

**November 2, 2014 – 1 Thessalonians 4:1-12 (OT: Micah 3: 5-12 Gospel: Matthew 23:1-12)**

*Don't be satisfied with your sanctification.*

Last week we looked at justification – that God declares us righteous in His sight because of Jesus' perfect life, His innocent death on the cross to pay for the sins of the world, and His resurrection from the dead. It is only fitting that this week we look at sanctification, which follows justification.

God is clear that you are saved by His undeserved favor through faith in Jesus' sacrifice apart from any works that you do. It is important to keep this truth in mind as we consider what God says about our sanctification so that we do not confuse it with our justification.

Do the words of 1 Thessalonians 4:1-12 make you uncomfortable? As Bible-based Lutherans we may prefer to focus on passages that talk about our justification – that is, what God has done for us – rather than passages such as this that talk about what we should do to please God.

Again, remember the context! Paul wrote these words “*to the church of the Thessalonians in God the Father and the Lord Jesus Christ.*” (1 Thessalonians 1:1) He wrote to those who were chosen by God (1:4) and who had already been justified by faith. These words do not tell us how to earn God's favor or earn our salvation; we already have those things through Christ. Rather, these words encourage us to not be satisfied with our sanctification, but, as we read in verse 1 and in verse 10, to “*abound [and increase] more and more.*”

“Sanctification” simply means “to be set apart,” to be “dedicated to God.” It is the same word that is translated “*holiness*” in verse 7. God is holy because He is “set apart” from all things and He tells us: “*Be holy, for I am holy*” (1 Peter 1:15-16).

But by nature we are not holy. We were not dedicated to God. Quite the opposite. We were dedicated to ourselves and to this sinful world. That is why Jesus came to earth: to live a holy life for you and to die to pay for your unholiness. Through Christ you are justified – declared righteous and holy.

That does not mean, however, that God no longer wants you to *be* holy. Verse 3 tells us that your sanctification – your holiness – is still God's will. God still calls us to be set apart to Him.

These verses give us a number of examples of what this means. It means to keep yourself from sexual immorality, to control your own body, to avoid lusts of all kinds, to not take advantage of others, to practice brotherly love, to lead a quiet and submissive life, to mind you own business, to do your work, and walk properly toward those who are outside the church.

What is your response to this list? Do you feel guilty because you don't always do all these things? While we have been justified in Christ, we still have our old sinful natures that can drag us back into sin. When we compare ourselves to God's will, we see that we still fall short of the perfect holiness that He requires. But know that Jesus paid for all your sins. And He always lives to make intercession for you (Hebrews 7:25). When you do sin, confess your sin, and He is faithful and just to forgive your sins and cleanse you from all unrighteousness (1 John 1:9).

Or, when you hear this list, do you think: “I'm doing pretty good” or “at least I'm doing better than \_\_\_\_.” We can be tempted to compare ourselves to others whose sins seem worse than our own. We may also be tempted to simply be satisfied with we how we are doing. But we should “*abound more and more*” in our sanctification. We should not be satisfied with anything short of perfection, because God is not satisfied with anything less.

Don't misunderstand me! You are saved because Christ lived the perfect life that God requires and paid for all your imperfection on the cross. His perfect life has been counted as your own so that you have the righteousness of God and have a place in heaven.

What we are talking about here is your sanctification. Verse 7 tells us that "*God did not call us to uncleanness, but in holiness.*" God calls you to sanctification. Hebrews 12:14 tells us to "*Pursue...holiness, without which no one will see the Lord.*"

This may seem impossible. If it were up to us, it would be. The important thing is how our sanctification comes about. Just as you are not saved by what you do, neither are you sanctified by your own efforts. Just your righteousness and salvation come from God, so too does your sanctification.

Verse 9 says that the Thessalonians were "*taught by God to love one another.*" They didn't learn to do it by themselves. It is God's Spirit that taught them. It is God's Spirit that also teaches you. That is why the Spirit is mentioned in verse 8. Anyone who rejects this call to holiness "*does not reject man, but God, who has also given us His Holy Spirit.*" To reject God's call to holiness is to reject God's Spirit whom He has given us to make us holy.

In 2 Thessalonians 2:13 Paul wrote to this same church: "*But we are bound to give thanks to God always for you, brethren beloved by the Lord, because God from the beginning chose you for salvation through sanctification by the Spirit and belief in the truth.*" Here again we see that is God's Spirit that sanctifies us.

We also see this in how the verb "to sanctify" is used in the New Testament. Where ever it appears it either has God as the subject, because it is God who sanctifies us, or it is in the passive, telling us that we are sanctified by God. The Bible never says that we sanctify ourselves.

God is not like the scribes and Pharisees in our Gospel reading who heap up all these things upon us that we should do without lifting a finger to help us. Rather, God had given you His Spirit of holiness to lead, guide and enable you to do His will and live a holy life.

So what does this mean in practice? How do we "*walk in the Spirit*" so that we do "*not fulfill the lust of the flesh*" (Galatians 5:16)? Jesus tells us in His prayer as our High Priest in John 17. He prayed, "*Sanctify them by Your truth. Your word is truth*" (verse 17). Jesus pointed to God's word. Paul did the same thing when he said farewell to the Ephesian elders on his way back to Jerusalem. He said to them: "*So now, brethren, I commend you to God and to the word of His grace, which is able to build you up and give you an inheritance among all those who are sanctified*" (Acts 20:32). It is God's word to which you are to turn, for it is God's word that the Holy Spirit uses to sanctify you.

It sounds too simple, doesn't it? It can seem like a "pat answer" – like in Sunday School: if the answer isn't "Jesus," it's "the Bible." But God's word is the answer. It is "*living and powerful*" (Hebrews 4:12). God promises that it will accomplish that for which He gave it (Isaiah 55:11) – it will accomplish your sanctification.

Perhaps there is some sin with which you struggle. No matter how often you hear or read God's word, you still fall into it again and again. Satan would like you to think that God's word really isn't effective, that there is no point to reading it or hear it again. He wants to keep you from the very thing that will help you.

Last week we read the words of Jesus in John 8: "*If you abide in My word, you are My disciples indeed. And you shall know the truth, and the truth shall make you free*" (8:31-32). The word of God will set you free. The Holy Spirit will sanctify you in the truth of God's word.

If there is something in particular with which you struggle, find a verse or verses that deal with that sin. Write them on a card and put it some place where you will see it again and again. The Holy Spirit will use God's word to put to death the deeds of your flesh. God's word is a powerful weapon to help us daily drown our old Adam.

So don't be satisfied with your sanctification. Turn to God who sanctifies you, and to the power of His word.

*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. He who calls you is faithful, who also will do it. (1 Thessalonians 5:23-24)*

**Rock of Ages Evangelical Lutheran Church**

[www.GrandRapidsLutheran.org](http://www.GrandRapidsLutheran.org)

Pastor Peter T. Evensen

616-322-9167 (cell)

[peterevensen@icloud.com](mailto:peterevensen@icloud.com)