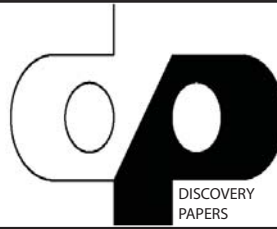


# SETTING THE STAGE

SERIES: BETWEEN THE TIMES



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1 & 2 Thessalonians  
9th Message  
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*1 Thessalonians 5:12-28*

I know God's will for your life. That's right. You have, perhaps at multiple junctures in your life, wondered what God's will is for you. Wonder no more. I know.

First of all, if you're hoping that I know who you should marry, what job you should take, or where you should live, I will disappoint you, because I don't know these aspects of God's will for you. Fret not, though, because I know something better. I know a more important aspect of God's will for you.

Well, I only know because the apostle Paul knows, and he told me what God's will is for you. How do I know what he knows? The same way you can know it: by reading his Spirit-inspired words in the New Testament. In 1 Thessalonians 5:18, he tells you God's will for you (and for me). What is it? Let's see.

## **1 Thessalonians 5:12-28:**

**We ask you, brothers, to respect those who labor among you and are over you in the Lord and admonish you, <sup>13</sup>and to esteem them very highly in love because of their work. Be at peace among yourselves. <sup>14</sup>And we urge you, brothers, admonish the idle, encourage the fainthearted, help the weak, be patient with them all. <sup>15</sup>See that no one repays anyone evil for evil, but always seek to do good to one another and to everyone. <sup>16</sup>Rejoice always, <sup>17</sup>pray without ceasing, <sup>18</sup>give thanks in all circumstances; for this is the will of God in Christ Jesus for you. <sup>19</sup>Do not quench the Spirit. <sup>20</sup>Do not despise prophecies, <sup>21</sup>but test everything; hold fast what is good. <sup>22</sup>Abstain from every form of evil.**

**<sup>23</sup>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. <sup>24</sup>He who calls you is faithful; he will surely do it.**

**<sup>25</sup>Brothers, pray for us. <sup>26</sup>Greet all the brothers with a holy kiss. <sup>27</sup>I put you under oath before the Lord to have this letter read to all the brothers. <sup>28</sup>The grace of our Lord Jesus Christ be with you.**

## **Partnership with God**

We hear, in these sixteen verses, no less than twenty-one commandments. Twenty-one! I have trouble keeping track of the Big Ten, and Paul now throws more than twice as many commandments my way. Helpfully, Paul's twenty-one, like Moses' ten, fall out into two categories—the same two, as it turns out. Moses' first four commandments orient us toward relationship with God, and the final six commandments orient us toward relationships with people. In 1 Thessalonians 5, Paul reverses the order, beginning with relationships with people (verses 12-15) and finishing with relationship with God (verses 16-28). Moses and Paul, not to mention Jesus, agree: love God; love others (Mark 12:29-31). However, because Moses gives us Ten Commandments and Paul gives us twenty-one commandments, and because they both give us plenty more commandments elsewhere, we're not left to our own devices to decide what loving God and loving others means, as if we could, to state the obvious, steal for the love of God and others.

Up until verse 23, however, it looks as if it's incumbent on us—our determination, our willpower—to keep the commandments. In verses 23-24, however, Paul prays that God would help us—that he would “sanctify” us—and he even expresses that confidence that God “will surely do it.”

There are two equal and opposite errors in the spiritual life. One is to believe that everything is our responsibility; the other is to believe that everything is God's responsibility. The Scriptures, not least in 1 Thessalonians 5:12-28, commend a third way: a partnership. Listen to Dallas Willard: “Grace is not opposed to effort, it is opposed to earning. Earning is an attitude. Effort is an action.”<sup>1</sup>

What sort of effort is required? What's our part?  
What is God's part?

## Set apart for God's purposes

Verses 23-24 sum up all of verses 12-28. In fact, they sum up Paul's entire letter.<sup>2</sup>

Paul here identifies God as the "God of peace." Near the beginning of the passage, Paul commanded his readers, "Be at peace among yourselves." In that he now wants the God of peace to do something for them, he wants God to help them be both at peace with each other and at peace with God. If God were to "sanctify" the Thessalonians completely, they would be at peace with one another and at peace with God, which means they would be following Paul's instructions in this passage to love each other and love God.

To "sanctify" something, or someone, is to set it, or him or her, apart for God's purposes. In one sense, a sense Paul employs elsewhere, this has already happened for believers: "But you were washed, you were sanctified, you were justified in the name of the Lord Jesus Christ and by the Spirit of our God" (1 Corinthians 6:11b). On the one hand, if we believe in Christ, we have already been set aside for God's purposes. On the other hand, having been set aside, we can always become more responsive to God until we are "completely" sanctified. That's what Paul wants for the Thessalonians—and for us: to grow in our responsiveness to God so that we increasingly fulfill his purposes. To be more useful to him, it stands to reason that we must become more responsive to him. And although effort is required, we cannot become more responsive to God on effort alone; therefore, Paul wishes that God would sanctify us.

Not only does Paul want God to sanctify us, he also wants God to keep us blameless until the coming of Christ, when he returns and the new creation commences. In view of their faith in Christ, believers are already blameless, just as they have already been sanctified. Although they can be increasingly sanctified, they can't become increasingly blameless. They just need to remain blameless. Thus Paul wishes that the Thessalonians would be "kept blameless." To remain in a blameless state, then, means to remain in the faith, for it is only the blood of Christ that makes us blameless.

If Paul would wish for us to be completely sanctified, how much of us does God want?

## Your whole being

When Paul refers to "your whole spirit and soul and body," he's referring to the whole person. In my view, Paul is not here reflecting a so-called "tripartite" understanding of humanity, as if humans consisted of three parts: body, soul, and spirit. Nowhere else in his writings does he speak of humans in this way. When he uses similar language in 1 Thessalonians 3:13, he wishes that God would establish their "hearts," not their body, their soul, or their spirit, "blameless in holiness before our God and Father, at the coming of our Lord Jesus Christ with all the saints." In 1 Corinthians 7:34, Paul refers to the "body and spirit" of someone, not the soul. Jesus said, "And you shall love the Lord your God with all your heart and with all your soul and with all your mind and with all your strength" (Mark 12:30). He doesn't say that you should love God with all your spirit, but that doesn't mean that he means that you shouldn't love God with all your spirit. The writer of Hebrews uses the words "minds" and "hearts" interchangeably (Hebrews 8:10). Moreover, in the Hebrew Scriptures, the words "spirit" and "soul" were used interchangeably (1 Samuel 1:15, Job 7:11, Isaiah 26:9). Words such as "soul," "spirit," "heart," and "mind" are all used in the Scriptures of the inner life, perhaps with different nuances here and there.

Whether you favor a "tripartite" view, as some do, or a "bipartite" view, as I do, or a "five-part" ("quinpartite"?) view, every approach includes the "body." God gave us bodies; he has redeemed us, bodies and all; and he will redeem us, bodies and all, when Christ returns (Romans 8:11, 23; 1 Corinthians 15:51-53). When Paul wants for God to keep your "whole" spirit and soul and body blameless, the emphasis is on the word "whole"—your whole being, through and through, inner and outer. God wants all of us.

How is he going to get it?

## Hold fast to the Scriptures

Jesus also spoke about sanctification. He prayed to God for his disciples: "Sanctify them in the truth; your word is truth" (John 17:17). In this world, we are assaulted by lies, distortions, and half-truths; therefore, we must immerse ourselves in the truth to counteract these influences.<sup>3</sup> What is truth? Jesus says it's God's word, as revealed in and through him, and ultimately also through his apostles and prophets, including, of course, the apostle Paul (2 Peter 3:14-16). What does Paul say about God's word? Look again at 1

Thessalonians 5:19-22: “Do not quench the Spirit. Do not despise prophecies, but test everything; hold fast what is good. Abstain from every form of evil.”

The Spirit works in myriads of ways, and Paul doesn't want believers to stifle the Spirit in any way. However, he zeroes in on a specific way in which the Spirit works, for it is the Spirit who inspires prophets to speak, sometimes concerning the future, in order to motivate obedience in the present, but more often concerning what is needed for the present. We now have, in the Scriptures, the words of the prophets, including the words of Paul. In Paul's day, the Spirit continued to inspire prophets to speak words of truth. Although some would argue that such prophecies have ceased now that the Scriptures are complete, there is nothing in the Scriptures themselves that say that such prophecies have ceased.

Paul doesn't say why the Thessalonians may have been inclined to “despise” prophetic utterances. There are good reasons to be suspicious: e.g., you don't want to be duped. There are also bad reasons to be suspicious: e.g., you don't want to be challenged. The answer, as it concerns contemporary expressions, is to “test everything.”

Paul does not say here how we should test a would-be prophecy. If we look elsewhere in his writings, however, we discern a three-step approach. First, test whether the words are consistent with the words of the apostles (1 Corinthians 13:3; 1 Thessalonians 2:5, 15; 2 Thessalonians 2:2). Second, test whether the words are consistent with God's purpose for prophecy: to build up, encourage, and console (1 Corinthians 14:3). Third, make use of certain individuals who are gifted by the Spirit with perceptive abilities (1 Corinthians 12:10). Once words have been tested, we should “hold fast what is good” (1 Thessalonians 5:21b). If they don't pass the test, if they are deemed to be falsehood masquerading as truth, the words are evil, and we should “abstain from every form of evil” (1 Thessalonians 5:22).

The Scriptures have passed the test. The Scriptures are good. We should hold fast the Scriptures. What do the Scriptures say about sanctification? What does Paul say in 1 Thessalonians?

## Rejoice, pray, give thanks

Paul says in 1 Thessalonians 4:3, “For this is the will of God, your sanctification . . .” Now look again at what he says in 1 Thessalonians 5:16-18: “Rejoice always, pray without ceasing, give thanks

in all circumstances, for this is the will of God in Christ Jesus for you.” Note what Paul says about sanctification in 1 Thessalonians 4: *this is the will of God*. Note what he says about his three commands in 1 Thessalonians 5: *this is the will of God*. In all of his writings, these are the only two places where Paul grounds his words in the will of God. The link between the verses in chapter 4 and chapter 5 suggests that God sanctifies us insofar as we rejoice, pray, and give thanks. If we want to be sanctified, then, we should rejoice always, pray without ceasing, and give thanks in all circumstances.

The word translated “rejoice” is related to the word usually translated “joy.” When you rejoice, you connect with who God is, often through what he has done, is doing, or will do, and you experience joy because of it. To rejoice, then, is to express such joy, either to God or to others. You can and should pray in a multitude of ways. Rejoicing is a kind of prayer. Giving thanks is a kind of prayer. Lamenting and confession are also kinds of prayers. When you give thanks, you not only thank God for obvious blessings, you also look for ways to give thanks in the middle of hardship, looking for God's blessings in seasons of sorrow. Paul instructs us to give thanks “in” all circumstances, not necessarily “for” all circumstances.

Paul is rather thoroughgoing in his desires for us: note the words “always,” “without ceasing,” and “in all circumstances.” If God is to sanctify us “completely” and if our “whole” being is to be kept blameless, then half-hearted participation will not do. In fact, words that convey comprehensiveness (e.g., “all,” “always,” “everyone,” “every,” “everything,” “completely,” “whole”) appear thirteen times in verses 12-28. Paul isn't messing around. Neither is God. God not only wants all of us, he also wants all of us all the time. How will he get it? He will get it if we rejoice always, pray without ceasing, and give thanks in all circumstances.

Clearly, Paul does not mean that we should literally engage in these disciplines every second. Surely, he doesn't expect us to pray in our sleep. Moreover, we can't engage in all three disciplines at once, for there are differences between rejoicing, different kinds of prayer, and giving thanks. If Paul wants us to “rejoice always,” he can't mean that we should never lament. What, then, does he mean? The comprehensiveness in these exhortations calls for us to make such disciplines a lifestyle. How do you do that? You need a rhythm, and you need reminders.

First, you start by finding a rhythm for the practice of spiritual disciplines: daily, weekly, monthly,



quarterly, yearly, whatever. It wasn't for nothing that God gave the Israelites a weekly rhythm and a yearly calendar. Second, you find triggers that remind you to commune with God throughout the day, usually briefly and silently. This, the practice of these disciplines, is the will of God in Christ Jesus for you—for your good. The will of God: that's the gift of God.

I don't know who you should marry, what job you should take, or where to live, but it's more important for you to rejoice, pray, and give thanks than to discern what we might call God's circumstantial will for you. God has not deemed it necessary, in the Scriptures, to tell you whom to marry. He has deemed it necessary, in the Scriptures, to tell you to pray. In fact, God's circumstantial will (e.g., who to marry, what job to take, where to live) is often discerned through obedience to God's fixed will (e.g., rejoice, pray, give thanks). I told you I knew God's will for you!

We practice the spiritual disciplines not only in solitude but also in community. For example, I was rejoicing and giving thanks recently because of something that happened with my children. When our community group gathered, I said, "I want to rejoice because of a minor parenting victory." Before I had a chance to share the nature of my victory, one of the brothers injected, "There are no *minor* parenting victories!" He helped us rejoice together for a major victory!

What happens as you rejoice, pray, and give thanks? You encounter God. As you encounter God, he sanctifies you: he transforms you (2 Corinthians 3:18, 4:6). What's our part? Our part is to, through the practice of spiritual disciplines, set the stage for the divine director. As our friend Jan Johnson says, you do the connecting; he does the perfecting.<sup>4</sup> He who calls you is faithful; he will surely do it.

## Prayer is relational

How do we understand prayer?

Prayer is relational. In the mind of some, prayer entails asking God for things. There is a kind of prayer that involves approaching God with our heart's desires, but limiting prayer in this way is to make it mostly functional. Surrounding Paul's admonition to "pray without ceasing" are admonitions to pray in ways that have nothing to do with supplication: "rejoice always" and "give thanks in every circumstance."

If prayer is relational, you can simply "be" with God. It's all right for your mind to wander. In fact, it is often beneficial for your mind to wander: your mind wanders to places that you can invite God into and then, perhaps, rejoice or give thanks as a result. When you talk with a friend, you're not usually trying to accomplish anything; mostly, you're just enjoying your friend. You're more than happy to accomplish nothing with your friend. On the contrary, you give no thought to wasting time with your friend. When you pray, you enjoy God. You waste time with him. Waste time? In the Silicon Valley? Waste time with God in the Silicon Valley? Whoa!

R. Thomas Ashbrook, director of spiritual formation for Church Resource Ministries, writes of his own transition from praying functionally to praying relationally:

*Too many times, in my frustration at not "hearing" God in prayer (for some "productive" purpose), He has had to say to me, "Tom, you mean I'm not enough for you?" I was embarrassed to admit this was exactly how I felt. I didn't just want to be with God and love Him; I wanted something out of Him and when I didn't get it I was grumpy.<sup>5</sup>*

I recently taught 1 Thessalonians 5:12-28 at our seniors' Bible study. But I knew that if the text concerned prayer, they were going to teach me. So I asked them to tell me about their prayer lives. I figure if anyone in our church knows how to pray, it's those who have walked with the Lord for sixty, seventy, eighty years or more. I could have listened to them for hours. One said she was first attracted to Christ when she heard some believers pray relationally, as if they were simply talking to God. Another likened prayer to a daylong conversation with a friend. Others said, "It's life. It's breath to me. It's an incredible gift." I got the impression that some of them were taking this "pray without ceasing" command literally.

One of the sisters shared that she had been praying for others virtually all day long and then, at the end of the day, realized that she hadn't praised God. At the end of the day, she thought to herself, "I have to stop and pray!" I love it! She had to stop praying in one way to pray in another way!

As you encounter God, he sanctifies you for his purposes. What purposes?

## Sanctification for the sake of others

God sanctifies you for the sake of others. We orient ourselves toward God, and he orients us toward

others. Look, for example, at 1 Thessalonians 5:15: “See that no one repays evil for evil, but always seek to do good to one another and to everyone.” The way of humanity is to retaliate, if only in one’s heart—to return hatred for hatred, curse for curse, insult for insult. Paul says: don’t do that. Challenging enough, but he goes even further than that. Not only should we not seek to retaliate, we should seek to “do good to one another and to everyone”—even to those who have hurt us. This is precisely what Jesus did: “When he was reviled, he did not revile in return; when he suffered, he did not threaten, but continued entrusting himself to him who judges justly” (1 Peter 2:23). Jesus sought to do good to those who both put him on the cross and taunted him while he was on the cross: he stayed on the cross.

How do you stay on a cross when you have it in your power to come down? Note that Jesus “continued” entrusting himself to God. Not for the first time did Jesus entrust himself to God. Entrusting himself to God was a lifestyle, cultivated by disciplines in which he encountered the Father—disciplines such as rejoicing, praying, and giving thanks.

If it is possible to do good to your enemies, how about doing good to your spouse, your children, your roommate, your neighbor, your co-worker, your supervisor, or your brother or sister in Christ? As we encounter God in the spiritual disciplines, we open ourselves up to his perspective. He sanctifies us.

As I listened to our seniors talk about their prayer lives, I surmised that God had sanctified them, for the sake of others, through their prayers. First, I can’t begin to imagine how many people have been blessed by their prayers of intercession. Second, I can’t begin to imagine how many people have been blessed by who they have become—and who they are still becoming. As I simply listened to them talk about prayer, I was blessed.

We orient ourselves toward God, and he orients us toward others. Thus we keep Moses’s Ten Commandments, not to mention Paul’s twenty-one, without really actually trying to keep them, because what we’re trying to keep is company with God. We keep the commandments by keeping company with God. Paraphrasing Dallas Willard: Don’t try to keep the commandments; try to be the kind of person who keeps the commandments.<sup>6</sup>

## Phone without ceasing

This is God’s will for you: Rejoice. Pray. Give thanks. Rejoice, pray, and give thanks to encounter God and be sanctified for the sake of others. Set the stage for the divine director, and watch what he does. You do the connecting; he does the perfecting.<sup>7</sup> Find a rhythm, and find some reminders.

I can’t find a rhythm for you, but let me suggest, for starters, that you set aside fifteen minutes sometime this week. Spend five minutes rejoicing, five minutes praying however you like, and five minutes giving thanks.

God wants us to pray, but he doesn’t want us to literally pray without ceasing. Neither does he want us to literally use our cell phones without ceasing, but we’re probably coming much closer to non-stop cell phone usage than we are to non-stop prayer. According to a recent study, if you’re an average cell phone user, you use your phone 1,500 times a week. That’s about 214 times a day and, if you sleep for eight hours a day, about thirteen times an hour.

If you own a cell phone, there are times you reach for it when you don’t need to use it (unless you need to use it 1,500 times a week!). I don’t need to know the score of the Giants’ game, but sometimes I reach for my phone because I’m curious. At such times, when you reach for your phone when you don’t need to, go ahead and reach for it. But as you do, give thanks to God. Just thank God for something. Thank him for anything. Thank him for the phone if you like. Then do whatever you were going to do with your phone. Let the inclination to reach for your phone be a trigger for prayer. We don’t usually forget to reach for our phones, but we often forget to pray. Therefore, we need reminders to pray. Your cell phone is now a reminder.

### (Endnotes)

<sup>1</sup>Dallas Willard, *The Great Omission* (San Francisco: HarperSanFrancisco, 2006).

<sup>2</sup>Note, especially, Paul’s use of similar language in 1 Thessalonians 3:11-13 and 4:3.

<sup>3</sup>Likewise, in 2 Thessalonians 2:13, Paul says sanctification takes place by means of “belief in the truth”—that is, the gospel.

<sup>4</sup>Jan Johnson, [www.janjohnson.org/spiritual\\_disciplines\\_-\\_introduction.html](http://www.janjohnson.org/spiritual_disciplines_-_introduction.html).

<sup>5</sup>R. Thomas Ashbrook, *Mansions of the Heart* (San Francisco: Jossey-Bass, 2009), 30.

<sup>6</sup>Dallas Willard, “Living a Transformed Life Adequate to Our Calling” ([www.dwillard.org/articles/artview.asp?artID=119](http://www.dwillard.org/articles/artview.asp?artID=119)).

<sup>7</sup>*Ibid.*