

1st THESSALONIANS

5:12-28

Introduction

Perhaps you've seen the bumper sticker that reads, "*Be patient with me – God's not finished with me yet!*" It implies that God has begun a work in you and will one day complete it... But, in the mean time, you are a work in progress.

The Bible has a word for this work in progress. We read it in verse twenty-three; it's the word "sanctify." "Sanctify" means *to set apart*. It is the ongoing spiritual process by which God influences you to make spiritual progress.

The Bible breaks it down further. There are three aspects to being sanctified: *past, present, and future*.

1. In the past, you were sanctified the moment you believed. The Bible says, "we have been sanctified through the offering of the body of Jesus Christ **once for all**..." (Hebrews 10:10). This is why it is accurate to call all believers "saints" – *sanctified ones*.
2. You will be completely sanctified in the future. When you go to be with Jesus you will be sinless in body and spirit forever! God "will transform [your] earthly bodies into glorious bodies like His own" (Philippians 3:21 MSG) and you will be "holy and without blemish" (Ephesians 5:27). You will be perfected.
3. In the mean time, in the present, God has promised to work in you so that you make spiritual progress while still on the earth. "He that hath begun a good work in you will perform it **until** the day of Jesus Christ" (Philippians 1:6).

You should *appreciate* the past and *anticipate* the future... But how should you *approach* the present in order to make spiritual progress?

In verse twenty-three you're told that it is "God... Himself" who sanctifies you "completely." God Himself is the source of your progress. It is by the presence of His Holy Spirit in your life that He

operates upon you to make spiritual progress. As He *operates* upon you He also gives you resources and encourages you to *cooperate* with Him.

Some of those resources are in the closing words of First Thessalonians. We'll organize our thoughts around two points: #1 You Make Progress Until You're Perfected By Living In Community With Christians, and #2 You Make Progress Until You're Perfected By Living In Communion With Christ.

#1 You Make Progress Until You're Perfected
By Living In Community With Christians
(v12-15; 19-21; 25-28)

You can never be perfect in this life. So long as you are in your physical body you will struggle against sin. Still, if you are a Christian you find that the Holy Spirit is living within you and operating upon you to influence you to live in a manner pleasing to God. One author put it this way: " Sanctification does not mean perfection reached, but... progress... toward perfection" (Clarke).

If you are a Christian you want to make progress in the present until you are perfected in the future. One of the resources God has provided for you in order to make progress is to live in community with other Christians.

Not a commune! There have been Christian communes... There still are. You are *not* called to start or settle in a commune, but to a sense of community. Christians are connected with one another and are expected to experience those connections in community with other Christians in a local Church.

Our text brings out three aspects of living in community with other Christians. Those three aspects can be captured by three words: *Government, grace, and gifts.*

By government I mean that the Church community has leaders. They are a God-given resource to help Christians make progress. You read about the dynamics of community leadership in verses twelve and thirteen:

1 Thessalonians 5:12 And we urge you, brethren, to recognize those who labor among you, and are over you in the Lord and admonish you,
1 Thessalonians 5:13 and to esteem them very highly in love for their work's sake. Be at peace among yourselves.

The Church was less than a year old. Everyone in it was still a young Christian. Some among them were leaders. It may be that there was a problem with submission to leadership as the members felt they were all more-or-less spiritual equals.

They may have been spiritual equals; but God still raised-up in their midst some to lead. It was a matter of *gifts*, not *growth*. Church leaders are supernaturally gifted to accomplish their work.

The local Church has leadership. Here at Calvary Chapel our leadership structure is a pastor-teacher supported by elders, who are supported by deacons. There is also leadership over and within the various ministries God has raised-up.

A few of a leader's responsibilities are listed:

1. They "labor among you." The word "labor" means *toil, strive, struggle*. It describes hard work that causes the leader to grow weary.
2. Leaders are "over you in the Lord." This means they exercise **oversight in a way that is characteristic of Jesus**. Jesus' example of being over you was to humble Himself to serve you. He illustrated it most memorably by washing His disciple's feet on the night before He was crucified.
3. Leaders "admonish you." "Admonish" literally means *to put in mind*. It is reminding others of spiritual truth, especially in the sense of appealing to the conscience and the will to encourage believers to obedience. It implies that they use God's Word, the Bible, as their source of truth.

Leaders are resources that the Holy Spirit uses to help you make spiritual progress. You cooperate with God when you do two things in relation to your leaders: *Recognize* them and *respect* them.

1. "Recognize" means acknowledging that God has placed them over you by His sovereign gifts in their lives.

2. "Respect" is the meaning of the word "esteem" in verse thirteen. It takes recognizing leaders one step further in that you recognize that they are over you for your good and you thus respect their influence in your life.

Paul had one more thing to say regarding leaders. It's in verse twenty-five:

1 Thessalonians 5:25 Brethren, pray for us.

I've had people pray about me... Better to pray for your leaders!

You will make progress toward perfection to the extent that you and your leaders are "at peace among yourselves." Leadership in the Church, and authority in general, is very different than what we are used to in the world. Leaders are not to lord over us; they are to be like the Lord and serve us. And we – when being led – are to submit to biblical authority without causing strife and division.

Another aspect of living in community is grace. You see it in verses fourteen, fifteen, and twenty-six.

1 Thessalonians 5:14 Now we exhort you, brethren, warn those who are unruly, comfort the fainthearted, uphold the weak, be patient with all.

Some of the believers were putting a strain on community life:

1. The "unruly" were probably those believers who had quit their jobs to wait for Jesus to Rapture them. Their mooching was a strain on the rest of the community.
2. The "fainthearted" were probably those whose loved ones had fallen asleep in death. They were overcome with grief, focusing constantly on their loss.
3. The "weak" were probably those who were morally weak and struggling with sexual sin as discussed in the opening verses of chapter four.

Regardless the particular causes, however, all Church communities will have believers who are unruly, fainthearted, and weak. The rest of you are to be "patient" with them; and you are to express your patience by warning, comforting, and upholding them.

1. "Warn" is the word *admonish*, which we said meant *put in mind*. You are to remind them of spiritual truth.
2. "Comfort" is translated from words meaning *to relate near*. The idea is that you try to relate to what they are going through, then come near to them with words to encourage.
3. "Upholding" means *support*. It's a picture of coming to them in their spiritual distress and holding them up by holding them accountable.

You can't list every possible stress that believers can experience when living in community with one another. You can't list every possible strategy for dealing with one another. So Paul gave a principle to follow in verse fifteen:

1 Thessalonians 5:15 See that no one renders evil for evil to anyone, but always pursue what is good both for yourselves and for all.

In practical terms, you should desire the very best for every other member of the Christian community, and then treat them in a way that promotes what is best for them. Christians living in community should therefore extend grace to one another.

The Church should promote an attitude of grace. Unbelievers should understand that God is ready to forgive and welcome them into His forever community. Believers should understand that they are to love and care for one another in ways that reveal the heart of Jesus.

When grace is the atmosphere of the community, then verse twenty-six is true:

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

Before you get too excited... The reference is to *men greeting men*, and *women greeting women*, with "a holy kiss." Later, when men and women started kissing each other, it gave the Church a bad reputation and early Church documents called for it to cease.

The idea is that you are preserving bonds of affection through grace; there is nothing keeping you from sincerely greeting one another – **in a culturally appropriate manner!**

The difficulties some members present thus become a resource God uses to draw-out His grace from your life so that you will make spiritual progress.

The third aspect of living in community is gifts. You see it in verses nineteen through twenty-one, and in verse twenty-seven.

- 1 Thessalonians 5:19 Do not quench the Spirit.
- 1 Thessalonians 5:20 Do not despise prophecies.
- 1 Thessalonians 5:21 Test all things; hold fast what is good.

These verses describe the public worship of the Church at Thessalonica. In a later letter Paul would similarly write,

- 1 Corinthians 14:1 Pursue love, and desire spiritual *gifts*, but especially that you may prophesy...
- 1 Corinthians 14:26 How is it then, brethren? Whenever you come together, each of you has a psalm, has a teaching, has a tongue, has a revelation, has an interpretation. Let all things be done for edification...
- 1 Corinthians 14:29 Let two or three prophets speak, and let the others judge.

Similar to our verses in First Thessalonians in that believers are assembling and there are spiritual gifts being exercised. In Corinth the exercise of gifts was what we would call charismatic; if you read all of First Corinthians chapter fourteen you'd call them charismaniacs! They needed to be corrected about the proper, orderly exercise of the gifts of the Holy Spirit in a corporate assembly.

The Thessalonians had the opposite problem. They were "quenching" the exercise of the gifts and "despising prophecies."

Both assemblies were told to "test" and then "hold fast what is good." They were to test the things spoken by the standard of the Word of God. As long as what was being prophesied, for example, was lined-up with God's Word, they could receive it as God's encouragement.

I'd put verse twenty-seven in with these as applying to their public worship:

- 1 Thessalonians 5:27 I charge you by the Lord that this epistle be read to all the holy brethren.

Paul wanted the *entire* letter read aloud to the *entire* assembly. Whatever else might be included as part of public worship, the reading of God's entire Word should be a priority.

Do we, though, "despise prophecies" – seeing as we don't allow people to get-up and share them on Sunday mornings?

Not at all! We understand that the teaching of God's Word is itself an exercise of the gift of prophecy. Teaching can also include the gifts of the Word of Wisdom and the Word of Knowledge. What we are doing on Sunday mornings is following the foundational biblical principle that all things be done decently and in order.

If you want to make spiritual progress you will need to meet with the Church community when they are assembled. In the assembly you will experience and exercise the gifts of God that promote your progress as a Christian.

We've skipped-over a few verses. They seem to have more to do with your personal, private relationship to Jesus.

#2 You Make Progress Until You're Perfected By Living In Communion With Christ (v16-18; 22; 28)

One author wrote, "Every [Christian] must grow, as trees grow, downward and upward at once. The visible, outward growth must be accompanied by an invisible, inward growth" (Baxter).

You **can't** always be around other believers. You **can** continually make progress as you fellowship in your heart with Jesus. Because God the Holy Spirit lives in you, you can experience the following:

1 Thessalonians 5:16 Rejoice always,

1 Thessalonians 5:17 pray without ceasing,

1 Thessalonians 5:18 in everything give thanks; for this is the will of God in Christ Jesus for you.

The last phrase, "this is the will of God in Christ Jesus for you," relates to each of the three things we read about. It is God's will for you that you "rejoice always." "Always" means *always!* Remember that the Church at Thessalonica was suffering intense persecution.

Nevertheless, they could rejoice always. Christian joy has nothing to do with external circumstances. It comes from being "in Christ" – from knowing you are saved and headed home to heaven. Your circumstances become your opportunity to express joy and thereby make spiritual progress.

It is God's will for you that you "pray without ceasing." "Without ceasing" means a life permeated with prayer – mostly silent prayer in your heart, but not excluding public praying. You might describe it as a spirit of prayer. If you are going to make spiritual progress it makes sense you will be in constant fellowship with your Lord so He can guide and direct your thoughts as well as your activities.

It is God's will for you that "in everything [you] give thanks." "Everything" means *in every circumstance*. This is possible when you accept the promise that God works all things out for good to those who love Him and are yielded to His will. You can then thank Him no matter what – knowing **everything** He allows is for your ultimate *good* and His *glory*.

If you are pursuing communion with Christ you will greet your circumstances with rejoicing, prayer, and thanksgiving. You will also avoid some circumstances. Look at verse twenty-two:

1 Thessalonians 5:22 Abstain from every form of evil.

The KJV says to "abstain from all appearance of evil." There are many things which you know to be wrong and sinful. They are black and white. You abstain from them. Some things in the world are in a more gray area; there is no clear biblical command against them, but some folks think they are questionable for Christians. If you want to make spiritual progress, you ought to abstain from things which are questionable because they give the appearance you are participating in something evil.

Your unbelieving family and friends have their ideas about what a Christian should or should not be doing. **So do you!** How many times have you heard that someone was going somewhere... Or doing something... And wondered if it was really proper for them as a

believer? There are many liberties; but you'd be better-off abstaining from them if they might in any way "appear evil."

If you are making spiritual progress you will become more, not less, sensitive to how your behavior and decisions present Christ to others.

I almost hate to call your communion with Jesus "progress" because it makes it sound like a *duty* rather than a *delight*. Delight yourself in Him.

Oswald Chambers wrote,

"If I exalt sanctification, I preach people into despair; but if I lift up Jesus Christ, people learn the way to be made holy."

Conclusion

We've three verses left. First, verses twenty-three and twenty-four:

1 Thessalonians 5:23 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.

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

This looks forward to your final, future sanctification. When Jesus returns for you, you will be given a glorified body. You will be perfected. He who began a good work in you will complete it.

God the Father declared you holy and set you apart at the Cross; God the Holy Spirit preserves you in holiness day-by-day; God the Son will return to present you perfect in holiness in heaven.

Sanctification is the work of God. It depends on His faithfulness, not yours. He operates upon you by His indwelling Holy Spirit. You ought to cooperate with Him to make progress; but He is going to perfect you with or without your cooperation!

One author put it this way: "Sanctification is not something our Lord does in me; sanctification is Himself in me."

There is no better way close our study of First Thessalonians than with the reading of the final benediction of the letter:

1 Thessalonians 5:28 The grace of our Lord Jesus Christ *be* with you. Amen.

