

## 1 Thessalonians 4:1-8 God's Will - Your Sanctification (Part 1)

Paul's prayer is that their hearts would be "blameless in *holiness*." (3:11-13)

When we think of "holiness" we often think of it in negative terms..."don't do this, don't do that...to be holy you need to stop something, get rid of something." The biblical term "holiness" carries with it two ideas, neither of which is "negative."

The first is being "set apart." The utensils used in temple worship were "set apart" from all the other utensils that might be used for general housework or hospitality.

The second idea is that they were "set apart"..."*for a special purpose*." They weren't just pulled out and set apart in isolation; they were set apart to be *used for God's unique service and purposes*.

Holiness carries *both* ideas, "being set apart...for God's purpose." This is not a negative concept...it is as good, and right, and honorable as it gets. In chapter four, Paul expands on this prayer, and speaks about the practical expressions of "holiness." He grounds his comments in the biblical doctrine called "sanctification." (4:3)

If you look at 4:1-12, you will notice that as Paul speaks of their *sanctification*, he addresses these areas...sexual purity, brotherly love, right living and working hard. In other words—sex/relationships/money. That's pretty all inclusive and it's the categories we will follow over the next two weeks.

I have found in my own personal experience and in walking with others, that our *sanctification* can be the place of greatest confusion, frustration, and disappointment in the Christian life. Whether it is ignorance or misunderstanding—we lose heart and we lose hope when we fail to grasp this biblical doctrine.

### Context...

Finally, then, brothers, we ask and urge you in the Lord Jesus... (v.1)

"Finally" here does not mean we are at the end. It means Paul is transitioning in his purpose.

Remember in our introduction we said the book breaks into two sections: Chapters 1-3 – Paul is CONFIRMING of their faith, and confirming the validity of his own work among them. Chapters 4-6 – Paul is CHALLENGING their faith.

We might say it like this, in chapter four Paul moves from *explanation...to expectation*. We might paraphrase the beginning of chapter four like this..."Now then, moving from what is true of you; let me tell you what the truth requires of you."

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. For you know the **instructions** we gave you through the Lord Jesus. (v.1, 2)

The word “live” is literally “walk” – which is a common biblical metaphor describing a “way of life.” This phrase “walk and please God” is a biblical figure of speech called a Hendiadys {hen-die-a-dis}. It means “one through two.”

Paul is not describing two *different* activities – walking *and* pleasing God. He is talking about “*a walk that is pleasing to God.*” The emphasis is upon “pleasing God.”

Paul affirms that this is how they are living and he now CHALLENGES them to *do so more and more!!*

*(Application...)*

One thing this tells us about the Christian life is that *ongoing growth is not optional.* There are no plateaus, and there are no peaks...there is simply the path of spiritual growth that ever rises before us. (Not saying there are no “seasons” of rest). What I am saying is that Paul indicates that *we never arrive.*

None of us are at the same place on that path, but if we know Christ, *there is always another step of growth to take.*

That word “ought” (v.1) can mislead us. We understand it as giving us the option to do otherwise.

When I say to my one of my children, “you really *ought* to study for that test right now.” I’m giving them an option; they can study right now or not. They generally choose the latter.

That is not the meaning of this word. It is the Greek word “dei” {day} and it carries the thought of “necessity, that *one must*, that something is inevitable in the nature of things.”

Take my dog Pearl for instance. Cesar Milan says that dogs “see the world through their noses.” I never really thought about that till we got Pearl, and I’m telling you it is the truth. When I take Pearl out her nose goes to work and she smells everything.

It’s drives me “nuts” that Pearl has to see the world through her nose...when we go on walks and I’m constantly yanking her away from mailboxes and bushes where other dogs have pee’d. She cannot pass up another dogs poop. Getting her nose right down on top of it...

Pearl *must* smell the world...It is *inevitable in the nature of what she is – a dog.*

Paul says to the Thessalonians, “it is inevitable *in the nature of who you are* that you walk pleasing to God, *and* do so in an ever increasing manner.” Their spiritual growth was as certain as my dog Pearl stopping at a pile of poop.

*What an amazing statement.*

Now here is what some of us are thinking – “it sure is not in my nature to walk pleasing to God, for sure it’s not “inevitable” that I walk in ways that please Him more and more!”

Personally, I have felt that throughout my spiritual journey.

But when we think like this, it means we don’t clearly understand our “sanctification.”

### **Verse 3...**

For this is the will of God, your sanctification; that you abstain from sexual immorality;

### *Will of God*

Paul eliminates 98.8% of our struggle with God’s will in this passage. He clearly states that “God’s will” is our *sanctification*.

How important it is that we understand “sanctification!!” And when we understand it, we discover that 98.8% of God’s will for us is plain for us to see and grasp, not something we have to struggle and search for.

“Sanctification” here is the Greek word “hagiasmos” {hagee-os-mose} (hear the root word “holy” – hagios) and it speaks of *the process of growing in holiness*.

Paul is saying that *God’s will* – **that which pleases Him** – is that we live in such a way that *holiness* becomes more and more evident in our daily lives.

Remember the definition of holiness... It should become increasingly evident that we are a people “*set apart for God’s purposes*.”

Simply staying in the context here of 1 Thessalonians we see ...

- 4:1 – *God’s will* is that we live to please Him in ever increasing ways
- 4:3-8 – *God’s will* is that we live lives that are sexually pure
- 4:9 – *God’s will* is that we love one another in ever increasing ways
- 4:10 – *God’s will* is that we live quietly and mind our own business
- 4:11 *God’s will* is that we work hard
- 5:16-17 – *God’s will* is that we rejoice, pray, and give thanks at all times in all circumstances

And it is amazing how faithfulness in that which we *know to do*, brings clarity, courage and confidence when we do come to those places that are not black and white, that require discernment, and Solomon-like wisdom. (.2% of life)

It seems that what God *cares most* about are those things that have to do with our *sanctification* – not our standard of living, where we live, our job, school, or career. I'm going to go out on a limb here...He is more concerned with our *character and spiritual maturity* than the specific person we marry.

## **Sanctification**

Sanctification is...

**GRADUALLY BECOMING WHAT YOU ALREADY ARE AND ONE DAY WILL BE.**

<b>SANCTIFICATION</b> hagios=holy		
“hagiazo” – <i>Fixed state</i>		“hagiasmos” – <i>Dynamic process</i>
<b>POSITIONAL</b>	<b>PROGRESSIVE</b>	<b>PERFECT</b>
<b>PAST</b> (1 Cor. 6:11) “hagiazo”  Legally set apart from the <i>penalty</i> of sin	<b>PRESENT</b> (1 Thess. 4:3) “hagiosmos”  Increasingly set apart from the <i>power</i> of sin	<b>FUTURE</b> ( 1 Thess. 5:23)“hagiazo”  Finally set apart from the <i>presence</i> of sin
<b>Declared Holy</b> (1 Cor. 1:2)	<b>Grow</b> in Holiness (2 Cor. 3:18)	<b>Perfectly Holy</b> (1 John 3:2)
<b>Cannot</b> be improved upon nor diminished	<b>Can</b> be improved upon or diminished	<b>Cannot</b> be improved upon nor diminished
<b>Faith</b> resting and dependent	<b>Faith</b> active and obedient	<b>Faith</b> resting and dependent
Christians <b>are identical</b>	Christians <b>not identical</b>	Christians <b>are identical</b>
<i>We progress</i> in sanctification as the Spirit enables us to understand and apply the truth of God's Word. (2 Thess. 2:13)		
God initiates and provides all that is required <ul style="list-style-type: none"> <li>• Decreed by the Father (chosen)</li> <li>• Secured by the Son (life, death and resurrection)</li> <li>• Applied by the Spirit (regenerates and empowers)</li> </ul>		

Notice how our definition is explained in this chart...

*Gradually* – by degree, incremental...not instantaneous

*Becoming* – it is ongoing and it is never complete this side of heaven

*Already are* – positionally holy, just, righteous, separated from sin's penalty

*Will one day be* – 1 John 3:2...when He appears we will be like Him

Another way to say this, a bit more comprehensive:

*Sanctification is the work of **God** that progressively transforms us into the image of **Jesus** by the power of the **Spirit** and the application of His Word.*

Or...

*Sanctification is the life of Christ, gradually formed in the life of the believer, by the power of the Spirit Who enables active obedience to the Word*

### **Implications of the doctrine of Sanctification...**

**Question:** “So does this mean I don’t have to *do anything* once I am saved since I’m declared holy and righteous when I trusted Christ, and one day I will be holy and righteous when I die or Christ returns?”

**Answer:** Absolutely not! Sanctification is a “package deal.” Positional, progressive and perfect sanctification are a unity, they are inseparable.

The absence of progressive sanctification *over time* implies the absence of positional sanctification at some point in time. (If someone says they are a Christian, but over time – and it may be a long time – if there is no visible evidence of progressing in sanctification [not perfectly...but some progress] then the issue is not progressive sanctification...but are they truly born again, are they truly a Christian?)

If we have truly believed, placed our trust in Christ, then sanctification – all parts of sanctification – will follow, just as surely as night follows day. It cannot be otherwise.

Let me take you back to my dog Pearl. Why does Pearl see the world through her nose? Why does she stick her nose in dog poop? It is her *nature*. She can do no other.

When you and I trust Christ, we are given a new nature (2 Cor. 5:17), Christ lives in us, and His nature is not to stick His nose in poop. He won’t, because of His nature...He can’t. Our new nature IS HOLY and will of necessity pursue holiness...a life of gradually being “set apart” and “used for God’s purposes.”

Not perfectly, not even steadily, but *over time*...progressively and certainly. If you are truly a regenerate Christian *it cannot be otherwise according to the Bible.*

Peter tells us in 2 Peter 1:3 that God has given us “all things that pertain to life and godliness” through faith in Christ. (We have all that we need.) Interestingly, after telling us we have all we need, he says...”For this very reason, make every effort to live godly.”

If we look at the life of Paul, we most certainly see a sanctified man, and his life was never void of struggle, pain, striving, running, walking – *making every effort* – to live godly. (Progressive sanctification)

Let me leave you with three words that get at three immediate effects an understanding of the doctrine of sanctification can have on our daily lives...

### **1. Gratitude**

God has done for us what we could never do for ourselves. Our past is forgiven, our future is secure because of what He has done and will do.

### **2. Hope**

When we understand sanctification, we understand that our conversion did not instantly make us “holy” *in word and deed*. We can remove the weight of trying to live perfectly because we can’t and never will this side of heaven. Part of our sanctification is progressive not instantaneous. It is gradual, sometimes even imperceptible in the short run, but over time it becomes evident.

Sure there are times when we take two steps forward and three back. But we will never, we can never go all the way back.

This is never, ever an excuse for disobedience...”I can’t help it.” The doctrine of sanctification tells us that by God’s grace, through His Spirit and Word...”We can help it.”

Sanctification doesn’t simply tell us that we “must change.” It tells us that we “can” change. Not easy, harder for some than others for a variety of reasons.

But all of us can make progress in this life.

### **3. Purpose**

The doctrine of sanctification gives us a purpose for living. In fact I would say there is no higher calling, no greater responsibility, nothing we could do in this world that is of more profound significance – than to grow in sanctification.

Think about this...God could have eliminated this whole middle section. When someone places their trust in Christ, he could have swooped them immediately into His eternal presence, after all, that is where we are all ultimately going in the end.

But He leaves us here. On this sin wracked planet. In these bodies that are still bent toward selfishness and immorality, with a humanity bent the same way.

- He leaves us on this planet where billions go to bed hungry, without clothes or shelter.
- Where justice is seldom served, where evil often comes out on top, and bad things happen to good people.
- He leaves us on this planet where guilt, and shame and fear is the air we breathe.

*Why?*

So that we would grow more and more into the image of His Son, our selfishness replaced by His selflessness. He leaves us so we will **mature in the faith and give our lives away.**

Then we do crazy things like leaving all we have, and giving all we have to feed the hungry, clothe the poor and give shelter to those in need.

We fight for justice, against evil, and comfort the hurting.

And we proclaim the gospel to world...that all might know of God's great love and provision in His Son Jesus...breathing the pure oxygen of Grace, Grace, Grace.

And as we "walk pleasing Him more and more" ...we show a dark world the light of God's glory.

*There is no higher calling, no greater purpose in the universe, than our sanctification. And there is nothing more certain!*