

# MAY THE GOD OF PEACE SANCTIFY YOU

1 Thessalonians 5:12-28

Key Verse: 5:23

**“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.”**

Today we come to the last passage in Paul’s first letter to the Thessalonians. To understand this passage, let’s review briefly what we have learned so far. Paul had been in Thessalonica for just a short time. He and his companions had shared the gospel message by the power of the Holy Spirit and demonstrated a gospel-centered life, like a nursing mother and a father. Then God blessed their ministry and a great number of people believed the gospel. They turned from idols to serve the living and true God. Where God was working, Satan was also working to destroy the church, mainly through false accusations against Paul to discredit the gospel message. Paul defended himself to strengthen the faith of the Thessalonians. When he heard that they stood firm in their faith, he really came alive. He prayed for them most earnestly in order to supply what was lacking in their faith. He urged them to please the Lord through a sanctified life and loving one another. He also reminded them of our great hope of Jesus’ second coming in power and glory. At that time, Jesus will take us, together with our beloved departed, to be with him forever. With this hope, we should be awake and sober as children of the light, encouraging one another and building each other up.

In today’s passage Paul continues to supply what was lacking in their faith by giving various instructions. Throughout this letter, Paul has said, **“love one another,” “encourage one another,”** and **“build each other up.”** Paul was very concerned that the church function in a healthy way. It was vitally important to establish a loving community in that idolatrous environment amidst persecution. This is also true for us. It is easy to emphasize each person’s struggle, not realizing the importance of building up the body. If the body is not built up, its individual members cannot survive. Jesus is the head of the church and we are members of his body. His body should become strong and effective to carry out his will. Let’s learn how our church body can become strong, strong enough to stand on the truth of the gospel and proclaim it in our increasingly hostile environment.

**First, acknowledge leaders (12-13).** Three times in this passage, Paul calls them **“brothers and sisters”** (12,14,25). We are all brothers and sisters in Christ, children of one Father God. Yet for the church to function well, God raises leaders. As a young church, the Thessalonians needed to learn how to acknowledge their

# MAY THE GOD OF PEACE SANCTIFY YOU

leaders. A healthy relationship between members and leaders is essential to building up the body of Christ. In verse 12, we can see what these leaders did. They worked hard to care for the church members, including admonishing them. Their leadership did not come from a hierarchical structure. Rather, they had spiritual leadership as they responded to God's call to take care of his people. We can think that leaders should be strong enough to bear all the problems and complaints of the church and receive encouragement only from God. But as human beings, leaders also need encouragement from church members.

Verse 13 says, **“Hold them in the highest regard in love because of their work. Live in peace with each other.”** This is not just a personal matter. It is for the sake of God's work. When there is an atmosphere of love and respect, God's work can be done fruitfully. Each member must know their role or function and serve faithfully. At the same time, each member should appreciate and cooperate with the others. When all the members work together, the body can function effectively and joyfully. However, if conflicts arise between leaders and church members, the body gets sick and does not function well. It experiences stress and pain, and becomes a bad influence to outsiders. For the church body to function well, we must live at peace with each other. This means we must humbly serve one another, bear with one another, and ask forgiveness and forgive one another. In order to do this, we must die to ourselves and let Jesus live in us.

**Second, always strive to do what is good for each other (14-15).** The instructions Paul gives in verses 14-22 are for all church members. It is not only leaders, but all members who are called to minister to the body. In verse 14 Paul said we are to warn those who are idle and disruptive, encourage the disheartened, help the weak, and be patient with everyone. Some people become idle by misunderstanding Jesus' second coming as an excuse to avoid doing their own duties. When they become idle, they naturally become busybodies who are needlessly involved in other people's affairs and disruptive. Through this, Satan works. There is an expression, “An idle mind is the devil's playground, and idle hands are the devil's workshop.” This is why we should work hard to support ourselves and our families, to serve others, and to be a blessing.

We are to encourage the disheartened. People become disheartened for various reasons, including ongoing persecution, the death of loved ones, personal failures, or broken relationships. Disheartened people are very vulnerable to the devil's temptation. They need encouragement. People can be weak in faith, in conscience, in their bodies, or mentally. They need help. However, we have a sinful tendency to judge and criticize the weak. This only crushes them. To help

# MAY THE GOD OF PEACE SANCTIFY YOU

them, we need to understand them and accept them as they are. We need to find the way to build them up until they become strong. Especially, we need to be patient with everyone. Love is patient. If God was not patient with each of us, we would have been handed over as slaves of sin long ago, destined for eternal condemnation. Just as God has been patient with us, so we should be patient with everyone.

Verse 15 says, **“Make sure that nobody pays back wrong for wrong, but always strive to do what is good for each other and for everyone else.”** Though the members of Christ’s body are called **“saints,”** we are in the process of growing and being sanctified. We still have a sinful nature and vestiges of self-righteousness. As we interact with others, we can offend them intentionally or unintentionally. We all experience offending and being offended. If we offend others, we should acknowledge our fault and apologize. What about when we are offended? We may be tempted to repay wrong for wrong—verbally, in writing (like e-mail), or in other unspeakable ways. If we do this, revenge begets revenge and a vicious cycle begins. One relationship breaks, and networks of relationships are damaged. Eventually the church will be destroyed. As Christians, revenge is not an option at all. Instead, we must forgive, as Jesus forgave us. We are encouraged to always strive to do what is good for each other and for everyone else. When we do so, the church can be built up and become healthy.

**Third, rejoice, pray and give thanks (16-22).** In 1 Thessalonians we find two teachings about God’s will. The first one is in 4:3: **“It is God’s will that you should be sanctified....”** The second one is in 5:16-18: **“Rejoice always, pray continually, give thanks in all circumstances, for this is God’s will for you in Christ Jesus.”** **“God’s will”** means that this is what he really wants us to do. When we do this, we can please God. When we please God, he will surely bless us. So, we can learn how to please God and receive his blessing. Let’s see how we can practice each exhortation. **The first exhortation** is, **“rejoice always.”** This sounds pretty challenging. Sometimes we can be joyful, but always? We experience so many trials and painful events, and hear so much terrible news every day. How can we be joyful always? Shall we be like dramatic actors and cover our sorrowful faces with a smile mask? We don’t need to do this. It is because God gave us enough reasons to be joyful always. The main cause of sorrow and grief are the power of sin and death. God forgave all our sins by shedding Jesus’ blood for us. Whenever we are sorrowful due to our sins, we can come to God and receive forgiveness. Then our sorrow turns to joy. God also destroyed the power of death through Jesus’ resurrection. Whenever the elements of death, such as fear, despair, and fatalism trouble our hearts, we can come to God and experience victory. Paul

# MAY THE GOD OF PEACE SANCTIFY YOU

exclaimed, “**Thanks be to God! He gives us the victory through our Lord Jesus Christ**” (1Co 15:57). Still, to be joyful *always* is challenging. How can we rejoice always? The answer is: “**Fix our eyes on Jesus!**”

**The second exhortation** is, “**pray continually.**” Prayer is communication with God. It is not just sending a text message with requests. It requires us to listen to God as well as talk to God. Prayer is possible because God opened the way for us to come to him through Jesus. This is why we pray in Jesus’ name. Jesus said, “**...whatever you ask in my name, the Father will give you**” (Jn 15:16). We have a great privilege to call God “**Abba, Father.**” Any time, and in any place, we can approach God in prayer in Jesus’ name. He gives us grace and mercy in our time of need (Heb 4:16). We can have the confidence that if we ask anything according to his will, he hears us (1Jn 5:14). We usually come to God in our time of need. But God wants us to come to him continually, not randomly. “**Continually**” means at regular or frequent intervals, again and again, without giving up. Jesus taught his disciples that “**they should always pray and not give up**” (Lk 18:1). We have many prayer topics for ourselves, families, community and nation. Let’s pray continually without giving up.

The final exhortation is, “**give thanks in all circumstances.**” It is not easy for us to give thanks in all circumstances. It is so easy for us to complain or blame others in times of difficulty. Of course, giving constructive criticism with a motive to build up is good. But venting one’s frustrations and opinions without assisting to improve things is destructive. Complaining is like a contagious disease. One person’s bitter complaint spreads like a cancer. Not only does that person become sick to death, but they make others sick. On the other hand, when we give thanks to God and others, we become happy and a blessing. We can overcome hardships. We have many reasons to thank God. God provides air, water, land, food, housing, families, and especially life. Furthermore, God gave us eternal life and a living hope in his kingdom. In comparison, the things we complain about are very small. I heard one person decided to sever all relationships with his in-laws because he was offended by one bad experience. One day, he heard his pastor’s message to remember many good things instead of one bad thing. He was enlightened and began to remember all the good things his in-laws had done for him. He realized that the bad thing happened just one time, but the good things were too numerous to count. He repented and became very thankful. He apologized to them one by one, and marvelous reconciliation took place. When we remember what God has done and what others have done, we can be thankful in all circumstances.

# MAY THE GOD OF PEACE SANCTIFY YOU

Paul's exhortations to rejoice always, pray continually and give thanks in all circumstances are not just personal; they are given to the church. When we rejoice together, pray together and give thanks together, God is pleased with our community and pours out his blessings upon us. Therefore, we should all do our best to create a joyful, prayerful and thankful environment in our church. It is an essential part of evangelism. If each of us carries our sorrows, ingratitude and grumpiness into this fellowship and adds them to those of others, it will be a terrible meeting. Newcomers will feel very uncomfortable, run out the door and never come back. But when they see that we are joyful, prayerful and thankful in all circumstances, they will be amazed and happy, thinking it is a glimpse of heaven. This is true, not just of our Sunday worship service, but of any meeting or fellowship. Let's do our best to make a joyful, prayerful and thankful environment!

To create a joyful, prayerful and thankful environment, we need the Holy Spirit. The Holy Spirit is the source of joy, prayer and thanksgiving. When the gospel came to the Thessalonians, they were changed by the power of the Holy Spirit (1:5). The Holy Spirit enabled them to rejoice in the midst of persecution (1:6), and to love each other (4:9). The Holy Spirit was burning like a fire in their hearts and in their community. So we should not quench the Spirit (19). If we are sorrowful, unthankful and grumpy, it is like pouring cold water on the fire of the Spirit. When we gather together, some people are inspired by the words of God and share prophecies publicly. Those who hear them should neither hold them in contempt, nor blindly accept them, but test them. We should hold on to what is good and reject every kind of evil (20-22).

**Finally, Paul prayed and blessed them (23-28).** After many exhortations, Paul prayed, **“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”** (23). Why did Paul call God **“the God of peace”**? It is because God brings peace. When man sinned and he became God's enemy. But God showed his great mercy, when he initiated reconciliation that brings peace by sending his Son Jesus. The gospel is the good news of great joy that brings peace (Lk 2:14). Everyone who accepts the gospel is justified and has peace with God (Ro 5:1). The gospel also brings peace between people. Jesus himself is our peace who can make two into one by destroying dividing walls of hostility (Eph 2:14). The God of peace sanctifies us through and through. We have a desire to live a sanctified life, yet we fail at times and are discouraged. Though we fail, the Holy Spirit never stops working. He sanctifies us through and through. He will keep our whole spirit, soul and body blameless until the coming of our Lord Jesus Christ. We cannot be blameless by our own effort. But God can keep us

## MAY THE GOD OF PEACE SANCTIFY YOU

blameless. Verse 24 says, **“The one who calls you is faithful, and he will do it.”** Though we are unfaithful, God is faithful. Our assurance does not come from ourselves, but from God who is faithful. When we look at ourselves, we despair. When we look at others, we despair even more. But when we look at God who is faithful we find hope. The prophet Jeremiah lived in a very difficult time: his nation was apostate and God’s judgment had come. The nation was exiled to Babylon. His tears for his people ran like a river. He said, **“I remember my affliction and my wandering, the bitterness and the gall. I well remember them, and my soul is downcast within me. Yet this I call to mind and therefore I have hope: Because of the Lord’s great love we are not consumed, for his compassions never fail. They are new every morning; great is your faithfulness”** (Lam 3:19-23). Because of God’s great faithfulness, we can be sure that we will be sanctified through and through. Because of God’s great faithfulness, we will be kept blameless until the coming of our Lord Jesus. Praise and thank God for his great faithfulness!

Verses 25-28 are Paul’s final greetings. He asked them to pray for him and his companions. He greeted all of them with a holy kiss. He charged them to have his letter, which became part of the Bible, read publicly. Then he blessed them, **“The grace of our Lord Jesus Christ be with you.”** May God help us to live sanctified lives, to love one another, and to put our hope in the glorious kingdom of God until Jesus comes again. Amen!!