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**First Thessalonians**  
**VII. May God Sanctify You Completely**  
**I Thessalonians 5:12-28**

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Benjamin Franklin, that quintessentially American spirit, once decided that, having conquered the worlds of publishing and politics, it was now time for him to tackle the issue of moral perfection. In his autobiography he wrote:

*It was about this time that I conceiv'd the bold and arduous Project of arriving at moral Perfection. I wish'd to live without committing any Fault at any time; I would conquer all that either Natural Inclination, Custom, or Company might lead me into.<sup>1</sup>*

Franklin's plan for accomplishing moral perfection was straightforward. First he compiled a list of thirteen moral virtues, such as temperance, frugality, sincerity – all the virtues he felt made up a life of moral perfection. He then figured that one week of focus on each of these thirteen virtues should be sufficient to master them. He drew up a chart for this thirteen week moral perfection project and launched right in. Suffice it to say, he found the project a good bit harder than he expected. In short, he failed miserably. But, as we said, quintessentially American – Ben Franklin has to be considered the father of the American obsession with self-improvement fads. All it takes is a little effort – make a list, follow these steps and, before you know, we have achieved our goal of fixing whatever about us needs fixing.

It can, therefore, be tempting for us to read this last section of Paul's letter to the Thessalonians in just this way – as a self-improvement plan. A list of all the things we need to fix in ourselves, in order that we might be considered, as Paul puts it, “*blameless at the coming of our Lord Jesus Christ.*”:

- Admonish the idle
- Encourage the fainthearted
- Help the weak
- Be patient with everyone
- Don't repay evil for evil
- Seek to do good to everyone
- Rejoice always
- Pray without ceasing
- Give thanks in all circumstances

- Do not quench the Spirit
- But test everything
- Hold fast to what is good
- Abstain from every form of evil

There's the list Paul gives us – let's get cracking! It's even thirteen items, just like Franklin's moral improvement project. If we will only take this list seriously then, like unlike Franklin, we might actually even get it all done in just thirteen weeks!

But, as for Franklin, so also for us – this Biblical moral self-improvement project just simply isn't going to work. For one thing, and perhaps even more so than in Franklin's day, so much of this list is so deeply counter-cultural – which means we're not going to find much support for any of this from the world around us. “*Repay no one evil for evil*” – evil for evil is basically the plotline of every Hollywood Superhero Blockbuster. “*Help the weak*” – how about look out for number one! “*Be patient with all*” – Lord, have you ever been in the checkout line on double coupon day at the Piggly Wiggly? “*Hold fast to what is good, abstain from what is evil*” – you mean have no fun at all? If we really take this list seriously, then we cannot help but note that it runs against the grain, it requires swimming upstream, it means living in a way that a lot of people will consider stupid – and, for the most part, we're just not brave enough to pull it off.

But this list understood as a self-improvement project to be undertaken for Jesus chiefly won't work for one other simple reason – the one big reason why Franklin's plan didn't work. We're not strong enough. Our willpower is insufficient to overcome what Franklin called his moral imperfections, but which the Bible calls our wayward and sinful hearts and minds and bodies. Even if we really and truly will with all our strength to do these things Paul lists, our willpower is simply not strong enough to overcome the constant lure of temptation and the deep attachment of our souls to sin. Even Paul, remember, cries out about his own inability to overcome sin and enter into moral perfection on his own:

*I do not understand my own actions. For I do not do what I want, but I do the wrong thing I hate . . . I do not do the good I want, but the evil I do not want is what I keep on doing . . . Wretched man that I am!*<sup>2</sup>

Our will-power, on its own, is simply not strong enough to overcome our attachment to sin.

Which reminds me of a scene in the children's classic, Frog and Toad Together – a story dear to my heart and my waistline. Frog bakes a batch of delicious cookies for himself and Toad, and then the two of them just dive in, stuffing one cookie after another into their mouths as fast as they can. “*We ought to stop eating,*” they say as they keep stuffing cookie after cookie into their mouths. “*We must stop,*” they say, as they cram in a few more. Finally Frog says, “*We need willpower.*”

*“What is willpower?” asks Toad, swallowing another mouthful.*

*“Willpower is trying very hard not to do something you want to do very much,” Frog says.*

*Frog discusses a variety of ways to help with willpower – putting the cookies in a box, tying the box shut, putting it high up [on a shelf] – but each time Toad points out (in between bites) that they could climb the shelf and untie the box. In desperation, Frog finally dumps the remaining cookies outside on the ground: “Hey birds!” he calls. “Here’s cookies!”*

*“Now we have no more cookies,” says Toad sadly.*

*“Yes,” says Frog, “but we have lots and lots of willpower.”*

*“You may keep it all,” Toad says. “I’m going home to bake a cake.”<sup>3</sup>*

So, with this list of moral improvement Paul says we are to make in order to be found *“blameless at the coming of our Lord,”* what are we to? These moral virtues are countercultural, which means we can count on little support from the world around us – can count instead on much opposition. And, even worse, we like Ben Franklin cannot make ourselves into this list of moral perfections even if we tried our very hardest – our willpower is simply not strong enough. But this list Paul provides us is nothing less than the Word of God – meaning that this list is non-negotiable in the eyes of the Lord. So, again, what are we going to do if it is indeed required of us that we are to be found *“blameless at the coming of the Lord”*?

Well, the first thing we need to do – actually the only thing we are really able to do in light of our moral failings and weak willpower is to read on to verses twenty-three and twenty-four. Thank God for verses twenty-three and twenty-four – and I mean that quite literally! Listen:

*Now may the God of peace himself sanctify you completely, and may your whole spirit and soul and body be kept blameless at the coming of our Lord Jesus Christ. He who calls you is faithful; he will surely do it.*

Did you hear it? This list of virtues, this list of what it will mean to be found blameless at the coming of our Lord is **not** something we are expected to accomplish by ourselves, through our own willpower – which we already know is impossible. Rather it is something God is going to do in us – something which God alone can accomplish in us, something which God Himself is even now working in us to accomplish. For just as we do not save ourselves on our own, so we are not expected to sanctify ourselves on our own. Just as we cannot save ourselves, but are saved by the grace of our Lord Jesus and His grace alone, so also just as we cannot sanctify ourselves, the grace of Jesus Christ works in us to make us sanctified, holy and blameless for that day when He comes again. This is, in effect, part two of the great Good News of Salvation in Jesus Christ – that not only does Jesus save us from sin and death by His grace and that grace alone, but so also Jesus sanctifies us by His grace and that grace alone. Makes us into the persons He calls us to be:

*Now may the God of peace himself sanctify you completely, and may your whole spirit and soul and body be kept blameless at*

*the coming of our Lord Jesus Christ. He who calls you is faithful; he will surely do it.*

*“He who calls you is faithful; he will surely do it.”* We shall surely be changed. We are being changed even now. And we shall be made ready by our God to be found blameless on that day when comes again. Grace. Amazing grace – we are not only rescued but also remade!

Does that mean, then, that we contribute nothing to the work of our transformation – that we can just take it easy and let God do His thing? Well, no – of course not. As with our being saved from sin and death, our forgiveness, the first part of our salvation, we still have to receive that grace, accept that grace, commit our lives to Jesus Christ our Savior – so also with our sanctification, our being made holy and blameless before the coming of our Lord. We have our part to play in God’s working in us, our work to do in response to God’s working. And Paul’s list of what is expected of us at Christ’s return also points us toward what we are to be doing until then, our part in God’s sanctifying work. It’s there especially in those items which talk about our conduct before God: *“Pray without ceasing, give thanks in all circumstances, do not quench the Spirit.”*

In other words, the first part we play in God’s work of sanctification in us is simply to stay as close as we possibly can to God – stay open to God, seek after God, think often about God, learn more and more about God from His Word, worship God. And, above all else, talk to God and listen for what He will speak to us in return – prayer. God, in His sanctifying work in us, will not overrule our indifference to Him, our inattention to Him, our placing of Him down near the bottom of our list of daily priorities. We can, in fact, through our inattention and indifference, greatly hinder, even prevent, what God is seeking to do in us. So the first thing we are to do, in response to God’s sanctifying work in us, is simply to stay close to God, stay in close communion with God, stay open to God and His Word and Working in us.

Small example, but a good one. One of the greatest missionaries of the twentieth century was a man named Frank Laubach. He was a missionary to the Muslim population in some of the most remote locations in the Philippines. In January of 1930, he decided to take seriously this call and challenge of staying close to God throughout his day, of not forgetting God in the course of his day. He resolved to develop the habit of thinking about God one second out of every minute. Now we don’t know how well he succeeded in keeping that commitment literally – one second out of every minute. But we do know how his efforts to pay more attention to Christ paid great dividends in terms of Christ’s work of sanctification in him. After about four weeks of doing this, he wrote:

*I feel simply carried along each hour, doing my part in a plan which is far beyond myself. This sense of cooperation with God in little things is what so astonishes me, for I never have felt it this way before. I need something, and turn round to find it waiting for me. I must work, to be sure, but there is God working along with me.<sup>4</sup>*

It is God who sanctifies us, who will present us blameless on that day Jesus returns. But in order that He might do so freely and fully, we attend to Him, open ourselves to Him – routinely, deliberately, and often. *“Pray without ceasing,”* writes Paul.

And the second thing we do to work in and with the God who sanctifies us is suggested by the last part of verse twenty-three: *“May your whole spirit and soul and body.”* Just that phrase – your whole spirit and soul and body. Because spirit and soul and body pretty much means every part of us, every single part of our lives. So the second thing we do in accordance with what God is doing in us is that we give Him access to every part of ourselves, and to every part of our daily living. We do not withhold from His working any part of our personhood – our personality, our thoughts, our emotions, our dreams for the future as well as our memories of the past. Nor do we exclude His working from any part of our daily practices and experiences – our work, our home, our leisure, our relationships, and so forth. We throw ourselves fully open for God to work in us where and when and how He sees fit. To change in us things we might not even think need changing; to confront us and transform us even in the areas where we are most resistant to being changed.

I came across this years ago in a sermon by the great twentieth century German preacher and pastor Helmut Thielicke – it spoke to me then and I think it speaks to us this morning:

*After all, every one of us has certain areas in his life which he will not give up and hand over. It may be my ambition in my job . . . It may be the jealousy or the prejudice that exists between me and my neighbor . . . Perhaps it is my business practices . . . Perhaps what I hold back lies in the area of sex: God can have everything else, but not this! At some other point in my life I'm willing to let him in, but not here, not at this point . . . This one thing [whatever it may be] he cannot have!*

*And now the very strange thing is that God is not interested in getting into my life at any other point, that he has taken it into his head to come into my life only by way of this most difficult terrain. It is characteristic of the kingdom of God that it never follows the path of least resistance, but always seeks out the thickest concrete walls in my life in order to enter there . . . Do we know where in our lives the thickest walls have been built up?<sup>5</sup>*

*“Spirit and soul and body”* – the second aspect of our part in God’s work of sanctifying us it that we let Him do it. That we open our whole self, our whole life, to His working. Thus He will transform every part of us, so that we will indeed be found *“blameless at the coming of our Lord Jesus Christ.”* The transformation may seem very slow, often imperceptible to our human eyes. But we have the assurance, despite what our eyes may see – that, *“He who calls you is faithful; he will surely do it.”*

We need to be changed. And we are going to be changed. We are being changed even now. Thanks be to God!

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<sup>1</sup> From Franklin's autobiography, chapter IX, accessed at [The Project Gutenberg eBook of "Autobiography of Benjamin Franklin."](#)

<sup>2</sup> Romans 7:15, 19, 24.

<sup>3</sup> I do not know where I found this summary of Arthur Lobel's story, but you can hear and read the original at [Frog and Toad Together by Arnold Lobel HD READ ALOUD](#). The cookie story begins at 5:26 into the video.

<sup>4</sup> Quoted in Dallas Willard, [The Divine Conspiracy](#) (HarperSanFrancisco, 1998), p. 24.

<sup>5</sup> Helmut Thielicke, "The Parable of the Wedding Feast," in [The Waiting Father: Sermons on the Parables of Jesus](#), trans. John W. Doberstein (New York: Harper & Row, 1959), pp. 187-188.