the coming of our Lord Jesus Christ."
 5. The concern of the Thessalonians was about their departed loved ones. Paul's greater concern was a focus upon the living – "we who are alive and remain."
A. In **Chapters 4-5** Paul has focused on the human side of sanctification.
1 Thessalonians 4:1-3 NAU - "Finally then, brethren, we request and exhort you in the Lord Jesus, that as you received from us *instruction* as to how you ought to walk and please God (just as you actually do walk), that you excel still more. ² For you know what commandments we gave you by *the authority* of the Lord Jesus. ³ For this is the will of God, your sanctification"
B. We are to remain vigilant, watchful.
1 Thessalonians 5:4-6 NAU - "But you, brethren, are not in darkness, that the day would overtake you like a thief; ⁵ for you are all sons of light and sons of day. We are not of night nor of darkness; ⁶ so then let us not sleep as others do, but let us be alert and sober."
 6. The New Testament frequently presses upon us our duty in sanctification. This has been Paul's emphasis in the second half of this letter. We must abstain from sexual immorality. We must excel in brotherly love. We must be watchful and vigilant. We must flee abstain from every form of evil.
One of the dangers of pressing upon us our Christian duty is for us to develop a moralistic view of the Christian life. In the extreme, some develop a works-based salvation.
 7. Paul consistently taught our responsibility to live a life of holiness, but he never failed to maintain God's work in the Christian life.
We must never forget, however, that sanctification is ultimately God's powerful work in us. With the Second Coming in view, Paul points us to the work of God in our lives until the final day. Paul points to two elements of this powerful work of God in us: God's work in sanctification and God's work in preservation.

I. God's work in our sanctification

A. Paul's emphasis in the second half of the letter has been on sanctification.

1 Thessalonians 4:3 NAU - "For this is the will of God, your sanctification"

1. Paul has been stating the importance of the sanctified life. There is a high charge to every Christian to press on in holiness, to put away sin and strive after obedience. We are called upon to live a consecrated life.

1 Thessalonians 4:1 NAU - "Finally then, brethren, we request and exhort you in the Lord Jesus, that as you received from us *instruction* as to how you ought to walk and please God (just as you actually do walk), that you excel still more."

2. Paul often stressed the human dimension of this work

Philippians 2:12 NAU - "So then, my beloved, just as you have always obeyed, not as in my presence only, but now much more in my absence, work out your salvation with fear and trembling;"

Philippians 3:13-14 NAU - "Brethren, I do not regard myself as having laid hold of *it* yet; but one thing *I do*: forgetting what *lies* behind and reaching forward to what *lies* ahead, ¹⁴ I press on toward the goal for the prize of the upward call of God in Christ Jesus."

B. But now as Paul closes this letter he reminds us once again of the ultimate power behind our sanctification.

"Now may the God of peace Himself sanctify you entirely"

1. Although **Chapters 4-5** have focused on the human aspect of our sanctification, Paul laid the foundation for these chapters at the end of **Chapter 3**

1 Thessalonians 3:12-13 NAU - "and may the Lord cause you to increase and abound in love for one another, and for all people, just as we also *do* for you; ¹³ so that He may establish your hearts without blame in holiness before our God and Father at the coming of our Lord Jesus with all His saints."

2. God is powerfully working in His people.

He is the God of peace who is working His peace within His people.

As Leon Morris describes this peace: "*Peace* is spiritual prosperity in the widest sense; it is so characteristic of God to bestow this gift that he is called *the God of peace*.¹

The word for sanctify is ἀγιάζω which simply means "to make holy"

He is working in us the power of holiness, separation from the life of sin that once held us captive.

3. Paul stresses this in terms of the fullness of God's work in us

"may the God of peace Himself sanctify you entirely"

όλοτελείς – this is a rare word, the only time Paul uses this word.

a. It is a compound word from:

όλος – whole or complete

τέλος – a fulfillment or ending or outcome

¹ Leon Morris, *1 and 2 Thessalonians: An Introduction and Commentary*, Tyndale New Testament Commentaries, (Downers Grove, IL: InterVarsity Press, 1984), 13:107.

- b. It points to a finality. Paul is using here to describe a completeness or even perfection.
 - 4. This describes the fullness of God's work. He will sanctify us fully and entirely. He is working in us, every part of us.
 - 5. Paul has the Second Coming of Christ in mind. God will fully accomplish our sanctification.
 - a. While in this life we will continue to struggle with sin and we will never reach perfection, in the end we will be fully and completely sanctified.
 - b. As we rise to meet Christ we will be fully transformed. Our holiness will be made complete.
- Philippians 1:6 NAU** - "*For 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.*"

- II. Second, Paul speaks of God's power in preservation
 "and may your spirit and soul and body be preserved complete, without blame at the coming of our Lord Jesus Christ."
- A. Again, Paul is talking about the powerful work of God
- 1. Our salvation has been ordained by God. He planned it in eternity and is bringing it to pass.
 We are not just being preserved from falling away—from being lost. We are being preserved blameless. We are preserved in holiness.
 - 2. Pressing on in holiness is beyond the power of man. We may strive and we must strive, but the power of holiness is in God.
 He has delivered us from the curse of sin and the fires of hell. He is continuing to free us from the sin that enslaved us.
 - 3. And He will keep us and sustain us until the end. We are being preserved. Our perseverance is based on God's preservation.
1 Thessalonians 5:24 NAU - "Faithful is He who calls you, and He also will bring it to pass."
 A present participle – a timeless work of God.
 - 4. Paul still has the Second Coming in mind. With the coming of Christ will come the final judgment. Multitudes will be condemned and will face eternal condemnation. Christians are being preserved complete and without blame.
- B. Is Paul making a statement here in support of trichotomy?
- 1. Is man made up of two parts or three – dichotomy or trichotomy?
 - 2. Trichotomy – we are composed of three parts: Body, Soul, and Spirit
 - a. Body – our flesh and blood
 - b. Soul – that which makes us alive
 - c. Spirit – equated with the soul in the dichotomy view
 - 3. Dichotomy – we are composed of two parts: Body and Soul
 - a. The body is that part of us that is temporal comprised of flesh and blood
 - b. The Soul is that part of man which survives the grave
 Our soul separates us from the brute beasts
 Our soul enables us to commune with God

- c. Paul uses the terms soul and spirit interchangeably:
Herman Bavinck – “Soul and spirit in Scripture repeatedly occur in parallelism and interchangeably. One moment “body and soul” constitute the nature of man, the next it is “body and spirit.” Physic activities are in turn attributed to the spirit and to the soul. Dying is called both the surrender of the soul and the surrender of the spirit. Sometimes the spirit and sometimes the soul is called immortal.”²
- 4. Paul’s point in this passage is not to describes how many parts we have but to stress that God will preserve us fully and completely.

Conclusion:

1. We are exhorted to press on in holiness. This is especially true as we consider the nearness of Christ’s return.
1 John 3:2-3 NAU - "Beloved, now we are children of God, and it has not appeared as yet what we will be. We know that when He appears, we will be like Him, because we will see Him just as He is. ³ And everyone who has this hope *fixed* on Him purifies himself, just as He is pure."
2. But we must not fail to recognize the power behind our holiness.
It is God who is perfecting us.
1 Thessalonians 5:23 NAU - "Now may the God of peace Himself sanctify you entirely; and may your spirit and soul and body be preserved complete, without blame at the coming of our Lord Jesus Christ."
Matthew Henry wrote: “if God did not carry on his good work in the soul, it would miscarry, we should pray to God to perfect his work, and *preserve us blameless*, free from sin and impurity, till at length we are *presented faultless before the throne of his glory with exceeding joy.*”³
3. It is in the in the face of this powerful work of God’s grace that we are commanded to press on towards perfection.
2 Corinthians 7:1 NAU - "Therefore, having these promises, beloved, let us cleanse ourselves from all defilement of flesh and spirit, perfecting holiness in the fear of God."
4. May this be our lives. God has saved us. He is preserving us. He is perfecting us. May we press on always pursuing holiness.
But may we find great comfort in the promise of the Gospel – that which God has begun He will perfect.
Philippians 1:6 NAU - "*For 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."
1 Thessalonians 5:24 NAU - "Faithful is He who calls you, and He also will bring it to pass."

² Herman Bavinck, *In the Beginning*, (Grand Rapids: Baker Book House, 2000), Page 189.

³ Matthew Henry, *Matthew Henry’s Commentary on the Whole Bible: Complete and Unabridged in One Volume*, (Peabody: Hendrickson, 1994), 2345.