MAY GOD SANCTIFY YOU

1 Thessalonians 5:19-28

Key Verses: 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.”

Thank God for the wonderful words of God, “Be joyful always; pray continually; give thanks in all circumstances, for this is God’s will for you in Christ Jesus.” These words of God may be rooted in our hearts and lives. Today’s passage is the last part of Paul’s final pastoral instructions and the last message in our study of 1 Thessalonians. Here again Paul mentions the sanctification. This time it is his prayer in an optative sentence for the believers and the assurance of God sanctifying them. There are also several other staccato commands of Apostle Paul as he concludes this epistle. These commands are also important in our Christian living.

**First, five staccato commands (19-22).** Paul says in verse 19, “Donot put out the Spirit’s fire.” The Holy Spirit indwells believers and works in the community of God’s people. Those who are in Christ live by the Spirit. The Spirit is there like a fire, not to be quenched, but to be fanned into full flame. Paul also says in Ephesians 4:30, “Do not grieve the Holy Spirit of God.” We should be sensitive to how the Spirit responds and discern how the Spirit leads us. And God wants us to be filled with the Spirit. However, it is easy to grieve or put the Spirit’s fire in us, in others or among God’s community. This happens when we ignore or reject God’s word. But when we repent hearing the word of God, the Spirit revives in us. When we are absorbed in the things of the world, we quench the Spirit’s fire. We need to draw our attention from this world to God at each time of distraction. When our prayer life dwindles, so does the Spirit. Paul rebukes Galatians in Galatians 3:3, “After beginning with the Spirit, are you now trying to finish by means of the flesh?” Christian life is to live by the Spirit with faith in God from first to last. Human-centred life or human-oriented relationship putting God aside puts out the Spirit’s fire. Paul says clearly, “Do not put out the Spirit’s fire.”

Paul continues in verse 20, “do not treat prophecies with contempt.” The word “prophecies” can refer to a spoken revelation from God, but most often refers to the written word of Scripture. These “prophecies” are authoritative messages from God through a well-recognized spokesman, and, because of the divine origin, they are not to be treated lightly. 2 Peter 1:19-21 says, “And we have the word of the prophets made more certain…Above all, you must understand that no prophecy of Scripture came about by the prophet’s own interpretation. For prophecy never had its origin in the will of man, but men spoke from God as they were carried along by the Holy Spirit.” Vitally, we are to have a right attitude toward the written words of the Scriptures. Particularly, the words in 1 Thessalonians 4:15-16 and 5:1-2 are the words of prophecy. And Revelation is a book of prophecy. The word “prophecy” appears 6 times. Revelation 1:3 says, “Blessed is the one who reads the words of this prophecy, and blessed are those who hear it and take to heart what is written in it, because the time is near.” In 19:10, “…the testimony of Jesus is the spirit of the prophecy.” In 22:7, Jesus says, “Behold, I am coming soon! Blessed is he who keeps the words of the prophecy in this book.” In 22:10, an angel said to John, “Do not seal up the words of the prophecy of this book, because the time is near.” And 22:18-19 says, “I warn everyone who hears the words of the prophecy of this book…And if anyone takes words away from this book of prophecy, God will take away from him his share in the tree of life and in the holy city, which are described in this book.” Apostle Paul says, “Do not treat prophecies with contempt.”

In verse 21, “Test everything.” We are living in a deceptive world where the devil, the father of lies, works rampantly. There are so many dangers in life. Nowadays many young people just want fun and good luck, and in such a living they are deceived and misled. Then they are misled to the point of not being able to be turned back. How important it is to have discernment in our Christian life! First of all, we should test ourselves. 2 Corinthians 13:5 says, “Examine yourselves to see whether you are in the faith; test yourselves.” If the testing of ourselves is wrong, our testing of all thing goes wrong. Paul said in 1 Timothy 4:16, “Watch your life and doctrine closely…” We remember we are to test everything through the lens of God’s word. Psalm 12:6 says, “The words of the LORD are flawless, like silver refined in a furnace of clay, purified seven times.” Definitely, we should study the word of God with a God-fearing pure heart (Ps 19:9). We also need prudency in life. We should not be gullible. Proverbs 14:15 says, “A simple man believes anything, but a prudent man gives thought to his steps.” It is written 2 times in Proverbs 22:3 and 27:12, “A prudent man sees danger and takes refuge, but the simple keep going and suffer for it.” We should know that a man of simple faith is different from a simple man. A man of simple faith believes the word of God which is trustworthy and put it into practice, simply trusting in God. Simple faith and prudence go together. 1 John 4:1 says, “Dear friends, do not believe every spirit, but test the spirits to see whether they are from God, because many false prophets have gone out into the world.” We really need a discerning heart to read or interpret our times and live a discreet and prayerful life.

Verse 21 continues, “Hold on to the good.” We should not let the good go. What is found to be good is to be wholeheartedly embraced. James 1:17 says, “Every good and perfect is from above coming down from the Father…” Hebrews 2:1-3 say, “We must pay more careful attention to what we have heard, so that we do not drift away. For if the message spoken by angels was binding, and every violation and disobedience received its just punishment, how shall we escape if we ignore such a great salvation?” We should really hold on to the great salvation in Christ Jesus. Paul said in 1 Corinthians 15:1-2, “…I want to remind you of the gospel I preached to you, which you received and on which have taken your stand. By this gospel you are saved, if you hold firmly to the word I preached to you. Otherwise, you have believed in vain.”

And in verse 22 he says, “Avoid every kind of evil.” What is evil is to be shunned. As we studied, 1 Corinthians 6:18 says, “Flee from sexual immorality.” And Paul says in 1 Corinthians 14:20 says, “…In regard to evil be infants, but in your thinking be adults.” In Romans 16:19 he says, “…I want you to be wise about what is good, and innocent about what is evil.” In this world, people say, “Embrace all whether good or evil, and you will grow becoming a adult.” That’s the devil’s sweet lie. “Shun evil” is a clear teaching of the Bible. Job 28:28 says, “…The fear of the Lord—that is wisdom, and to shun evil is understanding.” Those who do not shun evil fall into a bottomless pit, going down and down, and live in confusion and chaos throughout their lives. Shunning evil is an important part of repentance, and it is understanding. Proverbs 3:7 says, “Do not be wise in your own eyes; fear the LORD and shun evil.”

Let’s remember these staccato commands, “Do not put out the Spirit’s fire; do not treat prophecies with contempt. Test everything. Hold on to the good. Avoid every kind of evil” and have them as guidelines in our lives.

**Second, he will sanctify you (23-24).** Now in verse 23 Paul says, “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.” The God of peace was the one who sacrificed his Son in order to reconcile sinners to himself, the holy God. Colossians 1:19 says, “For God was pleased to have all his fulness dwell in him, and through him to reconcile to himself all things, whether things on earth or things in heaven, by making peace through his blood, shed on the cross.” And in 1:21-22, “Once you were alienated from God and were enemies in your minds because of your evil behaviour. But now he has reconciled you by Christ’s physical body through death to present you holy in his sight…” Here Paul says, “May God himself, the God of peace, sanctify you through and through.” The God of peace will be eager to sanctify us.

Hebrews 10:10 says, “And by that will, we have been made holy through the sacrifice of the body of Jesus Christ once for all.” Then a question can arise in our hearts, “If we have been made holy through Christ’s sacrifice once for all, why do we need sanctification?” We are to understand that we are holy as to our position before God. By Christ’s work on the cross God has set us apart unto himself, gave us a holy nature, an indwelling Holy Spirit, clothed with Christ’s righteousness. This happens at the time of justification through our faith in Christ Jesus. So believers are called saints from the beginning of their lives of faith. This aspect of sanctification is fixed. It causes us to desire God’s will, to love God, to hate sin and to long to obey. Then we go through the actual process of sanctification until we enter into ultimate sanctification, that is our glorification, the redemption of our body, coming out of our fallen humanness.

Subsequently, Christian life is the life of sanctification. It is as if you have sin on the one hand, holiness on the other hand, and you are moving in progression away from sin to holiness. Paul had said in 1 Thessalonians 4:3, “It is God’s will that you should be sanctified.” We should make every effort to obey this will of God for us to be sanctified. Apostle Peter also says in 1 Peter 14-15, “As obedient children, do not conform to the evil desires you had when you lived in ignorance. But just as he who called you is holy, so be holy in all you do; For it is written: ‘Be holy, because I am holy.’” But here Paul prays in an optative sentence, “May God…sanctify you through and through.” Our struggle to be sanctified and God sanctifying us are to go together. We do our part of obeying his commands for our sanctification and God will complete it. It means that in our effort for the sanctification we are to humbly and solely rely on God sanctifying us.

Then Paul continues to say in verse 19, “May your whole spirit, soul and body be kept blameless at the coming of our Lord Jesus Christ.” It is notable that Paul ends each chapter of this epistle with the description of the Lord’s coming: “…to wait for his Son from heaven, whom he raised from the dead—Jesus, who rescues us from the coming wrath” (1:10), “What is our hope, our joy, or the crown in which we will glory in the presence of our Lord Jesus when he comes?” (2:19), “May he strengthen you hearts so that you will be blameless and holy in the presence of our God and Father when our Lrod Jesus comes with all his holy ones” (3:13), “…will be caught up together with them in the clouds to meet the Lord in the air” (4:17), and here “…be kept blameless at the coming of our Lord Jesus” (5:23). The Thessalonians were young Christians. But they waited for Jesus God’s Son from heaven, and Paul spoke of the Lord’s coming repeatedly. Believers are to have faith in Christ’s death and resurrection and in his coming again, from the beginning. And here in 5:23 with the expectation of the completion of our sanctification, that is, our glorification, at his coming.

And Paul says in 20, “The who calls you is faithful, and he will do it.” What an assurance for our complete sanctification! Paul also says in 1 Corinthians 1:8-9 says, “He will keep you strong to the end, so that you will be blameless on the day of our Lord Jesus Christ. God, who has called you into fellowship with his Son Jesus Christ, is faithful.” Jude 24 says, “To him who is able to keep you from falling and to present you before his glorious presence without fault and with great joy.” Paul believed that the faithful God would sanctify the believers in Christ Jesus.

Yet, we are to know how God sanctifies us. Our faithful God sanctifies us through the words of truth and through all hardships in life. We remember Jesus’ prayer for his disciples in John 17:17, “Sanctify them by the truth; your word is truth.” The Israelites could survive in the desert through manna which God rained from heaven every day. The meaning is that man does not live on bread alone but on every word that comes from the mouth of God. God rains down his word of spiritual manna from heaven as we come to him each morning, so that we may be sanctified by his word of truth. And God sanctifies us the trials and hardships in life. So we need a right attitude at each hardship we face in life. Certainly, God sanctified Joseph through 13 years of his prison life. As we studied in James, we are to consider trials of many kinds pure joy, for the testing of our faith develops perseverance, through which we can grow mature. Hebrews 12:7-11, “Endure hardship as discipline; God is treating you as sons. For what son is not disciplined by his father? If you are not disciplined, then you are illegitimate children and not true sons…God disciplines us for our good, that we may share in his holiness. No discipline seems pleasant at the time, but painful. Later on, however, it produces a harvest of righteousness and peace for those who have been trained by it.” Thank God who sanctifies us.

**Third, Paul’s charge (25-28).** Paul says inverses 25-27, “Brothers, pray for us. Greet all the brothers with a holy kiss. I charge you before the Lord to have this letter read to all the brothers.” In this epistle of Thessalonians, 1:2 said, “We always thank God for all of you, mentioning you in our prayers.” Paul continually prayed for them.  And now at the end he turns the table and says, “Pray for us.” In fact, if you study Paul’s 13 epistles, it is the pattern of Paul to open his epistles with the assurance that he is praying for the church and to close the epistle by asking the church to pray for him.  This reciprocal mutual intercession was vital.  He sought it and valued the prayers of his people. When we think of Paul, he was a great man of God, matchless. Yet, he had limitations of his own capabilities and his own knowledge.  There was much opposition from formidable enemies set against him and he continually calls on people to intercede for him. In truth, humble people ask for others’ prayer support.

And in verse 26 Paul says, “Greet all the brothers with a holy kiss.” The word "greet" is intended to be warm and friendly, not distant, and cold.  It was a common conclusion to send loving thoughts to someone in a letter. Again, this is an expression of warm and friendly heart.

Then Paul says in verse 27, “I charge you before the Lord to have this letter read to all the brothers.” Here “charge” is in Greek *enorkizō*. It means to bind with an oath. It is dead serious. Here what Paul says is, “I am binding you to be sure that you make every one hear this.” As we have studied, how important and serious this letter is with the description of the church the bride of Christ meeting the bridegroom in the air and the day of the Lord, the day of destruction coming suddenly like a thief. We know that at that time, there was no printing. So this letter had to be read to all the Thessalonians, aloud. It means “You have an obligation to the Lord to read it to everybody.” The point is that those who know the words of God have a solemn charge to let others also know the words of God so that each one’s life destiny might be changed from eternal destruction to eternal life. This is the reason, Paul said in 2 Timothy 4:1-2, “In the presence of God and of Christ Jesus, who will judge the living and the dead, and in view of his appearing and his kingdom, I give you this charge: Preach the Word: be prepared in season and out of season…” Paul also said in 1 Corinthians 15:3-4, “For what I received I passed on to you as of first importance: that Christ died for our sins according to the Scriptures, was buried and was raised on the third day according to the Scriptures.”

Finally in verse 28, “The grace of our Lord Jesus Christ be with you.” Paul began and ended all his letters with “grace.”  It was the first and the last word. All that God provides in Christ is summed up in the word “grace.”

Let’s keep the words of prayer, “May God himself, the God of peace, sanctify you through and through…The one who calls you is faithful, and he will do it.” With the assurance of God’s sanctifying us we may go through sanctification holding on to what is good and avoid/shun evil.