

Taking New Territory in Troubling Times, Pt. 13

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Recap

Over the past four months, we've been working our way through Paul's letter to the Thessalonian Church.

Chapter 1 – Paul praises the church for their example — that in the midst of incredible uncertainty and circumstantial difficulty, even persecution — they didn't quit, but continued to take new territory, individually and collectively.

Chapter 2 – Paul writes about how they received the Word of God, not only as words of human authors, but also as the Word of the Divine Author, and they treated it with that level of seriousness, respect, and reverence.

Chapter 3 – Personal Christian conduct — Love one another... care for one another.

Chapter 4 – Be Holy! Be pure. Be righteous. Holy! 4:3... It is the will of God. Grow to become like Christ!

Today

We're wrapping our series, as Paul wraps up his letter to the Thessalonian Church. He ends with a benediction — some parting words for this Church — in the middle of a pluralistic and antagonistic, first century city.

1 Thessalonians 5:23-28

Now may the God of peace Himself **sanctify you completely**; and may your whole spirit, soul, and body be preserved blameless at the coming of our Lord Jesus Christ. ²⁴He who calls you *is* faithful, who also will do *it*. ²⁵Brethren, pray for us. ²⁶Greet all the brethren with a holy kiss. ²⁷I charge you by the Lord that this epistle be read to all the holy brethren. ²⁸The grace of our Lord Jesus Christ *be* with you. Amen.

In this passage Paul is giving one enormous theological concept... and a recurring theme throughout this whole letter — the idea of sanctification.

**THE SANCTIFICATION OF THE SAINTS
THE SICKNESS OF THE SOUL
THE SECURITY OF THE GOSPEL**

THE SANCTIFICATION OF THE SAINTS

Sanctification is the lifelong process of being made more and more into the image of Christ. It's the slow and steady process of the uprooting of your sin, the renovation of your soul, of your becoming more and more holy.

What may be confusing — is there are also scriptures that talk about how, you, right now, in Christ ARE holy. You ARE blameless. You ARE righteous.

But yet, in Chapter 4... Paul is telling the Thessalonian church... quit messing around and be holy! Live a holy life. Straighten up! Live a righteous life...

1 Thessalonians 4:2-4,7-8

you ought to walk and to please God...³ For this is the will of God, your sanctification: that you should abstain from sexual immorality; ⁴ that each of you should know how to possess his own vessel in sanctification and honor, ...For God did not call us to uncleanness, but in holiness. ⁸ Therefore he who rejects *this* does not reject man, but God,

- It begs the question... am I already holy or not? Is my righteousness dependent on me, or what Christ has already done for me?

If you *only read Chapter 4* you might think, “my sanctification... is purely up to me. I’ve got to be moral. I’ve got to behave in all the right ways. I’ve got to be better, try harder, do more, push harder.”

But read again what Paul says...

1 Thessalonians 5:23

Now may the God of peace **Himself** sanctify you completely;

- Paul is saying
- God is the one who does it
- He’ll keep you blameless, he’ll preserve you until the return of Christ
- God, who is the one who called you, He is the one who will keep you!

The Thessalonian believers had to be thinking, “Paul would you just make up your mind!?” Is it up to me or God?

What’s the answer? Yes. It’s both.

**What this passage tells us is that
God initiates, sustains, and finishes.**

One of the best ways to visualize this in scripture is the illustration of the Potter and the clay.

It’s the Potter’s job to make you a work of art...

The job of the clay is to be pliable, moldable, submissive — to simply cooperate with whatever the Potter wants to do.

When you become a Christian, you put yourself on the wheel... sanctification is the Potter molding you into the masterpiece that He desires you to be.

Philippians 1:6

...He who has begun a good work in you will complete *it* until the day of Jesus Christ;

- In other words, God is absolutely committed to complete the work He began in you...

Application: *If you’re discouraged because you’re not as far along as you feel like you should be, you’re still wrestling, struggling to overcome some sin you thought was gone long ago... this is your verse... this is your reminder. “He’s not finished with me yet!”*

God initiates, we cooperate.

So... how do we do that? How do we cooperate with what God wants to do in us?

THE SICKNESS OF THE SOUL

One of the most difficult aspects of this is actually taking a good honest look at the depth of our selfishness and sin.

Watch the video to see an example from Pastor Rob’s personal life.

PROBLEM: None of us want to see the depth of how sinful and selfish we really are. So, what we do is we distract ourselves from it. We fill our days with so much activity, or medicate, or escape from it — so we don't have to face the ugliness that really does exist in here. Whether that's through alcohol or achievement... religion or rebellion... pretense or production — we're experts at deceiving ourselves into thinking that we're better than we actually are.

**God isn't just after your behavior — he's after your heart.
He's after your motives.
It's not just what you do — but WHY you do what you do.**

Psalm 139:23-24

Search me, O God, and **know my heart;** Try me, and know my anxieties; ²⁴And see if *there is any* wicked way in me, And lead me in the way everlasting.

- *David is praying to God, "I don't even know the depth of my own sin... I don't understand how deeply selfish I am. Reveal it to me. Show me. And lead me in the way everlasting... change me. Make me pure..."*

Puritan writer John Owen wrote that it is the duty of the Christian to...
“...be killing sin or it will be killing you.”¹
~ John Owen

The only way to do that is to face it.

To see it for what it is.

To own it.

To take an honest look at your life.

To invite God to reveal to you what's really going on underneath all your hurried activity and escapism.

One of our greatest dangers is that we go about our day-to-day business without ever slowing down long enough to recognize the invisible forces that are driving our daily decisions.

For some of us, even though we're Christians...

- We're short tempered, argumentative, impatient, and prone to bursts of anger and often unloving.
- We're ungenerous, stingy, too cautious when it comes to risk of any kind.
- We're worrying all the time, and we jump to irrational conclusions about what's happening around us
- We're stubborn and prideful and will never admit when we're wrong
- We're envious, and tend to lie to ourselves and others to make ourselves feel better
- We're manipulative, power hungry, and even abusive toward others
- We're insecure, prone to comparing ourselves to other people
- We're cowards, terrified of personal conflict.
- We enjoy conflict a little too much
- We fearful of the unknown, and we villainize anyone that is different than we are, so we don't have to do the hard work of loving them.

But do you realize that wherever you find yourself on that list, that we've yet to list the **cause of those problems**? Do you realize that everything we've just mentioned is an **outward symptom** of an **inward problem**?

Watch the video of the sermon to hear Pastor Rob tell the story of Molly Bloom, which illustrates this point.

This is why we pray with David saying, "Search me, know me... — don't let me just go about my life with unseen forces driving my decisions. Help me recognize what's driving my life... help me see my sinful

¹ Owen, John. *The Mortification of Sin in Believers*, (Religious Tract Society, June 11, 2007) 9

methods of self-protection and preservation... help me recognize my motivations and why I'm doing the things that I do..."

Most of us won't do this work — to dig deep enough to understand, to invite God into those spaces, because we don't really want to know. You're inviting God into your deepest wounds, your most painful moments, and asking him cleanse you — to rewrite your story — to reorder the motives of your heart.

This is an enormous part of the sanctification process. The only way you'll have the courage, the emotional fortitude to admit how much sin is still in your life — is if you deeply understand that you are deeply rooted and secure in the gospel.

THE SECURITY OF THE GOSPEL

This is the passage where Moses is telling the people of Israel why God chose them...

Deuteronomy 7:6-8

the Lord your God has chosen you to be a people for Himself, a special treasure above all the peoples on the face of the earth. The Lord did not set His love on you nor choose you because you were more in number than any other people, for you were the least of all peoples; but because the Lord loves you...

Do you hear the completely circular reasoning?

As soon as you say anything specific, you've set the conditions for you love which means your love can be lost.

- God isn't saying I love you because you're great.
- I don't love you because you're serviceable to me. In fact, you're the least of all people.
- **God says, I love you, why? Because I love you. Why? Because I love you.**
- My love for you is not based on a condition of your beauty, or greatness, or moral performance... If my love isn't based on any condition — then there is no condition by which you can lose my love.
- It is secure. It is final. It is unwavering. It is immovable. It is eternal, unshakable, absolutely solid.
- **This is the gospel.**

*This is God's absolute, unwavering commitment to Israel, and — **in the person of Jesus Christ** — we see His unwavering, unconditional love, and commitment to us.*

When you're secure in the gospel, then you've got to take a good look at yourself and find out what's really bad about you — not for beating yourself up — but for connecting whatever those things are to the healing power of the gospel.

You can't change by sheer will.

And you can't change by being sorry for the consequences.

You've got to connect your heart to the gospel.

You've got to cooperate with what the Holy Spirit is revealing in you, in the moment.

You've got to look at the patterns of sin in your life so that you can bring the light of the Gospel down into those areas of darkness.

3 practical examples....

1. "Lord, when I've fallen into pride, and I'm so distraught over what other people are saying about or to me... when I'm being criticized or when my reputation is being tarnished... help me remember that on the cross You made yourself of NO reputation, You relinquished all Your power and Your glory for my sake. And the more I remember and rejoice in that, the less I'm affected by whether other people think highly of me or not."

2. “God when I find myself being short tempered, angry, or irritable with people, I remember Your patience with us when we were slow to learn, or stayed awake to pray for us, and on the cross as we mocked You, and reviled You, You prayed for us and asked for our forgiveness. When I see that, I can’t help but be patient, gentle, and kind with others around me.”
3. “When I’m overwhelmed with anxiety and fear, I remember that You walked through death’s door for me, You were tortured and killed so that I could be forgiven of sin, and secure in Your love for me; so that no matter what is happening in or around my life, I find myself at rest, because I don’t earn my security or prove my worth, and that gives me a courage that I’ve never had before.”

Do you see what the gospel does for you? The gospel is the thing that gives you the power to go back and root out your sin... without fear of rejection from heaven. You are fully loved and accepted in Christ. There is nothing you could ever do that would cause Him to love you any less or any more than He does right now. That gives you a power, a courage, a security that nothing in this world can even come close to.

Unless you are learning more and more of who you are in Him, you’ll never be able to admit what is still deeply wrong with you.

The invitation of sanctification is cooperation in our transformation.

Every single one of us is a work in progress.

Scripture tells us that we are His workmanship... His poema — His masterpiece.

God is the initiator, sustainer, and finisher of our faith.

He is the beginning — and the end.

We love Him — because He first loved us.

He is the potter — we are the clay.

And the more you really trust, not just know, but trust, base your whole life on the beauty, the power, the security of the Gospel — *the assurance of His unconditional love for you* — the more courageous, secure, patient, and pliable and even HOLY you’ll become.

In other words, the more you see the depth of His grace for you, the more you’ll be able to face your sin. And the more you face your sin, the more you’ll marvel at the extravagant wonders of His grace.

“The weaker we feel, the harder we lean. The harder we lean the stronger we grow... [this] is true sanctification.”²

~ J.I. Packer

Discussion Questions

1. During the past four months, what has God been exposing/revealing in you?
2. Define sanctification.
3. Whose responsibility is sanctification — God’s or man’s?
4. Discuss, “God isn’t after your behavior, He’s after your heart.” Actions vs. motives.
5. How does man’s love, based on conditions — differ from God’s love, based on no conditions?
6. Knowing that God’s love for you is unconditional — does that allow you to let Him expose your weaknesses and frailties — so He can heal them?

² Packer, J.I., *God’s Plans for You* (Crossway, September 18, 2001)

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