

The Holy Spirit ... Sanctifies

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[0 : 00] Well, good evening and welcome once again to our short church service. Let me begin with words that we find in 1 Peter chapter 1.

Words that speak hope to suffering Christians, reminding them, reminding us, of the true identity that is ours in Christ.

So listen to how the letter begins, verse 1 and 2. Peter, an apostle of Jesus Christ, to God's elect, exiles, who have been chosen according to the foreknowledge of God the Father, through the sanctifying work of the Spirit, to be obedient to Jesus Christ and sprinkled with his blood.

And then in chapter 2, he says of this suffering, struggling church, you are a chosen people, a royal priesthood, a holy nation, God's special possession, that you may declare the praises of him who called you of darkness into his wonderful light.

Now, we're going to read together in our Bibles from 1 Thessalonians chapter 4.

[1 : 25] Again, it would be helpful to have a Bible in front of you, but the words should also be on the screen so that you can follow along. We're thinking again about the Holy Spirit in the believer's life.

And here we're thinking about the Holy Spirit and his work in sanctifying. And we'll think about that in a moment. So 1 Thessalonians chapter 4.

Let's hear God's word together. As for other matters, brothers and sisters, we instructed you how to live in order to please God as in fact you are living.

Now we ask you and urge you in the Lord Jesus to do this more and more. For you know what instructions we gave you by the authority of the Lord Jesus.

It is God's will that you should be sanctified, that you should avoid sexual immorality, that each of you should learn to control your own body in a way that is holy and honourable, not in passionate lust like the pagans who do not know God, and that in this matter no one should wrong or take advantage of a brother or sister.

[2 : 33] The Lord will punish all those who commit such sins as we told you and warned you before. For God did not call us to be impure, but to live a holy life.

Therefore, anyone who rejects this instruction does not reject a human being, but God, the very God who gives you his Holy Spirit.

Now about your love for one another, we do not need to write to you, for you yourselves have been taught by God to love each other. And in fact, you do love all of God's family throughout Macedonia. Yet we urge you, brothers and sisters, to do so more and more, and to make it your ambition to lead a quiet life. You should mind your own business and work with your hands, just as we told you, so that your daily life may win the respect of outsiders, and so that you will not be dependent on anybody.

Goals matter for motivation, don't they? If you're listening and you're a student or a pupil, you will know that it's really hard to be motivated without the push of final exams.

[3 : 51] It's really hard to do your best without a teacher who's checking over your work, if you're in homeschool. And we see it in the life of athletes as well. They are on those gruelling schedules.

They make sacrifices and they push their bodies through the pain barrier for the sake of glory and championships. And it's really hard for them to keep motivated when there is no sport happening. As a Christian, if you are a Christian, I wonder if you know what is the goal of your life. What is God's goal for your life?

There's a wonderful little phrase in verse 3 here. God's will for you and me is that you should be sanctified.

What does God want for us? Sanctification. So what is that? And what does it have to do with the Holy Spirit who we've been thinking about for the last few weeks? Well, sanctification is one aspect of God's grace to us in Jesus Christ.

[5 : 02] It is part of his ongoing work by the Holy Spirit so that more and more we are living free of sin and we are becoming more and more like Jesus.

That's a progressive work of Christian maturity, of growing in holiness. So unlike justification, which is 100% God's work, God declares a believer to be in right standing with him, righteous in his sight because of the finished work of Jesus and because of God's grace that applies justification.

So we're justified in Christ and that's all God's work and we receive that freely as a gift. The sanctification is 100% the work of the Spirit in a believer's life and 100% the work of a believer working out our salvation.

So this is an area where we are involved in work. So the Christian life, and the Bible is really clear about this, the Christian life is about fighting and striving.

So the Holy Spirit is guiding us towards God's goal, holiness, sanctification, becoming more like Jesus. But we have to fight, we have to strive, we have to work, to obey, to kill sin, to believe the truth.

[6 : 36] Jenny Bridges, who's written a very helpful book called *The Pursuit of Holiness*, it says that God has made it possible for us to walk in holiness, but he has given us the responsibility of doing the walking.

So we are to aim for holiness, but we do that fuelled by faith in Jesus. We pursue godliness, but we do that empowered by the Spirit.

So we work as God's Spirit works in us. So let's use 1 Thessalonians 4 to begin to see how this works.

So first of all, the Holy Spirit guides us in holiness. You look at the first couple of verses here. What is Paul saying to these new Christians?

He says, So you are pleasing God.

[7 : 40] Now we ask you and urge you to do this more and more. So you are pleasing. Go on and do it more and more. Your ethics, your moral behaviour, is obedient and pleasing to God.

Now keep on that path of obedience. So remember, God wants us to be sanctified, to be holy, to becoming more like Jesus.

And the Spirit's work is to guide a person to know what that looks like. So this sanctification is an active and ongoing process of being taught and given power to know how on the one hand to love God and also to love our neighbour.

Now that's holiness is doing the will of God. It's about loving God, loving neighbour. So here, what does that look like for the Thessalonians? Well, they're given really practical instructions.

In verses 4 to 8, Paul talks to this group of young Christians about sexual ethics, calling them away from the sexual immorality that they were used to in their former pagan lifestyle.

[8 : 58] In verses 9 and 10, he encourages them to go on and to grow in their love for believers. In verse 11, it looks like avoiding controversy and gossip.

In verse 11 and 12, it also looks like working hard and working well. So there is guidance in all these practical areas of holiness.

God says, be holy because I am holy. All sin is unholy. It is a contradiction of God's holiness.

Therefore, we are to be fighting against it. There should be in a Christian an inner conflict where we want to kill sins so that we can do the will of God.

So when you look at the language Paul uses in verse 1, he urges them to keep on living to please God. In verse 7, he says, God calls you to live a holy life.

[10 : 07] Here is your way of life. Here is your work. Here is your hard work. There is no room for laziness as the Holy Spirit guides us to holiness and obedience. Now before we go any further, there are two, as it were, ditches to avoid.

If holiness is a path that we are to take, there are two ways that we can fall off the path. The one side is legalism where we get the idea that we are to obey in our strength or we are to obey to earn the favour of God.

and that will end in defeat and failure. So that's one ditch to avoid on the path of holiness. The other ditch is the mindset that says, well, we simply let go and let God.

The idea that obedience comes to us as some kind of automatic upgrade where a person becomes a follower of Jesus and then we always make good and wise decisions and we always love well. No, the Bible says we need to work out our obedience. We need to work hard at holiness but we do that not in our own strength.

[11:17] We do that guided and empowered by God's Holy Spirit. So thinking about the Holy Spirit who guides us in holiness, how do we know what holy living looks like?

How do we know what holy living sounds like? It takes us to our second point that the Holy Spirit guides us in the truth, guides us into the Bible, the truth of God's word.

We've already seen that. All through the Old Testament and the New Testament we find the law, we find ethics, we find a way of life being presented to the Christian and again this is not our way to earn God's favour, we're saved by grace not by law but law and ethics they do give us a guide to what pleases God.

They do show us what the way of holiness looks like. Look at verse 2 again. Paul says something striking here, verse 2, for you know what instructions we gave you by the authority of the Lord Jesus.

So Paul is saying that the ethical and moral teaching this very practical instruction, it has the same divine authority as his gospel message.

[12:39] They both come with the authority of Jesus. We need both as Christians. Look at verse 7 and 8. Again, very striking.

God did not call us to be impure but to live a holy life. Therefore, anyone who rejects this instruction does not reject a human being but God, the very God who gives you his Holy Spirit.

So to reject the clear moral instruction that we find in the Bible here delivered by Paul is to choose impurity rather than holiness is to reject God.

Further, it is to reject God's Holy Spirit who both gives the instruction and empowers the way to obey. So hopefully what's become clear to us is that for us to be sanctified, for us to grow in our holiness, to grow into the image of Jesus, we need to know our Bibles and we need to obey our Bibles.

One of the pictures that the Bible uses of itself and we find it in the Psalms and Jesus uses it is that God's Word is like a lamp, it's like a light and the Spirit is the one who inspired the Word of God so the Spirit uses the lamp of God's Word to illuminate certain realities for us.

[14:06] There's that illumination, brightening, lightening up that takes place in at least three ways. First of all, the Spirit uses the Word of God as a lamp to expose the darkness of sin in our hearts.

Maybe one way we can think about it is this. Imagine cleaning your car in the half-light or as it's getting dark. You know when you put loads of water on it and you put a bit of soap on it, it always looks good, doesn't it?

Always, until the water dries and until the sun shines and then, unless you know a really good job, you see the dirty marks in various places. We can think that we are doing really well when we're judging by our own standards or even judging by some of the things that we know in the Bible, but the Spirit always wants us to go deeper.

It wants us to be reading the Bible and to be reflecting on it that it's exposing some of the darkness, some of the unbelief, some of the sin, the stain of sin in our own hearts and lives.

So there's illumination to expose sin and stain. But there's also the Holy Spirit uses the Bible to illuminate and to reveal the beauty and truth of the Bible.

[15:29] So it's always helpful, it's so important for us to pray before we come to read the Bible, you know, open my eyes to see wonderful things in your word so that we wouldn't just read the Bible as any other book, that we wouldn't just read it as something so that we can, you know, tick it off our list so we can feel good.

We want to be reading so that we see more of God's glory, more of the beauty of God's truth. And especially, the third thing to focus on, the Spirit uses the lamp of God's word to illuminate for us the glory of Jesus on every page.

Think about a theatre and imagine that stage spotlight shining. Where does it shine? It always is shining so that we can see the star of the show.

The Spirit wants to do that to help us to see Jesus. So we read the Bible so that we see Jesus as the true king, to see Jesus as the glory of God revealed to us, the true hero, the true champion, the true star.

And the Spirit would have us to see Jesus and see the good news that we have in Jesus and see all the spiritual blessings that are ours in Christ so that we would become what we behold.

[17 : 01] That the more we enjoy and experience of the love and the goodness of Jesus, the more we'll be changed into his image. Now one very practical thing as we think about this truth that the Holy Spirit guides us in the truth that we find in the Bible, this means the Spirit will never guide you and I to act in an unbiblical way.

That is basic. he will never contradict himself, he will never contradict the word. I've had pastoral meetings and discussions and maybe you've had them as well where somebody will sit down opposite me and say, well I prayed and I really feel at peace with this decision and that decision is something that's just thoroughly unbiblical or I feel that the Spirit is guiding me in this way but again it's not a way that's in line with the truth of the Bible.

1 John tells us to test the Spirit to recognise that just as there is the Spirit of God so also there are evil spirits and what do they want to do?

They want to halt our progress in sanctification. They want to take us off course. They want to make us want to fall into ditches to not grow in the image of Jesus. So we don't trust our hunches, our feelings, our intuition.

We want to trust the Holy Spirit to guide us into the Bible. He's always going to guide us towards sanctification, towards holiness and never towards sin.

[18 : 43] He's always going to guide us in line with biblical teaching. He's never going to reveal some new truth. So the Holy Spirit guides us in the truth of the Bible. Last thing and in many ways the most important thing to motivate us towards the goal of sanctification is this, the Holy Spirit guides us to live out our true identity.

Now there is a question, well there are many questions I dread in a public setting but one that's particularly painful is this, when you get that open-ended, you're being introduced to a new group, it's like, tell us about yourself.

That's just, what do you do with that one? But it's interesting to think about identity and how we choose to identify ourselves.

Often, we identify in terms of place, I am from, sky, I live in Edinburgh, we identify ourselves in terms of people, our family relationships or maybe we tend to identify ourselves in terms of our position.

Here is the work I do, here is the work I did, whether that's paid or unpaid. Now, for you and I to make progress towards God's goal for our life which is sanctification, the most important thing for us to understand is our true identity.

[20 : 05] identity. So much of Christian ethics and the Christian way of life is bound up with becoming who we truly are. Not who we are by nature but who we are by God's grace becoming who we truly are in Christ.

Hundreds of times in Paul's letters he talks about being in Christ. It's crucial to see what is already true of us so that we would then live like it's true.

So even here in verse 1 we see it. We ask you and urge you in the Lord Jesus as those who are in Jesus continue to live to please God.

What does the Bible tell us about our true identity as believers? who says things like in Christ you are dead to sin and you are alive in Christ.

You have a new master, you have a new power. It says in Christ you are a new creation. God's power has worked in you so that now you might live for Christ and not live for yourself.

[21 : 26] in Christ you are not a child of disobedience. You are a child of God. In Christ you are holy, you are precious, you are a treasured possession.

So live that way. In so many ways the New Testament reminds us of who we are and then it tells us in light of that identity, in light of all those spiritual blessings you enjoy because you are united to the Lord Jesus Christ, live as those who are in Christ.

And that's what the Holy Spirit does. He guides us to see who we truly are. So we need the work of the Holy Spirit so that we might grow in holiness because he shows us what holiness looks like in God's word.

He shows us the gospel so we see the pattern of true holiness, the beauty of Jesus and we see in the gospel who we truly are so that we might live that way.

So remember the goal of God for your life. It is God's will that you should be sanctified.

[22 : 55] So remember we work hard at that but we work with the help of the Holy Spirit who helps us in that every step of the way.