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1 Thessalonians 5:223-24

Benedictions & Doxologies

Sermon 6

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Turn to 1 Thessalonians 5. For those of you who are here who might be visiting we are a pretty laid back church but we are pretty serious about the way we view the Scripture. We believe the Word of God is authoritative and sufficient. What that means is we don’t think God left anything out that He wished He had put in the Word of God. We also believe that the Word of God has authority for our lives. So, when we approach the Scripture we approach it to be mastered by it, to submit to it, and not to negotiate with it. We might wrestle with it. There are times where you have to wrestle with it and you work through a passage or text, something you don’t understand, but in the end the Word of God as God has given it to us has authority for our lives. When you’re studying the Word of God and you’re reading the Word of God there are times when you have these monumental moments and there are these big, sort of massive epiphanies that are called doxologies, which just means to proclaim praise to the majesty of Jesus. Then there are other times when the Scripture will have what are called exhortations or benedictions. A doxology is a sort of declaration of praise to God because of who He is and then an exhortation will be at the end of a letter and it will be a message to people, calling them to action. So, any time we approach the Scripture, like in your personal reading or when we come together corporately in the Church, we want to always walk away going, “Was there some clear command that God had for me to obey? What was the clear teaching from His Word that He would have me surrender to? What is it from that, which would shape my life?” God’s Word has power and authority in our lives so we want to approach it as such.

So, we’re in an eight week study and we’re looking at doxologies and benedictions because at the end of the worship services here at Red Oak we always close our service by reading a verse of Scripture that is a doxology or a benediction. We’ve done that for years since our inception. We’re not a very old church but we’ve always done that. We want our people to understand why we do that so we’re teaching and preaching through all of those passages of Scripture, so at the end of a worship service, when we dismiss y’all, and we do it by reading that Scripture you will have context for it. What we’ve done with most of these passages is we’ve backed up a little bit and pulled it into the context of what’s being said in the bigger picture.

Now, tonight’s benediction is from 1 Thessalonians. For a little background of the Thessalonian church, this is a group of people who were awesome. They loved Jesus and they loved Him so much that they wanted Him to come back really soon. They were expecting the return of the Lord and it seems from some of the inferences in the passages of 1 & 2 Thessalonians that some people had even quit work and were just waiting on the Lord’s return. They weren’t working or laboring and they were like, “Jesus is coming back any day,” and were just kind of hanging back and waiting for Jesus to fix everything, and to return, and to take everyone to be with Him in Heaven. So, Paul writes them a letter saying, “Hey, we still have work to do and as we’re doing that work here’s how the Church should go about it and here’s how the Church should function.” So, we’re going to work through 1 Thessalonians 5, keying in on verses 23-24, which are the exhortation and benediction, but we want to take in the twenty-two verses leading up to it so that we understand the context.

Have you ever taken something out of context that somebody said? That can get you into trouble, can’t it? Especially if you ever try to communicate too much through text because you don’t hear voice inflections and things like that. So, it’s necessary to understand in context what someone is saying. We did a skit one time with Shawn and Bethany who played the parts where they were communicating through text. It was at a marriage retreat and they had their backs to each other. One person was communicating something but the other person was hearing it differently. A person said, “That’s fine,” and the first person really meant “That’s fine,” while the other person thought, “What does she mean by ‘that’s fine’? Is it like ‘fine!’ or is it like, ‘You know, that’s really fine’?” It can mean two different things so context is a big deal. Context really matters.

Context matters when you read the Bible. I’ll give you my favorite misrepresentation of Scripture from when I was growing up. I grew up in a very fundamentalist background, which means that a lot of the Christianity was rules-based. I had to go to church, had to read only a certain translation of the Bible, had to have my shirt tucked in, and the men wore ties, so by the time I was in about sixth grade I had to wear a tie, and I couldn’t have a mullet in the mid-80s. I had to sneak a mud flap mullet, which is like a starter kit, a little curl on my collar. A mullet was long hair and everybody knows that Christians don’t have long hair, at least that’s what I was told. So, I loved rock ‘n’ roll music but I wasn’t allowed to listen to that in my house. I couldn’t go to the movies. Some of you may have grown up in a similar situation. By the way, my mama loved Jesus and to this day she loves Jesus. My folks ended up splitting up and things changed drastically but in my formative years that’s how it was. Well, I can remember that I was allowed to listen to music that was Christian instrumental or Southern Gospel, as if when we get to Heaven that’s all we’re going to listen to. That was sort of the message, that this was heavenly music. There’s nothing wrong with Southern Gospel music, alright? I’m not saying that. But it was just kind of odd that was the rules. So, what I did was that I took cassette tapes. Young people, cassette tapes are these devices from a bygone era by which music was recorded onto long strips of tape that was spooled, and when you unspooled it at the right speed the words and sounds came out of the machine called a cassette player, or in the vernacular of the pop culture of the day, a boom box. So, I had these cassette tapes with music on them and I had a Southern Gospel label stuck on that thing but it was really Metallica. I’m not going to lie; that’s what was in there. This was the 80s, too—this was early Metallica if you know what I’m saying. It was pre-Black album so it was hard, and aggressive, and angry, and it was fun, and I loved it. I also needed Jesus at that time.

But there was this thing that came out called Christian rock and I thought, “This will be great. My parents will be cool with this. My dad will be fine with this.” So, I remember getting a tape by a band called Petra. Remember them? I got this Petra tape and they were a Christian rock band. I remember getting it and thinking, “I’m good to go. Now, if I can warm my parents up to Petra then I can play Metallica with a Petra sticker and they won’t even know what they’re hearing. I’m gravy; I’m golden.” But I found out that the Petra was worse than the Metallica. The verse that got quoted was from Paul’s letter to the Corinthians where he says, “Come out from among them and be ye separate, sayeth the Lord.” The way that it was contextualized, I was taught, was that meant we are to come out of the world and do everything definitively different than how the world does it. Well, I feel like there’s a group of people who already have the angle on that—they’re called Amish. They already have that category of life. It was like that text was saying that you are to completely remove yourself form culture; that we need to completely segregate and separate ourselves from culture. Well, you guys know we have to live in the culture. We live in cities, we live in communities, we have neighbors, we have friends, we have co-workers, so how do we contextualize. Well, we begin by understanding that the Word of God is for all people, in all places, in any culture, at any time, but we need to understand the context of what it means. That verse in 1 Corinthians doesn’t mean don’t listen to rock ‘n’ roll music or wear your pants pegged in the 80s. It meant that the Corinthians needed to understand that worshipping Jesus looked different from worshipping the pagan gods of the Corinthian city. People in Corinth used temple prostitution, blood sacrifice, and bloodletting. They spoke in unknown languages and it was a very confusing experience to go to a pagan temple in Corinth. So, when the Corinthians believers became Christians, what happened was that they started to worship Jesus but while still practicing Corinthian ways in the worship of Jesus. Paul is explaining to them in that letter, “Hey, you guys, don’t sleep with each other unless you’re married to each other. Don’t get drunk during the Lord’s Supper. Here’s the way languages are to be used in church,” and things like that. So, in saying, “Come out and be separate” there was a very clear teaching.

With each other Paul’s letters in the New Testament of the Scripture—those letters are Romans, 1 & 2 Corinthians, Galatians, Ephesians, Philippians, Colossians, 1 & 2 Thessalonians, 1 & 2 Timothy, and Titus—those are the letters that are primary to groups of people. Timothy and Titus were to individuals but in pastoral roles. So, each of those letters was written to a group of people, addressing a certain set of issues, typically, and so we need to understand the context. The context in Thessalonica was that these people had a very simple faith. They were very simple minded, in fact, to the point that they were quick to just believe whatever they were told, which made them sitting ducks and wide-open targets for false teaching. Because they would just hear what the preacher said and go, “Well, that’s a preacher up front wearing a suit. He looks sharp and has a bunch of letters after his name. He just knows what he’s talking about. We believe whatever he says.” Paul would instruct them, “No, no, no—you need to test according to the Scripture. Test the spirit of the preacher. Test what he’s saying and understand the context.” In fact, when he originally went to this city he saw a great number of people come to faith in Jesus. He then left that city and went to a city in Berea. We studied this in our study of Acts that took us all of the last year, and in the book of Acts, when Paul leaves Thessalonica he goes to the city of Berea, and when he gets there it says, “The Bereans were more noble” than the Thessalonians because they listened to Paul’s preaching and tested what he was saying against the Scriptures. So, the Thessalonians needed good, clear instruction. A lot of people believe that this was the first letter Paul wrote and so that’s the context.

So, we are actually going to start at the end of 1 Thessalonians 4 and we’re going to begin in verse 13. I’m going to read a lengthy bit of it here.

But we do not want you to be uninformed, brothers, about those who are asleep, that you may not grieve as others do who have no hope.

The Thessalonians were struggling under persecution so Christians were dying for their faith and it was causing them an enormous amount of grief, an overwhelming amount of grief.

For since we believe that Jesus died and rose again, even so, through Jesus, God will bring with him those who have fallen asleep.

It’s interesting terminology, falling asleep referencing those who have died. You will see this often in the writing of Scripture. It’s alluding to the fact that death is temporal. Okay?

For this we declare to you by a word from the Lord, that we who are alive, who are left until the coming of the Lord, will not precede those who have fallen asleep. 16 For the Lord himself will descend from heaven with a cry of command, with the voice of an archangel, and with the sound of the trumpet of God. And the dead in Christ will rise first. 17 Then we who are alive, who are left, will be caught up together with them in the clouds to meet the Lord in the air, and so we will always be with the Lord. 18 Therefore encourage one another with these words.

Now concerning the times and the seasons, brothers, you have no need to have anything written to you. 2 For you yourselves are fully aware that the day of the Lord will come like a thief in the night. 3 While people are saying, “There is peace and security,” then sudden destruction will come upon them as labor pains come upon a pregnant woman, and they will not escape. 4 But you are not in darkness, brothers, for that day to surprise you like a thief. 5 For you are all children of light, children of the day. We are not of the night or of the darkness. 6 So then let us not sleep, as others do, but let us keep awake and be sober. 7 For those who sleep, sleep at night, and those who get drunk, are drunk at night. 8 But since we belong to the day, let us be sober, having put on the breastplate of faith and love, and for a helmet the hope of salvation. 9 For God has not destined us for wrath, but to obtain salvation through our Lord Jesus Christ, 10 who died for us so that whether we are awake or asleep we might live with him. 11 Therefore encourage one another and build one another up, just as you are doing.

Let’s pause right here and here’s the first big idea from the text building up to this benediction. It’s that Jesus is going to return. We know that one of the promises that Scripture holds out for us is that Christ is going to return. He came once just like God said He would and He’s going to come back to Earth again.

Now, when I was growing up there was a lot of talk, especially in those circles that I mentioned earlier, a lot of talk about the Rapture. Have you ever heard that word “rapture”? Raise your hand if you’ve ever heard the word rapture in reference to the Church. Okay, so it’s not in Scripture but it comes from the text that we just read where it says “caught up.” The idea is that there is going to be a point in history where Jesus brings us up to meet Him in the air. There are different views on this but when I was growing up it scared me to death because there was only one view that was taught and that view that was taught was that everybody was going to be hanging out at some point in history, and things were going to get worse, and worse, and worse—which is, I believe biblical that that part is going to happen—but there is going to be a point where all the Christians are going to vanish. Their clothes are going to fall into a pile, their cars are going to run off the road, and if you’re on a Delta flight and the guy flying it is a Christian you’re just in trouble because that thing is going down. There is going to be a mass disappearance of people. Now, I don’t know that it’s going to happen or not going to happen just like that. I don’t know. Because there are three primary views concerning the end of days and we’re not going to get into that. This is not, tonight, a study on that but I would encourage you to study the end times.

But what we do know is this in the passage that we just read. The Lord is going to return. His purpose in returning is going to be twofold—to judge people and to establish an eternal kingdom. Okay? So the first three things here are, Jesus is going to return and in that return He is going to establish an eternal kingdom, and everyone is going to be judged. What that return looks like is open to debate within Christian circles. We’re all on the same team but there are some disagreements on what that looks like. But this is what this text is telling us—the first thing to happen is that the dead in Christ will rise. This is a legitimate, literal resurrection. So, dead folks are going to be resurrected; they are going to be raised to life.

Think back, if you can remember, I think it was toward the end of our study in Acts. One night I stood right here and I asked, “How many of you grieve over the loss of someone you love? How many of us have stood over the casket, the coffin, of a brother, a sister, a mother, a father, a child, a friend, a coworker, and we felt the grief that is associated with the separation that death causes?” We’ve all felt that. And the Thessalonians were feeling it big time and it was happening like that. A lot of it was because of persecution because the Roman authorities were killing Christians. These people were grieving over the loss of their loved ones and Paul was giving them a hope that, “Hey, here’s what’s going to happen. Jesus is going to come back.” Some of them were confused, “Jesus is coming back to get us? Wait a minute, some of us have already died. What’s going to happen to them if Jesus comes and gets us? We’re going to leave our brothers’ and sisters’ corpses in the ground?” There was confusion. But Paul says, “No, here’s what’s going to happen. There’s going to be a point in the future where Jesus is going to raise to life those who are dead the same way He was raised to life. They’re going to come back to life.”

Every one of us is going to face death and the hope for the believer is because of the resurrection of Jesus death has been conquered. Death has been defeated. So, in our lives death will be defeated. We will simply fall asleep and be raised to walk in a new life with a new body. So, what’s going to happen is that the dead in Christ will rise first and then this idea of a rapture, or being caught up, is that we will go to be with Jesus. It seems in the vernacular of the text that we will go to be with Jesus and then immediately come with Him to the Earth to establish a new reign, a new Heaven, a new kingdom, a new Earth. The terminology seems to be, do you remember, those of you who have been here, at the end of Acts when Paul was getting close to Rome? Remember that group of people that went out and met Paul a day’s journey and then escorted him into the city? Remember that? We talked about how when a Caesar, a king, or a war general would come back from war, the people of the city, especially the dignitaries, would go out and meet him, and turn, and then enter the city with him. It’s a very Roman thing. This is not an obscure Roman idea. It’s a very Roman thing that when a Roman emperor, a Roman war general, had conquered and was returning to a city to claim what was his, or declare what was his, and establish that city as Roman rule, people would go out, the army would go out and meet him, and dignitaries would go out, and then they would escort him in a parade into the city. That’s the terminology that Paul is using. There is this idea that we are going to go be with Jesus and then come with Him to reign and establish this kingdom. There’s still a lot that we’re not told in the text.

Here’s the thing. When I was growing up the teaching of the Rapture scared me to death. All I could think was who was going to fix my breakfast and supper if my mama left a pile of clothes and was gone. I saw a movie. In the 70s they were making movies and in the 80s and 90s they were writing books. I saw a movie called *Thief in the Night*.[[1]](#footnote-1) It had a couple of sequels and there were a bunch of books in the *Left Behind[[2]](#footnote-2)* series, sixteen to be exact, and somebody made millions off of that stuff. That stuff scared me to death. I remember a guy who came and gave a lecture. He said Jesus will return by 1988 because in 1948 Israel became a nation. Again, he used the teaching of Jesus that said, “Before this generation passes…” It was crazy, and confusing, and I was spun out.

But look at verse 11. What’s the purpose of Paul telling them all of this?

Therefore encourage one another and build one another up.

We should be encouraged to know this. There is going to be a resurrection. That’s good. Jesus is going to come establish a permanent, eternal kingdom, and He will be on a perpetual throne that will never end. That’s going to be good. And there’s going to be a judgment. Now, listen to me. For those of us who are in Christ, the judgment that we will receive will be based on the merit of Jesus. The Bible says in Romans 8:1,

There is therefore now no condemnation for those who are in Christ Jesus.

I’ll give an account for what I say, and do, and how I behave, but ultimately, when it comes to eternal life and condemnation, I will stand before the throne of God uncondemned because Jesus took my condemnation. Salvation for you, if you’re here tonight and you don’t know what a relationship with God looks like, doesn’t come through church membership, saying enough of the right prayers, giving enough money, or being good enough. See, what the world will teach and most religious societies and cultures, and even a lot of what’s been labeled as Christianity or Christendom will teach, is that there are basically these cosmic scales and if the good things you do outweigh the bad things you do, and if the good things you think outweigh the bad thoughts you have, and if the good words you speak outweigh the bad words you say, that in the end the good outweighs the bad and you get to go to Heaven. That is not what the Bible teaches. The Scripture will teach us that nobody is righteous, nobody is good, everybody is sinful, and what we need is for everything on both sides of the scale to be taken off the scale and laid on Jesus and He will deal with it for us. What He gives us is not a set of scales but His declaration of righteousness and He makes us right with God. So, that’s the hope Jesus is giving them. Paul is writing to them and saying this is a good thing; you should be encouraged by this.

So, the three main points are that there is going to be a bodily resurrection, the return of Jesus that will involve calling the dead to life, and calling the living to meet Him in the air. Either way, y’all, think about this for a second. If you are dead that is going to be a heck of an experience. But even if you’re living—I’m imaginative, most of us are imaginative—whoo-hoo-hoo!! It’s going to be awesome.

Did you see those guys down there the other day with the helicopter at the middle school? They were doing touch and goes. The forest service was over there doing mock rescues. Did y’all see that? Like every other hillbilly, I drove down there in my truck with my barefooted kids in the back of it. Trucks were lining the road with folks watching these guys in the helicopter. They were picking people up on this cable. They would come down and pick them up and snatch them up into the helicopter. I thought, “What a job! That was awesome!” They were picking these guys up and flying them around in the helicopter and letting them back down. Gar did that for a living. He jumped out of airplanes, and helicopters, and all kinds of stuff. That’s pretty sweet. I was watching the guy go up in the helicopter and because I was studying this I was thinking, “What’s it going to be like?” Whisked away. It’s going to be pretty sweet. I won’t let my imagination get too carried away but it’s going to be a good thing.

But all of this is going to be followed by a day of judgment and you either get judged based on your merit, and your righteousness, and your scales, or you put your faith and your trust in Jesus, you give Him your sin through confession and repentance, He takes it and gives you His righteousness, and you’re removed from condemnation. That’s the first big idea as Paul is building up to this exhortation.

Verse 12,

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

Okay, so now what he does with the second big idea is he shifts over toward the way that the Church should function properly. So, the first big idea is that Jesus is going to return, the dead will rise, the rest of us will go, and there’s going to be a kingdom. So, in light of that, this is the way that we as a church should function. There is a biblical function of the local church that ties into the biblical function of the global Church of Christians everywhere. We are to function a certain way and he lays this out for us. It’s interesting because he gives us a clear set of teachings.

Now, what this is, is that there are a lot of commands, and imperatives, and instruction here, and there are a lot of active participles where the idea is that here is something you are to do and continue doing in the Christian life. Most of us want to be told to some degree how to behave and how to live. Give me instruction. We want instruction. We want to be told what to do. I want instruction and I want teaching. A lot of times, if you talk to someone who gets a job or who joins a sports team and there is no instruction given, they’re like, “I wish someone would at least tell me how to do my job.” So, as Christians, the good news is that sometimes we are given instructions. Now, the instruction—we’ve already established in what we just read—the instruction doesn’t make us righteous and it doesn’t make us earn favor with God. It doesn’t, but it’s just the way the family is to behave. There’s a way to love one another. You can read passages like Romans 12 and Ephesians 4, and what you are going to see in those passages is clear instruction on how the family of God is to interact; let love be genuine, show brotherly affection, be kind to one another, be tenderhearted. So, here now he lays out this real clear teaching on the function within the church. He starts by how you’re supposed to treat leadership in the church, and then he goes into how you’re supposed to treat one another in worship, and what daily function looks like, and he’s primarily speaking throughout this portion of the text in the plural.

Tucker and I watched that show about the game wardens in Maine, *Northwoods Law[[3]](#footnote-3)*. Has anyone seen that? Y’all got to check that out, at least if you’re a man. They follow these game wardens around in Maine who are chasing poachers and it’s pretty cool? One dude said, “Youse guys,” and I thought that’s a double plural. What does that even mean? Youse guys. I thought, if you’re up in Maine you say “youse guys.” If you’re over here you say, “You guys.” If you’re over here you say, “You all.” You keep coming south and you say “Y’all,” until you land in Southern Appalachia and you say, “Youns.” Okay? Wherever you’re at there’s a way to address a plural group of people. “You guys…youns…y’all…youse guys…” whatever, there are different ways, but the thing is that he is addressing people in the plural in this text.

He says, “We urge you.” We ask, we urge, we beseech. I like to simplify things for myself so in the margin of my Bible I kind of simplified some of these.

“Admonish the idle” – What does that mean? Basically, admonish means to warn. Warn the idle. Some of the Thessalonians—we know from chapter 2 and chapter 4 and from 2 Thessalonians 3—he is instructing because people are being lazy. He’s like, there’s no place for lazy people in the church. Everybody has to be on mission, everybody has a job to do, everybody has a task. Jesus’ Church has work to do in the world. Everybody has to be involved. The church in America is full of consumer Christians who show up, sit their rear end on a soft, cushiony seat, and just take what they can, and what they want, and discard the rest, or complain, or whatever. He’s saying we have a job to do and everybody has to be on mission. Everybody has to be on task and there’s work to be done. So, he’s saying to admonish or warn idle people. If people are being lazy and they’re not doing their job or pulling their weight, admonish or warn them.

Then he says to encourage faithhearted people or comfort discouraged people. That’s another way to say that. In the church, if you’re going through a season of discouragement, coming to church should be like, “Okay, this is going to be good. There is one place I know I can go and I will feel loved. I’ll feel connected.” Y’all, Red Oak should be a place where when people show up here they feel the magnitude and the gravity of the love we have for one another. We’re the Church of Jesus Christ. We’re a family. We’re to love each other. He gives us instruction in the Bible about how we’re supposed to sort out our junk because sometimes families don’t get along. I went to the fifty year wedding anniversary for some family last night. I told Ed Hammond, about three hours in I thought, “Okay, we’re at fifty percent intoxication. Let’s go.” Half the people were drunk. When you get to where a majority of people are drunk, that’s when it’s time to go because it’s going to go south from there. We get together because family loves each other. Sometimes we have to sort out issues but we love one another. We should be able to encourage each other. Church should do that. Help the weak. Be patient with people. Be patient with each other.

What is patience? I wrote this down. I’m just rambling from my journal. What is patience? I mean, I think I know but can I really give a good definition of it? I’m not really good with words. Concerning God’s patience with us, it seems to primarily be His willingness to delay judgment on sinful humanity though it deserves His wrath as in accordance with Romans 2:4. Basically, then, patience in the Church means we are slow to provocation towards one another. Don’t be so quick to be mad at each other, you know? Be patient.

Don’t get even. Don’t be vengeful. One of our members was recently sued in small claims court by someone who professes to be a Christian. They are not a member of our church. Go back and look at 1 Corinthians; Paul told them, “Don’t do that. The Church doesn’t take its business to secular courts. Work this out. We’re a family. Sort it out. Figure it out. There’s a way to do this.”

Then he says, “Rejoice always, pray without ceasing, give thanks no matter what, don’t quench the Spirit, don’t hate prophecies.” He’s like, “Love the Word of God. Care about the Scripture. Let the Church be a place that’s joyful and where we’re happy to see each other. Pray for one another throughout the week. Give thanks in everything.” The Bible says that when we give thanks it produces happiness and more joy. This is a great passage to read to say that this is how we as a family should live. It’s how we should behave.

So, now, we have one more main idea. Through two main ideas Jesus is coming back, there’s going to be a resurrection, it’s going to be a good thing, we should be encouraged, this world is not final for us, therefore we should behave in a certain manner in light of the fact that Jesus is coming back.

Now, we get down to verse 23 and that’s going to be our benediction. This is the big benediction that we read at Red Oak.

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. 24 He who calls you is faithful; he will surely do it.

Big idea number three, God is faithful and will complete the work He began in us. Most of you could finish this sentence from Philippians 1:6, “God who began a good work in you…..will bring it to completion,” right? The Bible talks about this in Hebrews and talks about it in the process of sanctification. Paul, writing to the Romans in Romans 8, says God justifies and those He justifies He glorifies. Justifies means He saves, He makes righteous. So, if God makes you righteous then there’s going to be this ongoing process until the day that He brings you into His kingdom.

See right there in the middle of verse 23 the word “sanctify.” Here’s what that word means. It’s this process where you become a Christian and when you become a Christian God gives you righteousness. He takes your sin. You don’t have to earn His favor. This is an act of grace, something God does by His own mercy and grace toward us. If you grew up thinking you had to earn God’s favor, earn your righteousness, talk to a priest, the Bible says no, Jesus is your priest and has given you His righteousness, just talk to God in the name of Jesus and call it good. That’s the Christian Life 101, okay? We have an Advocate with God, we have a Mediator with God, we have a Great High Priest—all of these are words that describe Jesus. So, we get to talk to God. What happens is that I’m now in a relationship with God. What God is doing as I look to Jesus, and I fix my eyes on Jesus, and through Him I see my heavenly Father, is that God draws me deeper into the relationship with Jesus, and as He’s drawing me more up into that relationship He is making me more like Jesus.

We have people who live here who are from up north. They will say that when they go home that their families will say, “You’re talking like those dumb Southerners.” The more you are with people the more you are going to conform into what you speak, the way you look, the way you behave, and maybe even the way you dress, and the way you carry on. So, as I worship God through Jesus, God is drawing me up and drawing me into a deeper relationship and deeper fellowship, so I’m going to begin to talk like Jesus, look like Jesus, and behave like Jesus. People are going to then begin to see something in me that’s definitively different. Someone ought to see something in you that is definitively different than everybody else in their world, unless they’re surrounded by other Christians. But in your place of employment, at your school, and in your community people should see something. That person doesn’t grieve the same way. That person doesn’t use the same language. That person doesn’t act like everybody else. Go back to what I said at the beginning—it’s not like we dress weird, we behave weird, or we’re awkward—I’m talking about real people loving a real God through a real Savior. What’s going to happen is that He is going to transform you and the Bible says He will do it one degree at a time, and the ultimate goal is to make me like Jesus. That is called sanctification. Sadly, what we’ve created in the last one hundred years in the Bible Belt in America is the idea that you can get saved, call yourself a Christian, and live the exact same way the rest of your life and never conform to Jesus. Y’all, I ain’t yelling at nobody; I ain’t mad at nobody; I want you to understand—the Bible doesn’t teach that brand of salvation. The Bible says that God saves you and He then sanctifies you and He then brings you into glory. So, a Christian who is walking in faith and who is truly saved by the power of the Gospel is going to become more like Jesus every day. It’s going to happen; it’s just a reality. It’s the Bible. He says,

Now may the God of peace himself sanctify you completely.

Connect that back to the first part of the text where we go to meet Him in the air. What’s going to happen in that time of judgment is that we’re going to be glorified. That’s another Bible word. We’re going to be made like Jesus. No more sin, no more sorrow, no more suffering, in a perfect, permanent place. We’re going to be with Him and be like Him. The process from now until then is called sanctification. We’re being sanctified. So, he says,

Now may the God of peace himself sanctify you completely.

Why? Because God doesn’t do anything not to completion. I do all kinds of things not to completion. I did college not to completion. Last week I cut my grass not to completion. Last month, I washed Little’s car not to completion because I ran out of quarters. I can’t wash it at my house because I’m on a spring. Anybody here ever live on a spring? People who live on a spring have dirty cars. You’re not spending valuable water washing your car. So, I was like, “I’m going to surprise Little and I’m going to wash her car.” I started washing her car and put the quarters in—ding, ding. I’m washing it and I hear, “Ding, ding, ding, ding, ding….” What’s that mean? I don’t know. Then, I realize it means, “You’re about to run out, idiot. Put some more quarters in.” Nope. I don’t have any more quarters. But I have one side of a soapy car and a rear quarter panel that’s still muddy. So, I drove it home and parked it that way. “Hey, mama. I washed your car for you.” It looked good. “God, please let it rain right now.” I do stuff all the time that I don’t complete. God always complete everything He does; He does nothing to incompletion. So, if He saves you, He will complete the work He started in you. So, we take peace in that. We take hope in that. That means that when somebody dies, or somebody gets cancer, or you lose your job, or something hard is going down, that God is doing a work and it all fits into the big picture. We can take hope in that. We can rejoice in that. Why? Because He’s faithful.

In closing, He’s faithful three ways. He’s faithful to himself, first and foremost. 2 Timothy 2:13. He’s faithful to himself and we need Him to be faithful to himself. That’s critical. Because He’s holy and He’s just. We need Him to be faithful to His own justice and His own holiness.

Number two, He is faithful to His children. Listen to this beautiful passage of Scripture from 1 Corinthians. He’s faithful to His children; that’s me and you if you’re a child of God. 1 Corinthians 1:8,

… for the revealing of our Lord Jesus Christ, 8 who will sustain you to the end, guiltless in the day of our Lord Jesus Christ. 9 God is faithful, by whom you were called into the fellowship of his Son, Jesus Christ our Lord.

So, He’s faithful to His children. He’s faithful to us.

Lastly, God is faithful to His plan. He’s faithful to His plan. What is the plan God has for you? That you would be fully sanctified, glorified, and made like Jesus, and dwell with Him forever. And we can take hope in that.

So, when we stand up here on a Sunday night and church ends and the benediction is from 1 Thessalonians,

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. 24 He who calls you is faithful; he will surely do it.

We can take hope in knowing there is going to be death but there’s going to be resurrection. There’s going to be pain but there’s going to be a new kingdom. There’s going to be sorrow but there’s going to be a wiping away of the tears. There is something greater and bigger in the future and God is working us toward that. In the meantime, He’s bringing us up further, in further to a relationship with Jesus and is conforming us to His image. The way we treat each other and the way we look at God fits into that and He’s going to be faithful to complete it.

You might be in a place right now in your Christianity where you feel like you are a failure. You have fallen flat on your face and you have given into sin this week that overwhelms you; addiction, pornography, angry attitudes, fighting with your spouse, rebellion against your mom, struggling with your boss, or whatever. Here’s the thing—God is working in you and He’s going to complete what He started. This is part of it so just keep pursuing Jesus, pressing up, pressing in, and let the Lord do what He intends to do. Amen? Let me pray.

Lord, I pray that tonight you would take your Word and apply it to our lives with clarity and confidence. I pray that if there are folks here who don’t know you or have a relationship with you that you would draw them into true salvation and fellowship with Jesus and that there would be repentance and that there would be a confession of Jesus as Lord, and that they would see you not the way the world would describe you but the way that you have revealed yourself to us through your Word, and through the revelation you have given us in creation, and in our consciences, and the fact that you created us in your image. In our minds, we don’t have to look far into our heart, and our mind, and our conscience to recognize good and evil and right and wrong and the reason for that is because you’ve imprinted your image into our existence. Help us to understand that. I pray for anybody here who doesn’t that you would draw them to yourself tonight and that they would receive the free gift of salvation. God, for those who are here who are part of the family of God who struggle and who have their own personal issues this week, I pray that you would bring them to a place of clarity and that big, huge word right in the middle of that last little Scripture, that the peace of God would reign in their hearts and that peace would lead to hope. God, we need to live with peace and we need to live with hope. In order to do that we need to be at war with sin and conflict at times with one another. God, we know that you’re doing a work in the Church and in our lives so please help us, I pray, to be faithful to one another and faithful to you, as you are faithful to us, and to yourself, and to your name, and to your work, and to your purposes in our lives. In the good name of Jesus we pray, Amen.

1. *A Thief in the Night* is an evangelical Christian film series about the Rapture, Tribulation, and Second Coming of Christ. It consists of four films: *A Thief in the Night* (1972), *A Distant Thunder* (1978), *Image of the Beast* (1981), and *The Prodigal Planet (*1983). The series focuses on the difficulties of those who miss out on the Rapture by having not trusted Christ as savior and thus find themselves in the Tribulation. [↑](#footnote-ref-1)
2. *Left Behind* is a series of 16 best-selling religious novels by Tim LaHaye and Jerry B. Jenkins, dealing with Christian dispensationalist End Times: the pretribulation, premillennial, Christian eschatological interpretation of the Biblical apocalypse. [↑](#footnote-ref-2)
3. *North Woods Law* is an American television series that broadcasts on the Animal Planet channel. It highlights the dangers and dramas encountered by the Maine Warden Service and also highlights fish and game officers in New Hampshire. [↑](#footnote-ref-3)