

July 15, 2001 by Steve Brandon



Final Requests

1 Thessalonians 5:23-28

1. Prayer (:23)
2. Promise (:24)
3. Request (:25)
4. Greeting (:26)
5. Mandate (:27)
6. Benediction (:28)

I would like to begin tonight by thanking the Lord for all the work that you (as a congregation) have done for us to help us in the moving process. As you all know, we moved to Rockford last Tuesday evening.

- You helped us prepare our house to sell by spending a work day cleaning it up.
- You helped us pack our belongings into a truck on July 4th.
- You helped us unload the truck on July 10th.

Yvonne and I have been furiously working to settle the physical affairs of our house. We have been up past midnight nearly every day this week. We have put our bodies to work in being busy with the affairs of the house that we might quickly be able to direct our full attention to the affairs of the church. We have made enough progress to be able to host a gathering immediately after church tonight. There will be some snacks and dessert over there. As we are done here, we will pack up as quickly as possible and migrate over to 7430 Tulagi Trail for a time of fellowship as long as you wish to stay.

Having said that, let's open our Bibles to 1 Thessalonians. In our study of 1 Thessalonians, this is the 28th (and last) message.

I think that it was good of us to begin our "official expositions" with this book. Of all of his letters in the Bible, Paul wrote this epistle first.

Allow me to read for you our text this evening. 1 Thess. 5:23-28.

1 Thessalonians 5:23-28

5:23. 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.

5:24 Faithful is He who calls you, and He also will bring it to pass.

5:25 Brethren, pray for us.

5:26 Greet all the brethren with a holy kiss.

5:27 I adjure you by the Lord to have this letter read to all the brethren.

5:28 The grace of our Lord Jesus Christ be with you.

In the text before us this evening, we have a Prayer, a Promise, a Request, a Greeting, a Mandate and a Benediction (as I have listed in your notes).

Paul prays in verse 23.

A promise is given in verse 24.

A request is made in verse 25.

A greeting is given in verse 26.

A mandate is ordered in verse 27.

A benediction is pronounced in verse 28.

Obviously in this passage, Paul is directing the church to action in many different areas of church life. Paul had certainly responded to all that Timothy reported (3:6) to him and feels that his instruction is complete. He closes with a few thoughts that would quickly wrap up the letter.

- He prays for them.
- He gives them a promise.
- He asks them to pray for him.
- He greets them.
- He asks them to read his letter.
- He pronounces a blessing upon them.

I originally thought, as I began to prepare for tonight's message, that this portion of scripture (being at the end of the epistle) would be pretty simple and straightforward. I thought that there would be few theological problems or difficulties with the text.

However, I was quickly proved wrong.

There are several theological and practical difficulties found in this text.

1. Complete Sanctification? (5:23)

- What does it mean to be "completely sanctified"?

2. Dichotomy/Trichotomy? (5:23)

- What are we all made up of? Are we three parts? Spirit, Soul, Body? Are each of these unique? Or, are we two parts? Spirit and Body? Or, Soul and Body?

3. The practice of the "holy kiss." (5:26)

- Should we do this today?

And I trust that through the exposition of this passage, we will deal with each of these as they arise in the text. Let us first look, this evening, at Paul's closing Prayer.

1. Prayer (:23)

Verse 23 - "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."

Paul prays for the Thessalonians to be sanctified (i.e. set apart, made holy or pure). As we have seen before (particularly, last week), the sanctification of the Thessalonians was an ever present concern of his (as it ought to have been). This theme had been picked up primarily in chapter 4, where Paul said (in verse 3), "this is the will of God, your sanctification." In 4:7 Paul repeated the thought, "God has not called us for the purpose of impurity, but in sanctification." His crescendoing admonitions in chapters 4 and 5 echo the same thing.

God has saved you. God's next purpose in your life is to sanctify you.

Paul prays to that end: "Now may the God of peace Himself sanctify you" (verse 23).

Notice that this is almost identical the first prayer in this epistle, which is found in 3:11-13.

1 Thessalonians 3:11-13

3:11 Now may our God and Father Himself and Jesus our Lord direct our way to you;

3:12 and may the Lord cause you to increase and abound in love for one another, and for all men, just as we also [do] for you;

3:13 so that He may establish your hearts unblamable in holiness (i.e. sanctification) before our God and Father at the coming of our Lord Jesus with all His saints.

We ought to be encouraged that Paul surrounds all of his practical exhortations (of chapters 4 and 5) by two prayers that God would sanctify the Thessalonians. At the end of chapter 3, he prays for their sanctification. In chapters 4 and 5, he gives some 30 commands for us to obey. At the end of them, he prays for their sanctification. In essence, Paul says, "I pray to God that he would sanctify you. Here is how you need to walk as a Christian. May God carry this out in you."

I believe that this gives for us a clear picture of what Biblical sanctification looks like. On the one hand, your sanctification is entirely a work of God. On the other hand, your sanctification is dependant upon your obedience to God's commands. May we never forget this.

Paul lays it out for us. "Now may our God and Father Himself ... establish your hearts unblamable in holiness" (3:11-13). "Now may the God of peace Himself sanctify you" (5:23). Yet, with all of his practical exhortations, he never says, "Since God will sanctify you, don't worry, don't obey, simply be passive. God will sanctify you." No, Paul says, "obey!"

Paul directs the Thessalonians in obedience: "See that no one repays another with evil for evil, but always seek after that which is good for one another and for all men. Rejoice always; pray without ceasing; in everything give thanks; ... Examine everything; hold fast to that which is good; abstain from every form of evil" (5:15-22).

This is the Biblical balance. On the one hand we are exhorted to holiness. On the other hand, our holiness is a work of God. This isn't too difficult to see. Practical exhortations, which instruct us how to live, abound in the word of God. We ought to respond in holiness to these. As we grow in grace, our lives will continue to increase in likeness to Jesus Christ.

Yet, how many of you feel that by your own effort, you will increase in likeness to Jesus Christ? The anguish of the believer is that he is powerless to effect a change in his life. Try as he like, the believer in Jesus Christ continues to see his sin and his lack of holiness which he can effect upon his own effort. Sanctification is a work of God, every bit as much as salvation is.

The Christian sanctification process is like climbing a mountain. When you almost think that you have arrived at the peak of the mountain, you realize that there is no other peak to be conquered. Work and work at it, and it seems as if the ultimate goal of complete righteousness always escapes you.

Let's notice the extent to which Paul prays for the Thessalonians: "Now may the God of peace Himself sanctify you entirely; and may your

spirit and soul and body be preserved complete, [and] without blame at the coming of our Lord Jesus Christ" (verse 23).

This is no half-hearted prayer of Paul's. This isn't in any way a concession to an "acceptable level" of sanctification. This is especially dangerous in America today. I feel that many people within the church are happy and content with their level of sanctification. They have conquered gross sin in their life. They have their religion down to a routine and want to keep it that way. They have their established devotional time. They have their regular church time (it starts at 10:30 sharp and ends at high noon). They give their regular amount to the church. They go on their merry way.... All is well....

But, this wasn't the heart of Paul. Paul prayed that God would sanctify entirely! Paul prayed that the Thessalonians would continue to purge themselves of sin until Christ would come again. Paul prayed that the Thessalonian believers would never be satisfied with any sin.

Notice that he isn't praying here that we would be sanctified in our position. Everyone who believes in Jesus and trust in Him is sanctified at the moment of their salvation. When Paul addressed the Corinthians (who had a long way to go in their sanctification), he addressed them as "those who have been sanctified in Christ Jesus" (1 Corinthians 1:2).

He is praying that we would be sanctified in our practice. Paul is praying for our living. Paul desired that every admonition given in chapters 4 and 5 to be experienced by the Thessalonians completely.

Theological Difficulty #1: Complete Sanctification?

This raises the question of whether or not a Christian can ever become sinless. There is a doctrine called, "Entire Sanctification." When in college, I attended a Wesleyan church for some time and I remember this actually being taught from the pulpit! People actually teach that you may experience sinlessness in this life. This, of course, was a doctrine held by John Wesley.

I know why some come to believe this. There are some texts, which taken in isolation and mis-interpreted, might lead you to believe that you can reach such a sinless state. (Philippians 3:12; Rom. 6; 1 Peter 4:1,2; 1 John 3:8; 1 John 5:18). For instance, the text before us. Why would Paul pray for us to be sanctified entirely if we couldn't ever obtain such a state? And so the reasoning goes that this state must be possible!

I believe it to be wrong. I'll give you two reasons why it is wrong.

1. The Bible

Romans 7 is the clearest example of the believer struggling with sin. There is a constant, nagging inability in the believer to do what is right all the time.

Psalms 119 is filled with many longings for obedience.

119:4 - "You have ordained Your precepts, that we should keep them diligently."

119:5 - "Oh that my ways may be established to keep Your statutes."

119:133 - "Establish my footsteps in Your word, and do not let any iniquity have dominion over me."

119:176 - "I have gone astray like a lost sheep; seek Thy servant."

The emphatic emphasis of the Scripture is that it is only Christ Jesus, alone who was righteous. We all trust in His righteousness. Nowhere in the Bible did anyone ever claim to reach such a perfected state. In fact, the testimony of the Bible is that God saves those who stray. Read Genesis. It is a story of the patriarchs of our faith - those rotten, deceitful scoundrels.

2. Experience

Personally, as hard as I try, I know that I am far from perfect.

The testimony of others. I know someone whose father-in-law claims that he has reached this state of entire sanctification. This man claims that he hasn't "willfully" sinned for years, even though his own family would testify that his relationship with his wife is not good. I remember of a man telling me that one of his teachers in high school or junior high school teacher told the class that he had reached a similar state. The man telling me this story told me that you should never tell this to teenagers. He said that he and his friends were ruthless whenever the teacher made any kind of mistake.

Yet, having said this, complete sanctification ought to be our desire. This ought to be our aim -- to reach entire sanctification.

Furthermore, we ought not to look down upon those who believe that such a state of perfection is possible, but ought to imitate them in their efforts. Those who believe they can reach such a state will strive to obtain it. I believe that there will be blessings for those who devoutly set themselves to seek earnestly after holiness and perfection.

So ought we to pray as Paul did, "God, sanctify me entirely." We ought to pray, as did Francis Havergal, "Take my life and let it be, consecrated, Lord to Thee." "Take my will, and make it Thine, it shall be no longer mine." This is the cry of the believer in Jesus Christ: "God, Change my heart of God, may I be like you." "God, let me love you completely!"

When was the last time that you prayed a prayer like that?

Let's look at the next petition (found in the second half of verse 23): "May your spirit and soul and body be preserved complete, without blame at the coming of our Lord Jesus Christ."

This is similar to the other request, only the emphasis here isn't so much on God's sanctifying work as it is on God's persevering work until the end. ("May you be preserved complete, without blame at the coming of our Lord Jesus Christ.") While the first request was for practical sanctification, this request is for the ultimate culmination of one's salvation.

The LORD is the one who keeps us. We will persevere in our salvation, because it is God who will cause us to persevere! This was the point of the Psalmist:

Psalm 121:5-8

121:5 The LORD is your keeper; The LORD is your shade on your right hand.

121:6 The sun will not smite you by day, Nor the moon by night.

121:7 The LORD will protect you from all evil; He will keep your soul.

121:8 The LORD will guard your going out and your coming in From this time forth and forever.

This the point of Romans 8? "Whom He foreknew, He also predestined, ... whom He predestined, these he also called; and whom He called, these He also justified; and whom He justified, these He also glorified" (Romans 8:29-30).

This is the point of the hymn writer:

"The soul that on Jesus hath leaned for repose
I will not, I will not desert to his foes;
That soul, tho' all hell should endeavor to shake,
I'll never, no, never, no, never forsake!"

Theological Difficulty #2: Dichotomy or Trichotomy?

The theological issue that has often arisen from this verse is the question of the constituent parts of man. Does this verse give us a technical picture of what we are? Are we made up of 3 parts? Spirit, Soul, and Body? Are all three being different? Many have said so.

I don't want to get into this too much, only to say that there are many, many other places in Scripture where man is seen as only having 2 parts -- the physical and the meta-physical (or, the material and immaterial). For instance,

Matt. 10:28 - "Do not fear those who kill the body, but are unable to kill the soul."

Rom. 8:10 - "If Christ is in you, though the body is dead because of sin, yet the spirit is alive because of righteousness."

1 Pet. 3:18 - Christ was ... "put to death in the flesh, but made alive in the spirit."

Furthermore, there are also places in the Bible where man is described by 4 different parts. Hebrews 4:12 speaks of a soul, a spirit, joints, and marrow.

I believe that the best way to understand how we are made up is to understand ourselves to be made up of two things: the material and the immaterial. Though our flesh is made up of different elements (joints and marrow), they all form a cohesive whole, so also is our immaterial substance made up of several elements (soul and spirit), which form a cohesive whole.

But, let us not forget Paul's point here. When Paul mentions, spirit, soul, and body, I believe his point to be that he prays for all of you to be preserved complete (i.e. your whole being) (i.e. every bit of you) at the coming of our Lord Jesus Christ.

2. Promise (:24)

Verse 24 - "Faithful is He who calls you, and He also will bring it to pass."

Again, with this verse, Paul is beating the same drum. He places our ultimate sanctification and our ultimate salvation in the hands of the Almighty. The prayer of verse 23 is founded upon the promise in verse 24. Isn't it a glorious thing that the one who calls us to salvation is a faithful God who will bring us home to salvation?

When God regenerates us and makes us new creations, He doesn't simply let us go and say, ... "Best of luck to you.... Press on.... You can do it...." No, God is actively working in our lives to bring about our ultimate salvation. Why? Because (as the text says,) He is faithful. God doesn't wind us up and let us go like a little toy. He is faithful to preserve us to the end.

The benediction that we have often sung: "Now to Him who is able to keep you from stumbling, and to make you stand in the presence of His glory blameless with great joy" (Jude 24), should only lead to our praise of him: "to the only God our Savior, through Jesus Christ our Lord, be glory, majesty, dominion and authority, before all time and now and forever. Amen" (Jude 25).

God is faithful to preserve us. "I give eternal life to them, and they shall never perish; and no one shall snatch them out of My hand" (John 10:28). "All that the Father gives Me shall come to Me, and the one who comes to Me I will certainly not cast out" (John 6:37)

God is faithful to bring our salvation to completion.

But, remember, it won't be a smooth road. It won't be a bed of roses. One of the ways in which we grow is through the trials of life that come.

God will work His work through the circumstances of life to bring about His perfect work in us, who believe.

We have to believe this. God is working in us "both to will and to work for His good pleasure" (Phil. 2:13). When the trials come, they come with a purpose to bring us to the end, "without blame at the coming of our Lord Jesus Christ" (:23). I heard John Piper recently on a tape say, "Behind a shadow of providence is the smile of God." **God is faithful!**

The story is told of a Sunday School teacher explaining Creation was irritated by one boy in the class. Thinking to shock the pupil, the teacher asked, "Who made you?"

"God did," the boy replied.

"Well, He didn't do a very good job!"

The boy retorted, "That's 'cause He isn't finished with me yet!"

That boy in Sunday School had a correct theology. God will work in us to sanctify us and to save us. This is the glory of the Christian faith:

- that our salvation rested in time past in God's faithfulness
- that each night we can reflect upon God's faithfulness through the day.
- that our future salvation is guaranteed by God's faithfulness, not our own efforts.

There is much more that we could say concerning the faithfulness of God. There are many passages which speak of it. Let me simply read a few of them.

Psalms 92:1-2

"It is good to give thanks to the LORD, and to sing praises to Thy name, O Most High,"

"To declare Thy lovingkindness in the morning, And Thy faithfulness by night."

Ps. 119:90

"Thy faithfulness continues throughout all generations."

Jeremiah wrote:

Lam. 3:23 - "Great is Thy faithfulness."

Paul has prayed for the Thessalonians (5:23). Paul has reminded them of God's promise (5:24). Now, Paul has a ...

3. Request (:25)

Verse 25 - "Brethren, pray for us."

This is a simple request really: "pray for us." Paul desired the prayers of the Thessalonians.

For them, it ought to have been easy to fulfill. The example of Paul praying for them is abundant.

1:2 - "We give thanks to God always for all of you, making mention of you in our prayers;"

2:13 - "we also constantly thank God that when you received from us the word of God's message, you accepted it as ... the word of God."

3:9 - "What thanks can we render to God for you ... ?"

3:11-13 - (We have already seen).

Then, when he gets to chapter 5, he simply says, "Pray for us."

Yet, the spiritual work of prayer is often neglected. But it is ever so much needed.

I will place in your hands tonight, a booklet, written by Gardiner Spring some 150 years ago. It is entitled, "A Plea to Pray for Pastors." It is an excerpt taken from his book, "The Power of the Pulpit." I encourage all of you to read it and apply it to your prayer lives. ([Read it here](#)).

If the great and mighty apostle Paul requested the prayers of the Thessalonians, who am I to think that I don't need your prayers! Beloved, "I need your prayers."

Let me simply read the first paragraph of the booklet for you....

"Such is the importance of the Christian ministry, that we are constrained to entreat for it one particular favor. It is a request in which we feel a very deep personal concern, Pray for us! "Pray for us", pleads the Apostle in I Thessalonians 5:25; pray for us is the hearty response from every Christian pulpit in the land, and in the wide world. If the prayers of good men were entreated by such a man as Paul; and if, with his giant intellect, his eminent spirituality, and his intimate communion with God and things unseen, this holy man needed this encouragement and impulse in his work, who will not say "Brethren, pray for us, that the word of the Lord may run swiftly and be glorified!" (II Thessalonians 3:1)."

In Paul's 13 epistles, this request (or something similar) is found in 8 of them:

1 Thess. 5:25 - Brethren, pray for us.

2 Thess. 3:1 - Finally, brethren, pray for us, that the word of the Lord may spread rapidly and be glorified, just as it did also with you.

Rom. 15:30-32 - Now I urge you, brethren, by our Lord Jesus Christ and by the love of the Spirit, to strive together with me in your prayers to God for me (:31) that I may be delivered from those who are disobedient in Judea, and that my service for Jerusalem may prove acceptable to the saints; (:32) so that I may come to you in joy by the will of God and find refreshing rest in your company.

2 Cor. 1:11 - you are joining in helping us through your prayers that thanks may be given by many persons on our behalf for the favor bestowed upon us through the prayers of many.

Eph. 6:19-20 - Pray on my behalf, that utterance may be given to me in the opening of my mouth, to make known with boldness the mystery of the gospel (:20) for which I am an ambassador in chains; that in proclaiming it I may speak boldly, as I ought to speak.

Phil. 1:19 - For I know that this shall turn out for my deliverance through your prayers and the provision of the Spirit of Jesus Christ.

Col. 4:3 - Praying at the same time for us as well, that God may open up to us a door for the word, so that we may speak forth the mystery of Christ, for which I have also been imprisoned.

Philemon 22 - I hope that through your prayers I shall be given to you.

As one commentator said, "Paul knew that the superhuman demands which were daily made upon him called for nothing less than the impartation of supernatural strength." (Geoffrey Thomas, 1 Thessalonians Commentary, p. 86).

When I think of my responsibility before God as your shepherd and overseer, I am overwhelmed.

Elisha Yale, a pastor of years gone by, one addressed a man being ordained for the ministry and said, "My dear brother, it was but a few days ago that I was by the grave of a beloved Christian minister, who had just finished his work, and laid down his commission at the feet of Jesus. In view of that grave, I would now address you, in the name of Christ, at your entrance upon the duties of this sacred office. Of all the undertakings of men, none are more important than the work to which you are this day set apart and consecrated. Its appointment is not of men, but of God. The investiture of the office is by my human hands, but the office itself is of Divine Authority. The doctrines you are to teach are not the investigations of reason, but the dictates of inspiration. The duties you are to enjoin are not the commands of men, but the laws of Jehovah. The threatenings you are to denounce are not the expressions of human displeasure, but the thunders of divine wrath. The promises you are to present for the encouragement of the convinced and desponding are not the fancies of theoretic philanthropy or love for fellow man, but the overflowings of God's unbounding goodness and mercy. Your embassy is from God to men, from the wise and good ruler of the universe to a portion of His rebellious subjects. And the proposals that you are to make from His word are to the unalterable terms of life and death. The results of your ministry are not to be the happiness or misery of empires and ages, but the happiness or misery of immortal beings forever."

I remember the example of Robert Murray M'Cheyne. He set up a network of pastors, who were committed to pray for each other every Saturday night for the activity of the following Lord's Day. When I begin to preach every Sunday morning, I plan on setting up a similar network of men to commit to pray for one another each Saturday night. M'Cheyne understood the need for supernatural enablement in the ministry.

Pastors need your prayers. I would plead and beg you for yours.

Next, Paul gives a ...

4. Greeting (:26)

Verse 26 - "Greet all the brethren with a holy kiss."

As you recall, Paul had tried on several occasions to come back to the people in Thessalonica and be with them. At the end of chapter 2, we saw that he was thwarted on several occasions from doing so. Since Paul was unable to greet the people in Thessalonica, personally, he asked others to greet them for him.

This gives us indication that this letter probably found itself in the hands of the leaders of the church initially and they were to extend his greeting to them. So, he told them to greet them with a holy kiss.

Children, did you hear what he said? "Greet all the brethren with a holy kiss?" (smooch) This isn't a mommy-daddy kiss. This is a kiss of friendship.

Theological Difficulty #3: should we practice the "holy kiss" today?

You all know that the eastern countries extend their greetings to one another with kisses. I remember taking a trip to Tahiti, and everybody gave each other two kisses (cheek to cheek). Before our children retire for bed each night, we have this "kissing ritual" that we undergo. Each of us kiss everybody else. We often kiss each other differently. We have a Tahiti kiss (like I described above). We have a bunny kiss (which consists of rubbing your noses together). We have a butterfly kiss (which consists of rubbing your eyelashes against the skin of another). But our favorite is a dog kiss (which consists of a sloppy lick on the cheek).

All of these kisses demonstrate our affection and love for each other. When Paul greets the congregation with a holy kiss, he is simply instructing the leaders of the church to greet the brethren with great emotion and tenderness.

This probably wasn't the every-day greeting. This was the greeting that comes when you haven't seen somebody for quite some time. That is Paul's heart. I haven't seen you Thessalonians for quite some time and I really long to come and see you and give you a kiss of affection.

The holy kiss was practiced frequently in the culture of Paul's day (as it is in many European cultures). In America today, it isn't practiced. However, may I say, that we Christians ought to demonstrate and express our affection towards each other. If we consider ourselves to be a "church family," we ought to function as an affectionate family toward one another in whatever ways are appropriate for our culture.

5. Mandate (:27)

Verse 27 - "I adjure you by the Lord to have this letter read to all the brethren."

It is important to remember the context of this injunction. You remember that his purpose in writing this letter was to combat some of the false accusations that had arisen against him. He was attempting to deal with the needs of the situation in Thessalonica by letter, because he couldn't deal with it in person (as explained in the end of chapters 2 and 3).

It would have been useless if this letter had not been read to ALL the brethren -- the rumors and slander would have continued and the truth would never have been known. So, Paul strongly urges those who received this letter (presumably the leaders of the church) that they read it publicly to ALL the brethren.

Perhaps we don't see it so much in the English text, but Paul is extremely strong in his language here. He takes a word that means "to make you swear" and makes it stronger. Essentially, he is saying, "I obligate you with an oath before the Lord."

Some have postulated that his strong admonition came because he was suspicious of some of the leadership of the church at Thessalonica. We don't really know. However, we do know that Paul felt that his letter would be a means to encourage the church body in their walk with Christ. (As it has been to many of us, I am sure).

Well, Paul finally ends his epistle, right where he started it. In fact, all of Paul's epistles begin and end with the same words. In all of his greetings, Paul says, without exception, "Grace to you." In all of his benedictions, Paul says, "Grace be with you."

Let's read the ...

6. Benediction (:28)

Verse 28 - "The grace of our Lord Jesus Christ be with you."

What a fitting ending. May you be filled with His grace. May you know His grace. May His grace be that which never leaves you.

Amen.

I thought it appropriate for us tonight to respond again with prayers from this text of Scripture.

1. Pray for our sanctification.
2. Pray for me and for our ministry here in Rockford.

This sermon was delivered to Rock Valley Bible Church on July 15, 2001 by Steve Brandon.

For more information see www.rvbc.cc.