

**Whose We Are:
Part Four. Faith and Our Spiritual Growth
I Thessalonians 5.23-24 and selected verses**

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This morning we pick up in our fall series on the key themes in I Thessalonians. In that letter Paul emphasizes the three Christian graces of faith, love and hope. This morning we wrap up our focus on what Paul has to say in this letter about *faith*.

I've shared a few different times the story of a phone conversation I had with a woman that I had never met before. Her brother, who was part of our church, had died, and she lived out of town.

I remember pausing before I picked up the phone. It wasn't a conversation I was looking forward to. The family had shared that she was not exactly an easy woman to interact with. It was the end of a long day, and I was tired. It was a full week, and didn't feel like I had the time. I was already getting home for dinner and to help Sharon with our four small kids. I really didn't want to call her. But in that pause, I prayed – that God would help me to give her what I didn't have.

We ended up talking for an hour. And it was a hard hour. Through much of it I wondered what the point of our conversation was. But I did what I could to listen and to try to bring a perspective of faith and hope to what was a really hard situation.

Two days later when I got to the funeral home for the service, the director brought me into the room to meet her. I was sort of behind the funeral director as we came into the room, with him telling her that I was there. She started to smile, and then she saw me and her face fell.

I said, "Is. . . is there something wrong?"

She said, "It's just that I thought you were going to look like Jesus."

What I brought to that woman in our conversation was a grumpy attitude and wishing I was doing something else. But, by the grace of God, that wasn't all. I brought more than merely me. Somehow I brought him too. God used my imperfect availability to minister to that woman by His Spirit in such a deep way that she felt as though she had spoken with him.

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When you think about the Christian life, what do you think of as the goal?

Is it for our sins to be forgiven? Is it to get us to heaven? Or is it something more?

I still remember reading CS Lewis's book *Mere Christianity* as an atheist college student who was on the brink of losing my faith in atheism. It remains one of the best books ever written about the Christian faith.

In it, Lewis tries to capture the mystery that we began to open up last Sunday, which is the way the Spirit of God equips us for the life of faith, empowering us from within to come alive to God, and then to become the sort of person he means us to be and to live the sort of life he means us to live.

You remember we talked last Sunday about how the Spirit of God makes us a new creation in Christ. When we come to Christ, we aren't the same person trying to live a new life. We are a new person.

Lewis writes:

[Jesus] never talked vague, idealistic gas. When he said, "Be perfect," He meant it. He meant that we must go in for the full treatment. It is hard; but the sort of compromise we are all hankering after is harder - in fact, it is impossible. It may be hard for an egg to turn into a bird: it would be a jolly sight harder for it to learn to fly while remaining an egg. We are like eggs at present. And you cannot go on indefinitely being just an ordinary, decent egg. We must be hatched or go bad.

... This is the whole of Christianity. There is nothing else. It is so easy to get muddled about that. It is easy to think that the Church has a lot of different objects - education, building, missions, holding services.

... The Church exists for nothing else but to draw men into Christ, [and] to make them little Christs. If they are not doing that, all the cathedrals, clergy, missions, sermons, even the Bible itself, are simply a waste of time. God became Man for no other purpose. It is even doubtful, you know, whether the whole universe was created for any other purpose.

Mere Christianity, CS Lewis, Book 4, Chapter 8

"To draw men [and women] into Christ, [and] to make them little Christs."

You may know that the word Christian means "little Christ."

That is why Jesus came. That is why the church exists. That's why God gave us his Spirit. To make us into little versions of himself, fit for ministry here on earth and for relationship with God for eternity.

Conversations about Christianity, which we held this past Wednesday night, were wonderful. If you are wrestling with the Christian faith, if there's something standing in the way of being a follower of Jesus, and you'd like a safe place to be able to talk about it, I really want to encourage you to come next month.

One of the great questions that was asked this week was this: How do you explain that indescribable something that sets apart followers of Jesus and makes them so attractive? What's the thing that lies at the heart of that and explains it? In a sense, this morning's message is the answer to that question.

As we said last Sunday, there are two ways of thinking about the Christian life:

What I do for God
What God does in and through me by His Spirit

From a biblical perspective, both are important, but the Christian life is meant to be understood primarily as the new life of God at work in us. Those of you who have been through Thrive know all about this.

As we've already pointed out, there are two aspects of the Spirit's work in a person's life. The first, which was our focus last Sunday, is that moment or season in a person's life when the Spirit brings them alive to God and brings about faith.

The second phase, which we'll be looking at this morning, is his work from that point forward, his ongoing work in us that brings about holiness, making us more and more into the people he intends us to be.

Here's the passage we'll be focusing on this morning

I Thessalonians 5.23-24

May God himself, the God of peace, sanctify you through and through. May your whole spirit, soul and body be kept blameless at the coming of our Lord Jesus Christ. The one who calls you is faithful, and he will do it.

Let's start by spending some time with that opening line.

What does Paul mean when he talks about God *sanctifying* us? That's not exactly a word we use every day.

The word means "make you holy." In English the words sanctify and saint and sacred are different from words like holy and hallow and holiness, but they all have the same word root in Greek.

The New Living Translation captures the meaning really clearly.

Now may the God of peace make you holy in every way.

Those of you who having been reading through the book of I Thessalonians regularly have discovered that holiness is a key theme of this letter.

Here are a few examples

I Thessalonians 4.3: It is God's will that you should be holy.

I Thessalonians 4.7: For God did not call us to be impure, but to live a holy life.

I Thessalonians 3.13: May he strengthen your hearts so that you will be blameless and holy.

Okay, sanctify means make you holy. But I'm not sure we're really any closer to knowing what Paul is saying here. Even though it's a more familiar word than sanctify, it's pretty hard to get our arms around. What is holiness?

As you know if you've spent any time in the Bible, *holy* is a word that is used to describe both God and everything and everyone that belongs to God.

The root idea of holiness is that there is an ordinary realm of ordinary people and ordinary things, and from that realm certain things are separated out. They are set apart, and they now belong to a separate sacred realm.

So the basic idea of holiness is "distinctive," "set apart." It doesn't fit in this realm any more. It belongs over there.

When the word is used to describe God, we tend to think of it as meaning morally perfect. And it certainly includes that. But God's holiness is so much more than his moral perfection. It is more accurate to think of holiness as God's perfection in every dimension of his character and not just in the moral realm.

Think about this. If we reduce God's holiness to mere moral perfection, then we might feel we can separate God's love from his holiness, and believe we are reflecting the heart of God when we hit people over the head with his holy standard in an unloving way. But God is not just morally perfect. He is perfect in every way, including in his love. And Jesus says, "Be perfect, as your Father in heaven is perfect. "

When we say God is holy that means God is *flawless* in every aspect of his character.

His love is flawless, his mercy is flawless, his care and compassion are flawless, his goodness is flawless, his greatness is flawless, his humility is flawless, his wisdom is flawless, his purposes are flawless, his ways are flawless.

So what does it mean when we talk about something or someone other than God being holy? What does it mean for us to be holy? Two things:

First, it has to do with *who we belong to* – whose we are. It means that we no longer belong to the ordinary realm. We have been set apart, and now we belong to God's realm. We have been given over to God. We are completely his.

Does that describe you?

Second, it has to do with *what sort of person we are* – what we are like. It means we are, or are becoming, flawless in character as God is flawless in character. We are becoming distinctive in the ways God is distinctive.

Our love is becoming distinctive like his is, so is our goodness and our humility, our care and compassion and mercy, our wisdom, so are our purposes and our ways.

Does that describe you?

So when it is used to describe us, holy means we belong completely to God and we are like God in his character.

The Voice paraphrase of our passage captures beautifully this twofold aspect of holiness.

May the God of peace make you His own completely and set you apart from the rest.

Those of you who have been reading your way through this letter to the church in Thessalonica know that, practically speaking, this process of being made holy involves a *turning from* and a *turning to*.

Turning from the ordinary realm, where everything is bent in upon itself, and turning up toward God and out toward others.

That turning from and turning to describes what happens at the moment of conversion.

I Thessalonians 1.9

You turned to God from idols to serve the living and true God

And it describes the constant continued turnings from and turnings to that are required of us ever since, turning *from* the way of life of those who don't know and belong to God...

I Thessalonians 5.5-6

You are all children of the light and children of the day. We do not belong to the night or to the darkness. So then, *let us not be like others*, who are asleep, but let us be awake and sober.

And turning to the way of life laid out for us by Jesus.

I Thessalonians 1.6

You became imitators of the Lord.

So now we really get to the heart of what holiness is about. Becoming like Jesus.

Remember our definition of holiness:

Holy means we belong to God and we are distinctive like God.
We are completely his, and completely like him.

Only one human being ever perfectly fulfilled both of those dimensions of holiness: Jesus.

Here's how the writer of the Book of Hebrews describes him.

Hebrews 7.26

For it was fitting for us to have such a high priest, holy, innocent, undefiled, separated from sinners and exalted above the heavens.

All through the New Testament we are told that God's project is *to make us holy*, as we've already seen.

But also, all through the New Testament we are also told that God's project is *to make us like Jesus*.

For example, look at these passages.

Romans 8:29: He predestined us to be conformed to the image of his Son

II Corinthians 3:18: We are being transformed into his image.

I John 3:2: When Christ appears, we shall be like him.

God is passionately concerned to make us holy, and he is passionately concerned to make us like Jesus. Turns out those are one and the same project.

By his Spirit, God is shaping us into *christoform* selves (as Hans Urs von Balthasar puts it), and calling us to live *cruciform* lives (as Jimmy Davis says). To become Christ-shaped people living cross-shaped lives.

So coming back to our passage, here is God's prayer for the Thessalonians and for us.

May God himself, the God of peace, sanctify you.
 May God make you holy.
 May God set you apart and make you completely his
 May God make you like Jesus.

All ways of saying the same thing.

And then Paul says his prayer is that God would do this, that he would make us like Jesus, *through and through*.

As Lewis said, that is why Jesus came. That is why the church exists. That's why God gave us his Spirit. To make us into little Christs.

To what extent would you say that describes you? To what extent does your life reflect that central purpose of God?

Look again at the last words in that verse: "through and through."

From our English translation you might think they were the same word. Not quite. The first word combines a word for entirely or completely with a word that refers to the end for which we were made, the reason we exist, who God intended for us to be from the start.

The second word combines the word for entirely or completely with a word that refers to the will of God, what pleases him, what his plans and purposes are in this world.

So . . . may God himself, the God of peace, make you like Jesus in a way that completely fulfills the intentions he had for you when he created you, and completely fulfills his will and purposes in this world as well.

There is no way we can read that sentence and conclude that in God's eyes we are unimportant. Or that who we are or the way we live our lives are unimportant.

This brings us to an incredibly encouraging part of this passage. Look at the last part of the verse.

I Thessalonians 5.23-24

May God himself, the God of peace, sanctify you through and through. May your whole spirit, soul and body be kept blameless at the coming of our Lord Jesus Christ. *The one who calls you is faithful, and he will do it.*

God will do it. He will sanctify you through and through. He will make you like Jesus.

Think about the implications of that last verse, and what that means for us in this period of time between our conversion, when the Spirit of God first brought us to life, and our death, when we will stand before the Lord in perfect Christlikeness and holiness.

The first implication is that, no matter where we find ourselves in the Christian life, brand new to Christ or his follower for decades, there is still a gap in our character between who we are and our being a fully Christlike version of ourselves.

If we are honest, we have to admit that there is a sizeable gap between our character and Christ's character. Our motives are less pure, our hearts are less selfless, our love is less kind and compassionate, our choices are less honoring, our regard for others is less sacrificial, and so on.

But the second implication is that the Spirit of God, who is alive within us, is working to close that gap. And he will. God promises he will see this work to completion.

Which leads to the third implication. Growth and progress are the norm for Christians. We should always be growing and deepening as followers of Christ. Not growing is not normal.

Paul makes this so clear in his letter to his brothers and sisters in Thessalonica.

Because the Spirit is alive within us, and because his ongoing work is to bring us closer to Christlikeness with each new day, there should be a *more and more* quality to our growth as followers of Jesus. Listen to how that idea echoes through this letter.

I Thessalonians 3.12: May the Lord make your love for one another and for all people grow *more and more*.

I Thessalonians 4.1: We instructed you how to please God. We urge you to do this *more and more*.

I Thessalonians 4.10: You love all of God's family. We urge you to do so *more and more*.

If it's true that our lives should have a more and more quality as Christians, then this should be true as well.

What that will mean is that at any season in our life we ought to be able to point to areas of our character where God is at work in us, where we are growing and making progress because of his faithful resolve to make us like Jesus, places where, as Tom Jameson put it in a recent session meeting, we can say not "I am changing" but "I am being changed."

And if we can't, if we can't point to places where we are growing, that should bring us prayerfully before the Lord, and move us to invite him to make clear to us the work that he is wanting to do in our lives to make our character more christiform.

What that will also mean is that at the end of each new day, one of the most important things I can do is look back and give God praise that, whatever else He was up to in my life, through the challenges and losses and struggles and joys I've faced, he has been forming Jesus in me, and I am more like Jesus today than I was yesterday.

And here's one other thing that will mean. At the beginning of each new day, one of the most important things I can do, maybe *the* most important thing I can do, is to invite the Spirit to make me like Jesus and cooperate with that work of transformation.

What does that look like?

I was thinking about a time when we were getting Sharon's mom ready to move in to our house and discovered the ceiling light and fan weren't working in her bath, and none of the new light fixtures fit on the old housing.

So I called Alan and the Helping Hands team and asked for some quick help, and they came over and put a new fan in.

But when they showed up, I didn't make them find their own way into the house, and figure out where things were, and track down what they needed, while I was busy with other things.

I went and got the new fan unit ahead of time. I met them at the door and showed them to the room. I asked if they needed anything, if there was anything I could do to help. I brought them a ladder and a work light, I showed them where the circuit breaker was, I offered them something to eat and drink.

Who did the work? They did. All of it.

What was my role, then? Invitation and cooperation. Hospitality and availability. Opening the doors in welcome and asking how I can help.

I think that's what God asks of us as the Spirit works in us each day to form us into little Christs.

As I said this summer, the Christian life is not a room we occupy, waiting for Jesus to come back and usher us into heaven. The Christian life is a path we walk, along which we are meant to make progress and learn and grow.

At any given point there is progress I can look back on, and there are places to grow that are still out in front of me. The life of faith is an active and vibrant process that engages and requires everything of me.

As you look at your Christian life, do you see growth and movement? Is your life more yielded to Jesus? Do you look more like him? Can you point to places in your life where he is at work today and you are cooperating?

Directly related to that, there's one other passage in Paul's letter to the Thessalonians where he mentions the Spirit of God. If you've been reading through the letter you might remember it.

I Thessalonians 5.19

Do not quench the Spirit.

As you're probably aware, the Spirit of God is described in the New Testament using lots of different images: wind, breath, water, and so on.

In Acts 2.3, the Spirit is described as being like a flame of fire. That's the imagery Paul has in mind in this line in I Thessalonians. Quench is a fire related word.

Think for a second. What does a fire want to do? To consume. It wants to grow and spread and consume, right?

Quenching means extinguish. Dousing a fire. Putting it out.

How do you quench a fire? We had a chimney fire in our house. Actually we had a few of them before we got wise and started having our chimney swept each year. A chimney fire starts when creosote from burning logs coats the inside of the chimney and then catches fire.

Well, one time our neighbors across the street called to tell us flames were coming out of the top of our chimney. So while Sharon called 911 I grabbed our fireplace tongs and grabbed the burning logs in the fireplace and carried them outside and then I closed the glass on the fireplace, quenching the fire by separating the flame inside from the oxygen and wood that could keep fueling it.

You quench a fire by removing the fuel. Of course, the opposite is true as well. If you want a fire to grow and spread, you give it all the fuel you can; you push anything that can burn within reach of the flame.

You and I, we are what the Spirit wants to consume. He wants us to be completely His. He wants to spread throughout our interior, and set every part of our lives on fire with his loving presence, to consume us and transform us into Jesus-like versions of ourselves.

Remember where we began, with CS Lewis describing what it looks like to cooperate with the work of the Spirit in transforming us into little Christs. Listen to these words from that same section of *Mere Christianity*:

The real problem of the Christian life comes where people do not usually look for it. It comes the very moment you wake up each morning. All your wishes and hopes for the day rush at you like wild animals. And the first job each morning consists simply in shoving them all back; in listening to that other voice ... letting that other larger, stronger, quieter life come flowing in. And so on, all day....

We can only do it for moments at first. But from those moments the new sort of life will be spreading through our system: because now we are letting Him work at the right part of us. It is the difference between paint, which is merely laid on the surface, and a dye or stain which soaks right through.

We quench the Spirit when we withhold ourselves from him. We cooperate with the Spirit, on the other hand, when we draw near to him in prayer and in worship and in scripture study and in reading the old Christian classics, and when we gather with other followers of Jesus.

We fuel his consuming fire when we bring within his reach our motives, our feelings, our desires, our ambitions, how we think about ourselves, the way we view others, how we deal with our hurts, the way we think about our time and our money, and when we invite him to be about his work of making us like Jesus in those areas.

In his journal, which is well worth reading, missionary Jim Elliot wrote this prayer:

Am I ignitable? God deliver me from the dread asbestos of 'other things.'
Saturate me with the oil of the Spirit that I may be a flame. . . . Make me Thy
Fuel, Flame of God.

How are you responding to the presence of the Spirit of God within you?
How might you open the doors wider, and draw nearer, and give him fuller access?
What would it look like to cooperate with his work of making you like Jesus?

Closing Prayer

Spirit of God, make me yours completely. Make me like Jesus.
And show me how I can cooperate with the work you are doing in my life.

Spirit of the Living God, fall afresh on me.
Melt me, mold me, fill me, use me.

Benediction (I Thessalonians 1.4 and 3.12)

Brothers and sisters, you are chosen by God and dearly loved.
May your love for Him, for one another, and for all others grow more and more.