

The Spirit's Sanctifying Work

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[0 : 00] Chapter 5, verses 19 to 22. Do not quench the Spirit. Do not despise prophecies, but test everything.

Hold fast to what is good. Abstain from every form of evil. So in this final unit of instruction here, as he's closing his letter, Paul turns our attention and the attention of the Thessalonian church to the mighty work of the Holy Spirit, but particularly in the Christian sanctification.

The text affirms a few things for us here that are helpful. It affirms that the Spirit is indeed at work in the church, preparing believers for the glorious return of Christ.

It also teaches us that this sanctifying work is one in which we must actively participate, pursuing the purity that he will complete at the end.

And what we discover immediately here in these verses is that we can actually stifle the Spirit's work in us. And we do that in this case and in the context of this passage by treating the various means of the Spirit's work with contempt.

[1 : 23] So the Spirit is working. We need to pursue that work, but we also need to be warned that we can stifle that work. And there are particular ways that Paul is intent to highlight how that might be done.

There was a specific way in the Thessalonian church where these Christians were quenching the Spirit's sanctifying work, and it all had to do with contempt for the gift of prophecy, which for them was a critical means of the Spirit's operation in establishing the church.

So we're taught in the passage here that as we await Christ's return, we must be careful not to quench the Spirit's work by despising the Spirit's ways.

And at the heart of the text is the most significant and powerful means of the Spirit's mighty work in our lives so that we would understand that if we truly desire to live in a manner worthy of God, who calls us into His kingdom and glory, as we saw in chapter 2, we must take this instruction seriously.

That the Spirit is at work, and He's at work in a particular way, and that His most primary and powerful means of work is actually what's at the heart of what we find here.

[2 : 47] I have just two simple headings that conform to Paul's imperatives here. The first one is this. Don't hinder the Spirit's work.

Don't hinder the Spirit's work. It's very plain for us in verse 19. Do not quench the Spirit. It's a simple, straightforward statement.

It's the main idea of what Paul is going to go on and expand upon in verses 20 and 22. It moves our focus to the work of the Holy Spirit and our sanctification in particular.

There's two fundamental truths here that are worthy of our meditation. The first is an encouragement. The second then would be a warning.

And the encouragement, as I've already mentioned, is this, that the Holy Spirit of God is actively working in the lives of His people. He's actively working in the lives of His people.

[3 : 47] We understand that the Spirit of God is the agent who applies the work of Christ to the individual. That if the Son supplies through His atonement our salvation, the Spirit applies the work of the atonement for our salvation.

And the Bible tells us that the activity of the Holy Spirit in our salvation is amazingly vast. We could spend several sermons just thinking about and meditating on and reflecting on the various ways that the Spirit works.

In fact, the Old Testament actually indicates that this would be a sign of the coming kingdom. It would mark out Christ's kingdom in the world.

And of course, that was inaugurated on the day of Pentecost in Acts chapter 2. There's a lot of ways that the Bible speaks of the Spirit's work. For our purposes this morning in relationship to this text, I want to highlight just two of them, regeneration and sanctification.

Regeneration and sanctification. Regeneration is the work of the Spirit to take one who is spiritually dead in sins and bring them to life in Jesus Christ.

[5 : 12] It's what Jesus was referring to in that great conversation with Nicodemus in John chapter 3 when He told Nicodemus that to enter the kingdom of God, one must be born again of the Holy Spirit.

The Spirit applies the atonement of Christ to the individual through the work of regeneration. And He does so through the preaching of the gospel.

The gospel of John tells us in so many different places, Jesus is teaching about this. In John 15, 26, Jesus says that when the Spirit comes, He will bear witness about me.

That is, He will guide our hearts. He will indicate the work of the Holy Spirit and the application of the atonement to our lives. He would go on to say later, 2 Corinthians chapter 4, Paul would speak of those who are blinded by sin, blinded by the God of this world, but that God shines in their hearts the light of the knowledge of the glory of Christ Jesus.

And what is the agent by which He does that work? It is the Holy Spirit of God that He does that. If you are a Christian today, you are a Christian because the Holy Spirit of God has brought your dead soul to life in Christ.

[6 : 41] Through the gospel, the Spirit applies salvation, bringing sinners to life, calling us to repent and to believe.

Loved ones, if you are not born again, you will not enter the kingdom. You cannot be saved. That's Jesus' message and that's what the Holy Spirit does.

We find that clearly stated. Titus chapter 3, He saved us not because of works done by us in righteousness, but according to His own mercy, by the washing of regeneration and renewal of the Holy Spirit.

He poured out on us richly through Jesus Christ our Savior so that being justified by His grace, we might become heirs according to the hope of eternal life.

The Spirit is actively at work in His people, first in regeneration, but then we find in connection to this text in 1 Thessalonians 5, the Spirit is actively at work in His people through the work of sanctification.

[7 : 51] Sanctification being the work of the Spirit to take one who is born again and make them holy. Of course, we understand that at the moment we come to faith in Christ, positionally we are holy, the righteousness of Christ imputed to us, but in this life, until the return of Christ, the Spirit is at work in us, purifying us, sanctifying us, making us holy.

But whereas regeneration is solely the work of God, sanctification is a lifelong process in which we cooperate with God's work to grow in holiness.

So the Scriptures command us again and again, things like walk in the Spirit in Galatians 5. Be filled with the Spirit in Ephesians 5.

Keep in step with the Spirit again in Galatians 5. All of those being imperatives for us. The power is in the Spirit's work.

It's in His grace, but in our sanctification. We pursue that work. We cooperate with the Spirit's work in our lives. There's tremendous encouragement in this, isn't there?

[9 : 13] The Spirit is working. What a joy to know that. We've seen it in the letter several times already, haven't we? Chapter 1 and verse 5, the gospel message was spoken to them in the power of the Holy Spirit, meaning the Spirit of God saved them when Paul preached the gospel to them.

He was at work in the regeneration of the Thessalonians. And just a verse later in chapter 1, and it was through this regenerative work of the Spirit that the joy of the Spirit was put in them, which led to their perseverance of faith as they faced incredible hardship and persecution.

And then we get to chapter 4 and verse 8, and we find that God gives the Spirit as a gift to His people. To do what? To help them live according to the will of God.

What a joy. That's an encouragement. Simple statement. Yes, in verse 19, don't quench the Spirit, but one amazing encouragement is that the Spirit is actively at work.

He saves us, and He's working to sanctify us. And what a joy it is to know that He's doing so. But there's also a warning in verse 19, isn't there?

[10 : 25] It's not only an encouragement. There's a warning that goes along with it. The warning of verse 19 is simply that though the Holy Spirit is actively at work in and through us, we can't actually easily hinder His sanctifying work in our lives.

Quench here, of course, it means to extinguish. It's like pouring water on a fire. It's an appropriate metaphor, isn't it? The Scriptures often comparing comparing the Holy Spirit to a fire.

It's not that the Spirit Himself can be extinguished, but that we can hinder His work through sin, through neglect of the means of the Spirit.

And so, the Bible instructs us, again, in several places, things like, do not grieve the Spirit in Ephesians 4. Do not resist the Spirit in Acts 7.

And then, of course, here, we're commanded not to quench the Spirit. So, be encouraged. God is pleased to do a mighty work in your life through His Spirit, but be warned that there are ways that you can stifle that work, which is the primary focus of these four verses.

[11 : 47] Paul is going on in verses 20 to 22 to address a specific way that the Thessalonians were quenching the Spirit. So, if we're going to follow the two headings, the first one is don't hinder the Spirit's work.

The second one would then be don't despise the Spirit's ways. Don't despise the Spirit's ways. Look again at verses 20 to 22.

Do not despise prophecies, but test everything. Hold fast what is good and abstain from every form of evil.

These verses tell us how the Thessalonian Christians were quenching the Spirit's work in them. It has to do with their treatment of prophecies.

In this case, prophecies refers to a unique gifting of the Holy Spirit on individual Christians for the purpose of building up the church.

[12 : 52] I want to show you two texts that help us to understand this and wrap our minds around how the Thessalonians would have understood this instruction. The first one is in 1 Corinthians 12. In fact, you could read 1 Corinthians 12 through 14 and find a lot of instruction even specifically about prophecy, but let me just point out a couple of verses to you here.

Paul says, there are a variety of gifts but the same Spirit. In other words, part of the Spirit's activity and working is to gift His people in order to use them in particular ways.

There are varieties of service but the same Lord. There are varieties of activities but it is the same God who empowers them all in everyone. And then he begins to list a number of these giftings and right in the middle of the list is this idea of prophecy.

He says, the Spirit gives to another prophecy and to another the ability to distinguish between spirits which is connected in this case to this idea of prophecy.

And then at the end of the paragraph he says, all these are empowered by one and the same Spirit who apportions to each one individually as He will.

[14 : 04] And we see a similar statement in Romans chapter 12. Paul says, having gifts that differ according to the grace given to us let us use them and he highlights this gift again if prophecy that we would do it in proportion to our faith.

Now, we don't know as much about this gift and how it functioned in the early church as we would like to but we do have enough here to get our bearings. It wasn't simply preaching which involves proclaiming and explaining a particular text of Scripture.

That's not exactly what's happening here. That's not how the Thessalonians would have understood this instruction. Prophecy was a spontaneous and extemporaneous revelation from God spoken by a Christian to encourage, instruct, and warn God's people.

Preaching and teaching is a different category. It is prophetic in its nature but it's a different category. Preaching and teaching involve the Scriptures themselves, speaking the Scriptures, explaining the Scriptures.

This function of prophecy in the early church is not exactly that. It's this spontaneous revelation from God through a Christian for the building up of God's people.

[15 : 33] And it wasn't necessarily foretelling the future though certainly that would have been the case at times. It was also forth telling the will of God regarding present circumstances.

And in the early church age this was a regular means of the Holy Spirit working to sanctify believers. Now remember that's the context of what we're dealing with in 1 Thessalonians 5.

The idea is our sanctification and growing in that sanctification as we await the return of Christ. And Paul says don't quench the Spirit. The Spirit's at work in this sanctification and you can hinder it.

And one of the ways you guys are hindering it he says to the Thessalonians is by despising prophecies. Don't hinder that work. That's a way the Spirit is working in you. Don't despise it.

Apparently the Thessalonians had grown weary of those claiming to have a prophetic word from God. Began to reject the notion of prophecy outright.

[16 : 44] Now we've spent enough time in this letter to acknowledge that it is not surprising that they would have come to this point. We've seen that charlatans were actively at work religious and philosophical in Macedonia.

Who could they trust? Paul even almost gives a defense of himself in chapter 2 in relationship to this marking himself out as distinctly different from the charlatans of the day who had come in and were attempting to deceive the people.

If you read ahead in 2 Thessalonians you find that there's a moment there where it seems that some of these people were actually maybe even writing letters to the Thessalonians under the guise of being from Paul.

And they were saying things like the Lord's already come back and Paul says no, no, if you hear a spirit or a prophecy is what he means from that or a letter or somebody saying this as if we have said it no, that's not true Paul says.

So it's not hard to see that this church would have probably grown a little bit weary of this kind of thing and just decided you know the easiest thing is just to not even listen to that. If it's not coming directly from Paul then we're not even going to hear it.

[17 : 59] If it's not coming directly from an apostolic witness then we won't listen. Perhaps that's what's happening here. Jesus and his apostles they all warned often of false prophets who would attack the church as wolves in sheep's clothing.

We know this was common and it's just as common today. Paul understood their despising of this gift and means of the Spirit's work as being something that was hindering their sanctification.

He understood it to be a huge problem. By despising the Spirit's ways they were inadvertently quenching the Spirit's work and were therefore hindering their ability to continue in their process of sanctification as they awaited the Lord's return.

The solution then Paul says is not to despise prophecies but rather to test them. He says don't despise them test everything.

Rather than dismiss the means of the Spirit test everything against what? Against the Old Testament Scriptures whatever they might have had with that. Against the apostolic witness of the gospel that we know they had from Paul and now Timothy who has returned since Paul was forced to leave.

[19 : 24] And through that testing they were to hold fast to everything that was good. Those things which were in line with apostolic doctrine and they were to abstain from everything that appeared to be evil or what they would determine was inconsistent with what they knew to be true from the apostolic witness.

And this instruction holds true today. Test everything against what? The Scripture both old and new.

Every idea every thought every action every counsel you receive should be tested against the truth of God in Jesus.

And in so doing we must hold fast to what is good according to the Word of God and we must reject every form of evil that is inconsistent with the Word of God.

And in this way we today like the Thessalonians rightly cooperate with the Spirit in His sanctifying work. We might understand these verses this way if we could just paraphrase them a little differently.

[20 : 36] Don't quench the Spirit by despising prophecies. Instead test everything you hear holding to what is good and resisting what is evil.

And the imperative holds true now. This introduces a huge question doesn't it? Are we then to expect the Spirit to work through prophecies now as He did then?

And that's how I want to close our study and apply the text finally. The gift of prophecy as the Thessalonians knew it as it is referenced here in the New Testament served a unique and temporary purpose in the early church.

One purpose was the fulfilling of what the Old Testament prophesied. Joel chapter 2 God speaking through His prophet He says on that day on the day of the Lord I'm going to pour out the Spirit and your sons and daughters are going to prophesy.

And we fast forward to Acts chapter 2 this phenomenon is happening in Jerusalem and Peter stands up to preach to explain it and as he does so what does he do?

[21 : 56] He refers to Joel chapter 2 and he says this thing that you are witnessing today this is the fulfillment of the Scripture the outpouring of the Holy Spirit so that even in one situation or in part of that context is even your sons and daughters are prophesying.

this was an essential means of the Holy Spirit in laying the foundation of the church and perhaps the best text for us to understand and think about this particular issue is Ephesians 2 20 the church is built on the foundation of the apostles and prophets Christ Jesus himself being the cornerstone the cornerstone being the gospel of Jesus the teaching and the revelation of God through the apostles and prophets completing the foundation on which the church is being built New Testament prophets functioned similarly to Christ's apostles though their prophecies were tested and tried against the apostolic witness the Holy Spirit gifted and used them to speak the infallible word of God to the church before the scriptures were completed

God used them to establish the church and guide his people during a unique transition in redemptive history and now that that foundation of the church is fully established through the completion of the New Testament scriptures we understand the office and function of the apostles and prophets to have passed away it wouldn't even be correct I think to say that the gift of prophecy still exists today but just in a different form as if some would reduce this gift of prophecy as active today but really just reduced to preaching but that's not that I don't think that's consistent with what the scripture is teaching us here and of course there are many that would say that would disagree with me on this that this gift is actually just as operative today as it ever was I think we're on firm footing when we disagree with that to say that it still exists today but only in a different form it would it would lead us to affirm a spiritual gift that is neither defined nor warranted in the scriptures and I understand in the disagreement

I want to respectfully say this for those of you who may even have a disagreement with my position on this that what is being practiced and referred to as the gift of prophecy in modern traditions is not the same as what we read in the New Testament it's not the same in affirming such things opens the door to confusion and to spiritual abuse in the church I think Tom Schreiner is helpful on this some of you have read his little book on spiritual gifts and he's helpful just in this simple statement we no longer have the gifts of apostleship and prophecy the scriptures constitute our soul and final authority and thus the role of the apostles and prophets the role that they played in the foundational period of the church is no longer needed the scriptures he emphasizes again are our soul and final authority that presents a problem doesn't it what are we supposed to do with texts like 1 Thessalonians 5 19-22 do we just say well this just doesn't matter to us no of course not does it have any relevance to us now yes indeed it does though there is no new prophetic utterance for us to anticipate we have the apostolic and prophetic witness of the Holy Spirit in the completed canon of the New Testament and we must not despise it as Peter wrote we have the prophetic word more fully confirmed in the written word of God we're blessed with something that the Thessalonian church did not have the whole scriptures and the Bible we understand is the primary and most significant and powerful means the Holy Spirit's work today it is the sword of the Spirit in Galatians 6 it's his instrument for applying the work of Christ to us in our salvation in our regeneration and in our sanctification we obey this text and we fan into flame the Holy Spirit by submitting to the scriptures his scriptures as the soul and final authority of our faith and practice we obey it by not despising the preaching and teaching of the Bible in the corporate gathering of the church we obey it by not neglecting to study and meditate prayerfully on the word of God in private worship we obey it by testing everything we hear by the truth of scripture holding fast to what is in line with it and rejecting every form of evils and loved ones we obey this text by refusing to confuse or even potentially abuse others by claiming a spiritual gift that no longer is used by God when we claim to speak on behalf of God the words that come out of our mouths ought only to be what he has given us in the Bible statements like the Lord told me to tell you or

I have a fresh word from God for you mistake our words for God's and we need to tread carefully here it doesn't mean that we can't share what's on our hearts with one another it doesn't mean that we can't pass on a form of counsel or encouragement that we feel impressed to give but we need to be careful to distinguish a way that God may be using my words for your good versus what God has said we must say to someone else we need to be careful with this we don't serve people well with statements like that we confuse them we don't stand in line with the scriptures when we make statements like that what we ought to say rather better way to serve people in the work of the spirit is maybe to do something like this why don't we look at what

[29 : 20] God says in his word about this thing in your life maybe we would say something like you know I've heard what's going on maybe this particular passage will bring light to your circumstance why don't we examine God's word and pray and ask for the spirit to give us wisdom in how to apply it if we want to speak God's words we need to actually speak God's word and again it's not that we can't help one another and it's not to say that God doesn't use his people to help his people I don't believe that he does we just need to be careful to distinguish between a way that God may be using me to help you with my words verses thus saith the Lord thus saith the Lord for us is only what is recorded for us in the scriptures now what's the text about the text is not about describing what this gift is perhaps there's been too much time on that the text is about not quenching the work of the spirit by despising his ways and what is the way that we know the spirit is actively working in our regeneration and sanctification today preparing us for the return of

Christ he's working through his word so don't despise it be present when it's being taught and preached in the church let it be the thing that guides your discipling relationships with one another as you sit at coffee together this week let it be the thing that's ruling over your home let it be the thing that's ruling over your work your relationships for both the Thessalonians and for us this instruction is about proper submission to the Bible and through the scriptures the spirit is indeed working even now preparing us for Christ's return and to cooperate with his work we must embrace the word of God and test everything by it let's pray together