***A Prayer and a Promise***

**The Gospel Difference, 1 Thessalonians 5:12-24 June 4, 2023**

***Do not put out the Spirit’s fire; do not treat prophecies with contempt.  
Test everything. Hold on to the good. Avoid every kind of evil.  
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.***

**1 Thessalonians 5:23**

**Final instructions**

*12 Now we ask you, brothers, to respect those who work hard among you, who are over you in the Lord and who admonish you. 13 Hold them in the highest regard in love because of their work. Live in peace with each other. 14 And we urge you, brothers, warn those who are idle, encourage the timid, help the weak, be patient with everyone. 15 Make sure that nobody pays back wrong for wrong, but always try to be kind to each other and to everyone else.*

*16 Be joyful always; 17 pray continually; 18 give thanks in all circumstances, for this is God’s will for you in Christ Jesus.*

*19 Do not put out the Spirit’s fire; 20 do not treat prophecies with contempt. 21 Test everything. Hold on to the good. 22 Avoid every kind of evil.*

*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. 24 The one who calls you is faithful and he will do it.*

*25 Brothers, pray for us. 26 Greet all the brothers with a holy kiss. 27 I charge you before the Lord to have this letter read to all the brothers.*

*28 The grace of our Lord Jesus Christ be with you.*

1 Thessalonians 5

1. These instructions are very personal, more like the first four commandments than the final six.

2. As in 4:3-8, the Christian life always points to something to avoid and something to hold on to

3. The normal Christian life depends on God’s sanctifying work and looks forward to the *Parousia*

4. Paul expected his letter to be “preached”

**A series of very relational imperatives (developed from the ESV)**

In the church: Work for order (I like this starting point better than 1 Corinthians 14:40)

*We ask you, brothers,   
 to respect those who labor among you and are over you in the Lord and admonish you,   
 and to esteem them very highly in love because of their work.*

*Be at peace among yourselves.*

Among the brothers: Paul wants us to start with the more difficult cases (see 2 Thessalonians 3:6-15)

*And we urge you, brothers,   
 admonish the idle,   
 encourage the fainthearted,   
 help the weak,   
 be patient with them all.   
 See that no one repays anyone evil for evil,   
 but always seek to do good to one another and to everyone.*

Regarding the Spirit: the disciplines of joy, prayer and thanksgiving prepare believers to receive and discern

*Rejoice always,* *pray without ceasing,*

*give thanks in all circumstances; for this is the will of God in Christ Jesus for you.*

*Do not quench the Spirit.*

*Do not despise prophecies, but test everything; hold fast what is good.*

*Abstain from every form of evil.*

*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.*

Regarding Paul:Paul ends with how much he depends on the church (see 2 Thessalonians 3:1-5)

*Brothers, pray for us.*

*Greet all the brothers with a holy kiss.*

*I put you under oath before the Lord to have this letter read to all the brothers.*

*The grace of our Lord Jesus Christ be with you.*

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**Is sanctification required? (with some help from John Piper and B. B. Warfield)**

*8 So do not be ashamed to testify about our Lord, or ashamed of me his prisoner. But join with me in suffering for the gospel, by the power of God, 9 who has saved us and called us to a holy life—not because of anything we have done but because of his own purpose and grace. This grace was given us in Christ Jesus before the beginning of time . . . .*

2 Timothy 1:8-10 (see John 15 for another perspective)

*The Lord said to Moses, 2 “Speak to the entire assembly of Israel and say to them: ‘Be holy because I, the Lord your God, am holy . . . .*

Leviticus 19

*13 But we ought always to thank God for you, brothers loved by the Lord, because from the beginning God chose you to be saved through the sanctifying work of the Spirit and through belief in the truth. 14 He called you to this through our gospel, that you might share in the glory of our Lord Jesus Christ. 15 So then, brothers, stand firm and hold to the teachings we passed on to you, whether by word of mouth or by letter.*

2 Thessalonians 2:13-15 (remember the discussion from 1 Thessalonians 4:1-12, especially 4:7)

1. Sanctification is a celebration of grace

2. Sanctification is essential to authentic conversion (along with “belief in the truth”)

3. Sanctification is the objective evidence of conversion (see passages like 2 John 2:1-8)

**Living in anticipation of the *Parousia***

1. *Labora et ora*

*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. 24 The one who calls you is faithful and he will do it.*

1 Thessalonians 5:23-24

*13 Therefore, prepare your minds for action; be self-controlled; set your hope fully on the grace to be given you when Jesus Christ is revealed. 14 As obedient children, do not conform to the evil desires you had when you lived in ignorance. 15 But just as he who called you is holy, so be holy in all you do; 16 for it is written: “Be holy, because I am holy.”*

1 Peter 1

2. This is a promise based on God’s call and his character

*24 The one who calls you is faithful and he will do it.*

1 Thessalonians 5:24

*17 Since you call on a Father who judges each man’s work impartially, live your lives as strangers here in reverent fear. 18 For you know that it was not with perishable things such as silver or gold that you were redeemed from the empty way of life handed down to you from your forefathers, 19 but with the precious blood of Christ, a lamb without blemish or defect. 20 He was chosen before the creation of the world, but was revealed in these last times for your sake. 21 Through him you believe in God, who raised him from the dead and glorified him, and so your faith and hope are in God.*

1 Peter 1

3. Pray for what Paul prayed for

*Finally, brothers, pray for us that the message of the Lord may spread rapidly and be honored, just as it was with you. 2 And pray that we may be delivered from wicked and evil men, for not everyone has faith. 3 But the Lord is faithful, and he will strengthen and protect you from the evil one. 4 We have confidence in the Lord that you are doing and will continue to do the things we command. 5 May the Lord direct your hearts into God’s love and Christ’s perseverance.*

2 Thessalonians 2 (and see Spurgeon’s sermon on 5:17)

**Resources for reading 1 Thessalonians**

The poster for 1 Thessalonians can be found at [*bibleproject.com*](file:///I:\Lent%202023\bibleproject.com)

Doug’s favorite 1 Thessalonians commentaries include   
Charles Wannamaker’s NIGTC volume (Eerdmans, 1990)  
Hendricksen’s *Expository Commentary* (Baker, 1955)  
Robert Thomas’ volume in *Expositors’ Bible Commentary* (Zondervan, 1981)

John MacArthur has a very interesting sermon, “The Ideal Church” at [*https://www.gty.org/library/sermons-library/1317A*](https://www.gty.org/library/sermons-library/1317A)

Spurgeon’s sermon on 5:17 is at [*http://www.spurgeongems.org/vols16-18/chs1039.pdf*](http://www.spurgeongems.org/vols16-18/chs1039.pdf)This sermon ends with this challenge:

Beloved, you have prayed very earnestly for the pastor when he has been sick. Your prayers have

been his consolation and his restoration. Will you not pray for him now that he is able to preach the

Gospel, that his health may be sanctified to God’s service, and the ministry of the truth may be mighty

in the winning of souls? I ask it of you. I think I might claim it of you. I do beseech you, brethren, pray

for us.

Suppose again, dear brethren, there were no conversions in our midst, would you not pray? And

since there are a great many conversions, should that be a reason for leaving off? Shall we worship God

the less because He gives us more? Instead of one prayer which would go up were there no conversions,

there should be ten now that He continues to work salvation among us.

Suppose we were divided, and had many schisms, and jealousies, and much bickering, would not the

faithful ones pray in bitterness of spirit? Will you not pray since there are no divisions and much

Christian love? Surely, I say again, you will not treat God the worse because He treats you the better.

That were foolish indeed.

Suppose we were surrounded today with hosts of persecutors, and error everywhere crept into our

midst, and did us damage, would you not pray, you who love the Lord? And now that we live in days of

peace, and error, though it prowls around, is kept out of our fold, will you not commune with the Lord

all the more? I will say yet a third time, shall we pray the less because God gives the more? Oh no, but

the better He is to us, the more let us adore and magnify His name.

Just now we need to pray because some are growing cold and turning to their old sins. We need to

pray because we are doing much for Christ. Every agency is in full work. We want a great blessing upon

great efforts. We have had such results from prayer as might make a man’s ears tingle who should hear

of them for the first time—our history as a church has not been second even to apostolic history itself.

We have seen God’s arm made bare in the eyes of all the people, and to the ends of the earth the

testimony of this pulpit has gone forth, and thousands have found the Savior—all in answer to many

prayers.

Pray, then, without ceasing. O church in the Tabernacle, hold fast what you have, that no man take

your crown. Oh, continue to be a praying church that we together, when we shall stand before the

judgment seat of Christ, pastor and people, may not be accused of being prayerless, nor of being slack in

the work of the Lord. I earnestly hope all this will tend to make tomorrow’s day of prayer more earnest

and intense. But yet more do I pray that at all times all of us may be fervent, frequent, instant, and

constant in prayer, praying in the Holy Ghost, in the name of Jesus.

John Newton’s “Great Advent” sermon is at [*https://www.monergism.com/great-advent*](https://www.monergism.com/great-advent)

Thomas Schreiner has a wonderful essay on the optimism in 1 Thessalonians at [*http://www.sbts.edu/documents/tschreiner/3.3\_editorial.pdf*](http://www.sbts.edu/documents/tschreiner/3.3_editorial.pdf)

J. C. Ryle has a good commentary on the end of 1 Thessalonians at (attached below) [*https://www.biblebb.com/files/ryle/hold\_fast.htm*](https://www.biblebb.com/files/ryle/hold_fast.htm)and [*https://www.biblebb.com/files/ryle/prove\_all\_things.htm*](https://www.biblebb.com/files/ryle/prove_all_things.htm%20)

B. B. Warfield has a great commentary on 5:23-24 at [*https://www.monergism.com/entire-sanctification-1-thessalonians-523-24*](https://www.monergism.com/entire-sanctification-1-thessalonians-523-24)

John Piper has several very good sermons on 1 Thessalonians at [*https://www.desiringgod.org/scripture/1-thessalonians?page=3*](https://www.desiringgod.org/scripture/1-thessalonians?page=3H)His sermon on 5:23-24 is at<https://www.desiringgod.org/messages/god-sanctifies-his-people>

**Hold Fast by J. C. Ryle** (1816-1900)  
at [*https://www.biblebb.com/files/ryle/hold\_fast.htm*](https://www.biblebb.com/files/ryle/hold_fast.htm)  
 ***“Hold fast that which is good."--1 Thessalonians 5:21***

There are few things in religion which men are so ready to forget as the duty of “contending earnestly for the faith,” and holding fast the truth.

Controversy is seldom popular. Most men like a quiet life in religion. They dislike anything like strife, trouble, contest, and exertion. They will give up much for the specious pretext of securing peace. They are apt to forget that peace procured at the expense of truth is not worth having. In short, they need reminding of St. Paul’s golden words: “Hold fast that which is good” (1 Thess. v. 21).

Reader, when St. Paul said, “Hold fast,” he wrote as one who knew what the hearts of all Christians are. He knew that our grasp of the Gospel, at our best, is very cold,—that our love soon waxes feeble,—that our faith soon wavers,—that our zeal soon flags,—that familiarity with Christ’s truth often brings with it a species of contempt,—that, like Israel, we are apt to be discouraged by the length of our journey,—and like Peter, ready to sleep one moment and fight the next,—but like Peter, not ready to “watch and pray.” All this St. Paul remembered, and, like a faithful watchman, he cries, by the Holy Ghost, “Hold fast that which is good.”

He wrote as if he foresaw by the Spirit that the good tidings of the Gospel would soon be corrupted, spoiled, and plucked away from the Church. He wrote as one who foresaw that Satan and all his agents would labour hard to cast down Christ’s truth. He wrote as if he would forewarn men of this danger, and he cries, “Hold fast that which is good.”

Reader, the advice is always needed—needed as long as the world stands. There is a tendency to decay in the very best of human institutions. The best visible Church of Christ is not free from this liability to degenerate. It is made up of fallible men. There is always in it a tendency to decay. We see the leaven of evil creeping into many a Church, even in the Apostle’s time. There were evils in the Corinthian Church, evils in the Ephesian Church, evils in the Galatian Church. All these things are meant to be our warnings and beacons in these latter times. All show the great necessity laid upon the Church to remember the Apostle’s word: “Hold fast that which is good.”

Many a Church of Christ since then has fallen away for the want of remembering this principle. Their ministers and members forgot that Satan is always labouring to bring in false doctrine. They forgot that he can transform himself into an angel of light,—that he can make darkness appear light, and light darkness; truth appear falsehood, and falsehood truth. If he cannot destroy Christianity, he ever tries to spoil it. If he cannot prevent the form of godliness, he endeavours to rob Churches of the power. No Church is ever safe that forgets these things, and does not bear in mind the Apostle’s injunction, “Hold fast that which is good.”

Reader, if ever there was a time in the world when Churches were put upon their trial, whether they would hold fast the truth or not, that time is the present time, and those Churches are the Protestant Churches of our own land. Popery, that old enemy of our nation, is coming in upon us in this day like a flood. We are assaulted by open enemies without, and betrayed continually *by false friends within.* Roman Catholic churches, and chapels, and schools, and conventual and monastic establishments are continually increasing around us. Month after month brings tidings of some new defection from the ranks of the Church of England to the ranks of the Church of Rome. Already the Pope has parcelled our country into bishoprics, and speaks like one who fancies that by and by he shall divide the spoil. Already he seems to foresee a time when England shall be as the patrimony of St. Peter’s, when London shall be as Rome, when St. Paul’s shall be as St. Peter’s, and Lambeth Palace shall be as the Vatican itself. Surely now, or never, we ought all of us to awake, and “hold fast that which is good.”

We supposed, some of us, in our blindness, that the power of the Church of Rome was ended. We dreamed, some of us, in our folly, that the Reformation had ended the Popish controversy, and that if Romanism did survive, Romanism was altogether changed. If we did think so, we have lived to learn that we made a most grievous mistake. *Rome never changes.* It is her boast that she is always the same. The snake is not killed. He was scotched at the time of the Reformation, but was not destroyed. *The Romish Antichrist is not dead.* He was cast down for a little season, like the fabled giant buried under Ætna, but his deadly wound is healed, the grave is opening once more, and Antichrist is coming forth. The unclean spirit of Popery is not laid in his own place. Rather he seems to say, “My house in England is now swept and garnished for me; let me return to the place from whence I came forth.”

And, reader, the question is now, whether we are going to abide quietly, sit still and fold our hands, and do nothing to resist the assault. Are we really men of understanding of the times? Do we know the day of our visitation? Surely this is a crisis in the history of our Churches and of our land. It is a time which will soon prove whether we know the value of our privileges, or whether, like Amalek, “the first of the nations,” our “latter end shall be that we perish for ever.” It is a time which will soon prove whether we intend to allow our candlestick to be quietly removed, or to repent and do our first works. If we love the open Bible,—if we love the preaching of the Gospel,—if we love the freedom of reading that Bible, no man letting or hindering us, and the opportunity of hearing that Gospel, no man forbidding us,—if we love civil liberty,—if we love religious liberty,—if these are precious to our souls, we must all make up our minds to “hold fast,” lest by and by we lose all.

Reader, if we mean to hold fast, every parish, every congregation, every Christian man, and every Christian woman, must do their part in contending for the truth. Each should work, and each should pray, and each should labour as if the preservation of the pure Gospel depended upon himself or herself, and upon no one else at all. The bishops must not leave the matter to the priests, nor the priests leave the matter to the bishops. The clergy must not leave the matter to the laity, nor the laity to the clergy. The Parliament must not leave the matter to the country, nor the country to the Parliament. The rich must not leave the matter to the poor, nor the poor to the rich. We must all work. Every living soul has a sphere of influence. Let him see to it that he fills it. Every living soul can draw some weight into the scale of the Gospel. Let him see to it that he casts it in. Let every one know his own individual responsibility in this matter, and all, by God’s help, will be well.

If we would hold fast that which is good, *we must not tolerate or countenance any doctrine that is not the pure doctrine of Christ’s Gospel.* There is a hatred that is downright charity: that is the hatred of erroneous doctrine. There is an intolerance which is downright praiseworthy: that is the intolerance of false teaching in the pulpit. Who would ever think of tolerating a little poison given to him day by day? If men come among you who do not preach “all the counsel of God,” who do not preach of Christ, and sin, and holiness, of ruin, and redemption, and regeneration,—or do not preach of these things in a Scriptural way, you ought to *cease to hear them.* You ought to act upon the injunction given by the Holy Ghost in the Old Testament: “Cease, my son, to hear the instruction that causeth to err from the words of knowledge” (Prov. xix. 27). You ought to carry out the spirit shown by the Apostle Paul, in Gal. i. 8: “Though we, or an angel from heaven, preach any other Gospel unto you than that which we have preached, let him be accursed.” If we can bear to hear Christ’s truth mangled or adulterated,—and can see no harm in listening to that which is another Gospel,—and can sit at ease while sham Christianity is poured into our ears,—and can go home comfortably afterwards and not burn with holy indignation,—if this be the case, there is little chance of our ever doing much to resist Rome. If we are content to hear Jesus Christ not put in His rightful place, we are not men and women who are likely to do Christ much service, or fight a good fight on His side. He that is not zealous against error, is not likely to be zealous for truth.

If we would hold fast the truth, *we must be ready to unite with all who hold the truth, and love the Lord Jesus Christ in sincerity.* We must be ready to lay aside all minor questions as things of subordinate importance. Establishment or no establishment, liturgy or no liturgy, surplice or no surplice, bishops or presbyters,—all these points of difference, however important they may be in their place and in their proportion, all ought to be regarded as subordinate questions. I ask no man to give up his private opinions about them. I wish no man to do violence to his conscience. All I say is, that these questions are wood, hay, and stubble, when the very foundations of the faith are in danger. The Philistines are upon us. Can we make common cause against them, or can we not? This is the one point for our consideration. Surely it is not right to say that we expect to spend eternity with men in heaven, and yet cannot work for a few years with them in this world. It is nonsense to talk of alliance and union, if, in a day like this, there is to be no *co-operation.* The presence of a common foe ought to sink minor differences. We must hold together: depend upon it, all Protestants must hold together, if they mean to “hold fast that which is good.”

Last of all, if it be right to “hold fast that which is good,” let us make sure that we have each laid hold personally upon Christ’s truth for ourselves. Reader, it will not save you and me to know all controversies, and to be able to detect everything that is false. Head knowledge will never bring you and me to heaven. It will not save us to be able to argue and reason with Roman Catholics, or to detect the errors of Pope’s bulls, or pastoral letters. Let us see that we each lay hold upon Jesus Christ for ourselves by our own personal faith. Let us see to it that we each flee for refuge and lay hold upon the hope set before us in His glorious Gospel. Let us do this, and all shall be well with us, whatever else may go ill. Let us do this, and then all things are ours. The Church may fail. The State may go to ruin. The foundations of all establishments may be shaken. The enemies of truth may for a season prevail; but as for us, all shall be well. We shall have in this world peace, and in the world which is to come life everlasting, for we shall have Christ.

Reader, if you have not yet laid hold on this hope in Christ, seek it at once. Call on the Lord Jesus to give it to you. Give Him no rest till you know and feel that you are His.

If you have laid hold on this hope, hold it fast. Prize it highly, for it will stand by you when everything else fails.

**God Sanctifies His People**

John Piper, April 12, 1992

At [*https://www.desiringgod.org/messages/god-sanctifies-his-people*](https://www.desiringgod.org/messages/god-sanctifies-his-people)

*May the God of peace himself sanctify you wholly; and may your spirit and soul and body be kept sound and blameless at the coming of our Lord Jesus Christ. He who called you is faithful, and he will do it.*

1 Thessalonians 5:24

## Introduction: The Necessity of Holy Living

How can you have the assurance of salvation if holiness is necessary?

Vast portions of the Christian church today in America seek assurance by making holiness of life unnecessary. If holiness of life is not necessary to get to heaven, then an unholy person can have assurance that he will get there. They don't just deny that perfection is not required for entering heaven (which is true; we do not attain practical perfection in this life); but they go beyond that and say that no degree of obedience or holiness or purity or goodness or love or repentance or transformation is required for entering heaven. They say that if God required any measure of practical obedience or holiness, it would do three terrible things: 1) nullify grace and 2) contradict justification by faith alone and 3) destroy assurance.

But that is not true. The Bible teaches that none of those things happen when the biblical necessity for holy living is rightly understood. There is a glorious assurance in the Christian life! But it is not found by denying the demand for holiness.

**1. Does Not Nullify Grace**

The necessity of holy living does not nullify grace.

It is based squarely on the pardon of grace. And it demonstrates the power of grace. In [1 Corinthians 15:10](https://biblia.com/bible/esv/1%20Cor%2015.10) Paul said, "By the grace of God I am what I am, and his grace toward me was not in vain but I worked harder than any of them. Nevertheless it was not I but the grace of God which is with me." Grace is not only the pardon that passes over our badness; it is also the power that produces our goodness. If God says that it's necessary for grace to do that, it is not a nullifying of grace when we agree with him.

**2. Does Not Contradict Justification by Faith Alone**

The necessity of holy living does not contradict justification by faith alone.

[Three weeks ago](http://www.desiringgod.org/ResourceLibrary/Sermons/ByDate/1992/794_God_Justified_the_Ungodly/) I tried to show that all the sins of God's people, past, present, and future, are forgiven because of the death of Christ once for all. I said that this justification on the basis of Christ's death for us is the foundation of sanctification—not the other way around. I put it like this: the only sin we can fight against successfully is a forgiven sin. Without a once-for-all justification through Christ, the only thing that our striving for holiness produces is despair or self-righteousness.

But I did not say that the work of God in justification makes the work of God in sanctification optional. I didn't say (the Bible doesn't say) that forgiveness makes holiness optional. It doesn't make it optional, it makes it possible. What we will see today is that the God who justifies also sanctifies. The faith that justifies also satisfies—it satisfies the human heart and frees it from the deceptive satisfactions of sin. Faith is the expulsive power of a new affection (Thomas Chalmers). That is why justification and the process of sanctification always go together. They both come from the same faith. Perfection comes at the end of life when we die or when Christ returns, but the pursuit of holy living begins with the first mustard seed of faith. That's the nature of saving faith. It finds satisfaction in Christ and so is weaned away from the satisfactions of sin.

**3. Does Not Destroy Assurance**

The necessity of holy living does not destroy assurance.

The human mind might reason like this: if some measure of holy living is required and if it cannot be precisely quantified—if you can't tell me exactly how much is necessary—then that requirement will always leave me unsure if I have enough. So any requirement for holiness or obedience at all destroys assurance.

But this is simply not the reasoning of the Bible. The Bible shows abundantly that there is a "holiness without which we will not see the Lord" and we are told in [Hebrews 12:14](https://biblia.com/bible/esv/Heb%2012.14) to "pursue" it. But it does not imply that this destroys assurance. And the reason it doesn't is what today's sermon is about. Namely, God's commitment to sanctify us—to make us as holy as we need to be in this life—is as sure as his election and his predestination and his justification and his call. What gives us assurance in this matter is not primarily focusing on the measure of our holiness, but on the measure of God's faithfulness to do the sanctifying work he promises to do. There's the key.

## Exposition: God's Commitment to Sanctify Us

So let's look at this in our text. Notice three things: the commandments, the prayer, and the promise.

**1. The Commandments**

Paul has just finished giving a string of commandments in verses 14–22 which comes to an end in verse 22, "Abstain from every form of evil." So we know that God uses commandments and incentives in the way he sanctifies us. He does not say: "I am the one who sanctifies you, so I have nothing to tell you to do." The way he sanctifies is not merely subconscious. He deals with our minds and our motives. That's the first thing to notice.

**2. The Prayer**

Then in verse 23 Paul shifts from exhorting or commanding us to be holy to asking God to make us holy: "May the God of peace himself sanctify you wholly; and may your spirit and soul and body be kept sound and blameless at the coming of our Lord Jesus Christ." So not only does God use commands and incentives in the way he makes us holy, he also uses the prayers of his people. He not only deals with your mind and motives in the way he makes you holy; he deals with the minds and motives of others so that they pray for you.

**3. The Promise**

Notice not only the commandments and the prayer, but most important the promise of God. After commanding us to pursue holy living in verses 14–22 and praying that God would sanctify us in verse 23, Paul says the decisive thing in verse 24: "He who called you is faithful, and he will do it."

This is the way Paul handles the assurance problem. Let it shape your thinking this morning. It is mere human reasoning and not God that says: "Well, he is commanding us to abstain from evil, so it must be up to us to get holy, and therefore it's not assured." It is mere human reasoning and not God that says: "Well, he is praying for God to sanctify me, so it depends on Paul's prayer and God may or may not answer, and so it is not assured." All that is wrong thinking. It's not what the text says. Right thinking moves on to verse 24 and says: God's faithfulness combined with God's call proves he WILL do it! "He who calls you is faithful, and he WILL do it." What's the IT? The "it" is what Paul's been commanding and what he's been praying for, namely, sanctification. God will do it.

That is the foundation for full assurance. Paul did not say that you have to make holy living unnecessary to have assurance. He said that God is faithful and he WILL do it. The issue of assurance is: will we trust him not only for the grace to forgive our sins, but also for the grace to make headway in overcoming our sins? Will we believe what verse 24 says: "God is faithful; he will do it"?

## When Will God Do It?

Now if you are looking at verse 23 carefully, you may have the question I had: When Paul prays that God would sanctify us and keep us blameless "at the coming of our Lord Jesus Christ," does he mean that God will change us then in the twinkling of an eye when Jesus comes, or does he mean that he will work in us now so that we will be holy when Jesus comes? Are verses 23 and 24 a prayer and a promise for what God will do all at once only when Jesus comes? Or are they a prayer and a promise for what God will do now in the lives of believers to prepare them for that day in holiness?

My answer is that it's a prayer and a promise for God to do what needs to be done now. My reason for this is not only that sanctification usually refers to the process of becoming holy now, but also the parallel in chapter 3:12–13 shows that this is what Paul means.

May the Lord make you increase and abound in love to one another and to all men, as we do to you; so that he may establish your hearts unblamable in holiness [that's what Paul prays for in 5:23] before God our Father at the coming of our Lord Jesus Christ [same phrase as in 5:23] with all his saints.

So what Paul is praying is that God would do something NOW, namely, make us increase and abound in love. And the goal of this progressive work in us NOW is that when the end comes, we might be established before God in holiness, because love is the essence of human holiness.

So my conclusion is that [1 Thessalonians 5:23–24](https://biblia.com/bible/esv/1%20Thess%205.23%E2%80%9324) really does teach that God is the one who sanctifies NOW. He does it through commandments and incentives that appeal to our minds and our motives. He does it through prayer. But however he does it, and however slowly it comes, and however imperfect we feel, the main thing is that GOD does it, and he WILL do it. That is the ground of our assurance. "He who calls you is faithful. He will do it." Assurance does not come from making holiness optional. It comes from knowing God is faithful.

## Why God's Call Guarantees His Sanctifying Work

But why is it that the faithfulness of God commits him to sanctify us? The key is the connection between the other parts of our salvation and God's work of sanctification. You can see this clearly in verse 24. Paul says, "He who calls you is faithful. He will do it." It's as if Paul said, "He called you! Don't you see? He called you! And if he called you, then he WILL sanctify you. That's what his faithfulness means. Don't you get it?"

And you scratch your head and say, "Why does the fact that he called us mean that he has to sanctify us?" And Paul says, "It's because his purpose in calling you was that you might become holy. Holiness is the invincible purpose of God in your call. He would be unfaithful to his purpose if he just called and didn't sanctify. That's what I said back in 4:7, "God has not called you for uncleanness, but in holiness." "God called you with a holy calling" ([2 Timothy 1:9](https://biblia.com/bible/esv/2%20Tim%201.9)). His purpose in calling you is your holiness. He will do it. He's faithful.

I hope you begin to feel what this means for the foundations of your assurance. It means that every successive step of your salvation is rooted in the certainty of all the steps that have gone before. Your sanctification is rooted in your call and guaranteed by your call. Your call is rooted in the death of Christ for sinners. The death of Christ is rooted in predestination and predestination is rooted in election. Once you feel yourself caught up in this great, objective, God-wrought salvation, you know yourself loved with an omnipotent, everlasting, electing, predestining, atoning, calling, sanctifying, saving love. And you sing, "God is faithful. He will do it!"

## God's Sure Purpose for Your Holiness

But not only that, the aim of God in your election was your holiness. [Ephesians 1:4](https://biblia.com/bible/esv/Eph%201.4), "God chose us in him before the foundation of the world that we might be holy and blameless before him in love" (cf. [2 Thessalonians 2:13](https://biblia.com/bible/esv/2%20Thess%202.13)). Your holiness is as sure as your election.

Not only that, the aim of God in your predestination was your holiness. [Romans 8:29](https://biblia.com/bible/esv/Rom%208.29), "Those whom he foreknew he predestined to be conformed to the image of his Son." Becoming like Jesus is as sure as God's purpose of predestination.

Not only that, the aim of God in the death of his Son was your holiness. [Ephesians 5:26](https://biblia.com/bible/esv/Eph%205.26), "Christ loved the church and gave himself up for her that he might sanctify her"—make her holy. Your becoming holy is as sure as God's invincible purpose in the death of his Son.

In choosing you his purpose was your holiness. In predestining you his purpose was your holiness. In dying for you his purpose was your holiness. In calling you his purpose was your holiness. And so we can say with Paul in verse 24 not only, "He who called you is faithful, he will do it—he will sanctify you," but also, "He who chose you is faithful, he will do it. He who predestined you is faithful, he will do it. He who sent his Son to die for you is faithful, he will do it.

[2 Thessalonians 2:13](https://biblia.com/bible/esv/2%20Thess%202.13) says, "God chose you from the beginning to be saved through sanctification"—not apart from sanctification. Salvation comes through sanctification, and no other way (cf. [Romans 6:22](https://biblia.com/bible/esv/Rom%206.22)). We have a great and glorious ground of assurance not because holiness is superfluous, but because God is faithful. He will do it.

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Note: See ["Letter to a Friend Concerning the So-Called 'Lordship Salvation'"](http://www.desiringgod.org/ResourceLibrary/Articles/ByDate/1990/1496_Letter_to_a_Friend_Concerning_the_SoCalled_Lordship_Salvation/) for a list of texts showing the necessity of holiness and the way this fits together with justification by faith and the freeness of grace and the reality of assurance.

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