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“HOPE FOR SANCTIFICATION”

First Thessalonians 5:16-28

☑ In childhood and youth our lives revolve around school. But after a while, ingesting and regurgitating information, striving after an excellent grade point average and acquiring marketable skills can feel like {Eccl 1:17} **“chasing after the wind.”** Doesn't education count for more? Shouldn't it serve a greater purpose?

For many, work consumes the bulk of our time and energy. It can seem a {Eccl 4:8} **“miserable business,”** clocking in and clocking out for a paycheck. Work has value – but is climbing the ladder, earning recognition, and getting a gold watch really our highest aim? Isn't there more?

We cannot live without material goods. But though we labor to acquire and maintain and keep our “stuff,” in the end we will {Eccl 2:21} **“leave all we own to others who have not toiled for it.”** Shouldn't our possessions give more than momentary pleasure? Can't we dedicate our treasures to a loftier cause?

You and I are incurably social creatures. Our relationships are frequently good; but they can also take on a self-centered, utilitarian quality. Isn't friendship about more than satisfying one's personal needs? Doesn't marriage have a more profound objective than to make a man and woman happy?

We take Christianity seriously. But isn't there more to be gained from it than going to heaven when we die? Doesn't biblical faith have a weightier goal than to give us truer beliefs and better morals? Should not church membership serve a grander end than to keep us out of trouble and make us look respectable?

The answer to all these questions is “Yes!” God creates and then recreates us for purposes that are noble, beautiful and eternally significant. He intends all that we are and do to glorify his Name, reveal his kingdom, and benefit his Creation!

☐ First Thessalonians 5:23-24 cuts to the heart of the matter: **“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 Greek verb translated **“sanctify”** literally means *to make holy*, so we could paraphrase verse 23 to read: **“May God himself, the God of peace, [make you holy] through and through.”**

🌀 Sanctification (or holiness) is the substance of our nobility, beauty and eternal significance. It is also the primary means by which God uses us to glorify his Name, reveal his Kingdom, and benefit Creation. It follows that sanctification is the key to making our education count for more, giving our work with a higher aim, using our treasures for a loftier cause, and so on.

📖 *But what is sanctification?* The generic meaning of the word is {Evangelical Dictionary of Biblical Theo.}

“the state of proper functioning.” To sanctify a person or thing is to set [them] apart for the use intended by [the] designer. A pen is “sanctified” when used to write. Eyeglasses are “sanctified” when used to improve sight. In the theological sense, things are sanctified when they are used for the purpose God intends.

God’s Word in the Old Testament emphasizes two basic components of proper functioning: ritual rightness and ethical rightness.

★ Under the Law of Moses, ritual rightness was accomplished by observing the calendar as God intended, handling objects as God intended, treating one’s body as God intended, eating as God intended, and worshiping as God intended. To us the whole approach seems difficult and strange; yet it was a visible revelation of Holy God’s choice of Israel to represent him to a fallen world. Ritual rightness is about status: it is the condition of being set apart from all other nations as the people of God.

★ Ethical rightness was encapsulated in the Ten Commandments and subsequent teachings like: **“what does the LORD require of you? To act justly and to love mercy and to walk humbly with our God”** (Micah 6:8). Justice is interacting with the needy and vulnerable as God intends, mercy is dealing with our enemies in the way God intends, and humility is responding to God as he intends. Ethical rightness is about relationships: it is embodying the Creator’s heart toward his Creation.

O.T. sanctification consisted of ritual rightness and ethical rightness. In theory, this was great.

But consider {Eccl 1:1} **“the Teacher,”** the man (possibly Solomon) who wrote Ecclesiastes and lived under the Law of Moses. He is constantly solemn, often in despair. To him every human endeavor appears to be futile.

- Ecclesiastes 1:16-17: **“I have experienced much of wisdom and of knowledge... but ...this... is a chasing after the wind.”** Ritual and ethical rightness could not fill his education with great purpose.

- Ecclesiastes 2:17, 22: All **“the work that is done ...is meaningless.... What do people get for [their] labor?”** Ritual and ethical rightness could not fill his work with meaning.

- Ecclesiastes 2:8: **“I amassed silver and gold for myself, ... the treasure of kings and provinces....Yet... nothing was gained under the sun.”** Ritual and ethical rightness could not redeem his possessions for a lofty cause.

And so on, and so forth. Those are the words of a defeated man. He heard the call to sanctification, God gifted him with unprecedented wisdom and resources to achieve it – and still he failed.

That is the problem with Old Covenant sanctification: its rituals and ethics were good and true, but they could not overcome sin’s devastating power to undermine our status before God and corrupt our hearts. The best that it could do was to cleanse us on the outside, and show us how thoroughly unholy we were on the inside.

I have been speaking of the Old Covenant, the Law of Moses. God be praised we live under the New Covenant, the Law of Christ!

Where sanctification is concerned, there is substantial continuity and discontinuity between the two.

★ God's people are still those whom he set apart to represent him. Their status is unchanged.

☆ However, aside from baptism and communion, this status is unrelated to ritual. More importantly, it no longer depends on ethnic identity: the doors into the household of faith have been thrown wide open to all who will enter, including us Gentiles.

→ Thus Peter declares **“to God's elect ...who have been chosen according to the foreknowledge of God the Father, through the sanctifying work of the Spirit, to be obedient to Jesus Christ”**: **“You are a chosen people, a royal priesthood, a holy nation, God's special possession, that you may declare the praises of him who called you out of darkness into his wonderful light”** (First Peter 1:1-2, 2:9).

★ Likewise, ethical relationships that embody the Creator's heart are still a basic component of sanctification. The dual commands to love the Lord with our entire being and to love our neighbor as ourselves are equally binding under both covenants.

☆ However, the scope of those relationships has been extended outward to include the unworthy {Mt 5:43-45a} **“You have heard that it was said, ‘Love your neighbor and hate your enemy.’ But I tell you, love your enemies and pray for those who persecute you...”** It has also been extended inward to include our attitude: {Mt 5:21-22}

“You have heard that it was said... ‘You shall not murder, and anyone who murders will be subject to judgment.’ But I tell you that anyone who is angry with a brother or sister will be subject to judgment.”

If this was all that the New Covenant accomplished, we would be in worse shape than before! None of us are naturally good at loving the unworthy, and even those who control their words and actions frequently struggle with sinful attitudes. But this is where the great Good News comes in:

✠ All who {Gal 2:20} **“have been crucified with Christ”** are {Ro 6:3} **“baptized into Christ Jesus”** and become a dwelling place for his Spirit. It is no longer we {Gal 2:20} **“who live, but Christ lives in”** us. And so New Covenant sanctification is different in two critical ways.

⚙ 1st, the template for holiness is no longer the lifeless Law of Moses, but the living Christ (sanctification means becoming like Jesus). Romans 8:28-29: **“we know that in all things God works for the good of those who love him, who have been called according to his purpose.”** (Remember, **“things are sanctified when they are used for [God's] purpose.”**) **“For those God foreknew he also predestined to be conformed to the image of his Son, that he might be the firstborn among many brothers and sisters.”**

⚙ 2nd, the Spirit conceives, energizes, and completes our sanctification. Philippians 2:13: **“it is God who works in [us] to will and to act in order to**

fulfill his good purpose.” While we are responsible to cooperate with him (Php 2:12) **“to [continually] work out [our] salvation”**), it does not depend on our effort.

This new template and new work by the Holy Spirit are Good News, indeed!

“May God himself... 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.”

Our education, work, relationships, salvation, and all that we say, think and do will count for more, achieving the highest aims and serving lofty causes, if we collaborate with God for our sanctification in them.

As we complete this series on this Thessalonian epistle, Scripture speaks to Beverly Covenant with great force and confident hope: **“The one who calls [us] is faithful, and he will do it.”**