

# *The Crucible of Formation*

1 Thessalonians 5:23-24

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PD Mayfield

This morning, we will be looking at 1 Thessalonians 5:23-24. We're continuing our sermon series called the Gospel GPS, the pathway for spiritual formation. And this morning, we will be looking at particularly the crucible for formation. The gospel gives us the invitation to be with Jesus in this journey. The gospel also helps us understand how to walk the path of the journey. And we experience the ways God works in our lives where we experience that formation and that growth.

Hear now the reading of God's word 1 Thessalonians 5:23-24.

Now may the God of peace himself sanctify you completely, and may your whole spirit and soul and body be kept blameless at the coming of our Lord Jesus Christ. He who calls you is faithful; he will surely do it. [ESV]

This is the word of the Lord. Thanks be to God. Let us pray.

Father in heaven, we pray for your Spirit to open our ears to hear your word, open our mind to understand, and open our heart to be moved by your love. Help me, the teacher. Help us as we respond by faith to your holy word. In Jesus's name. Amen.

How many of you remember anything about your high school science labs? When I was in high school sciences, I always enjoyed labs because it was fun if you weren't sitting at your desk. I particularly liked the ones with the little flint striker and Bunsen burners. That was always a good lab when there was fire. And when we were dealing with Bunsen burners, that typically was just heating some water in a beaker or something like that. But sometimes we'd pull out these little crucibles which meant we were going to heat something really hot, and we were probably going to melt something and see some sort of reaction. If you remember from your science classes, a crucible is just a container in which metals or some other substance can be heated to very high temperatures. They can be made out of clay, ceramic, metal. But the key is that they be able to withstand the high heat and that they can hold the material inside.

Now, they are often used for melting, such as melting solids like metals into liquid. They're also used in a process called smelting. Smelting does not mean smelling melting plastic or anything like that. It's not the smelling of the melting. It's a process of applying heat and other chemical agents seeking a reaction that pulls out the purified form. For example, you take iron out of the ground. You put it in a crucible. You add some chemical agents. You put it at a high heat, and you get pure iron as the final form.

Today's verses highlight that process, this crucible of formation. And we can think of it in terms of a spiritual smelting process, if you will, for the Christian. This process is a work of God's grace that brings about your total renewal, your total renewal as a person made in the image of God redeemed in His image to be made more and more into the likeness of Christ. And this process is the work of the Holy Spirit applying the death and the resurrection of Jesus Christ to you by His grace through faith. The Spirit is working in you to grow you and bring about spiritual maturity.

In our series, we've been looking at this idea of the gospel GPS. And if you're a Christian here today, then you likely know that in some degree, you're thinking, expecting, and anticipating that you are growing in spiritual maturity. And for the Christian at least, you know that we're supposed to be growing toward that spiritual maturity. And it's good. It's good to desire growth. But perhaps you're here today because you don't know how to grow. Or maybe you're discouraged that you're not growing as much as you would like, or you're hindered in some way from experiencing growth.

For the last several weeks in this series, we've looked at the various obstacles to spiritual maturity. Randy has talked about the encouragement to resist idolatry on one side of the coin, and on the

other side of the coin that we would resist the corrosion of what can be called a composite faith, looking at what we take in the truth of the gospel of Jesus and we might subtly add things on top of the gospel saying, Jesus plus something. Jesus plus my security. Jesus plus my ability, my intellect, my wisdom. It's ways that we take on what Randy called folk religion which is really just adding to our union with Christ. Like a GPS, the gospel of Jesus Christ shows us exactly where our little blue dot of life is on the map and where your little purple or blue line is on whatever app you use for the destination toward what God is doing in your life and where He is growing you.

Today, as we think about the crucible of formation, it's namely right there at the beginning of verse 23. It's God's sanctification. Dick did a great job earlier this morning to flesh that out and begin to define it. We're going to look at it a little bit more today.

These particular verses come from Paul's first letter to the Thessalonians, and they make up some of his concluding remarks to them. They are framed in terms of a prayer, something hoped for, something that he hopes to see God do in their lives. And in addition to the prayer, Paul is providing a very, very important assurance.

Just quickly, let's look at a few things from these verses. We see right at the beginning that it is God who is doing these actions. And there's a couple things going on. One, He is actively sanctifying. He is the one that is setting apart. He is the one dedicating. He is the one that is doing the action which brings about the work of sanctification which is bringing about holiness. Now, there is another action that is passively received, and that's what we're receiving. We're being kept. And that action is still of God's doing. He's doing it, and we're receiving it.

We see in these verses characteristics of God, God of peace. He is the one who is peace, who makes peace, and who brings about the harmony between us and the divine. And even through Him, He brings about harmony with one another. In addition to being marked by being the God of peace, God is characterized as faithful, faithful being a very core characteristic of who He is in His character. He is trustworthy. He is to be trusted. He is to be relied upon. He is to be sought after because He is true to who He is.

Here, it doesn't go into great detail, but it references that God, who is the God of peace, who is the God who is faithful, He is the caller. He is the one that calls out to His people. He calls them and invites them to Himself to be restored in that peace, to experience that relationship with Him where in that relationship, we see these actions. We see Him working sanctification. We see Him working being kept, being held, being preserved.

As we move forward this morning, we're going to spend a little bit more time looking at what is sanctification. This is important for the culmination in where we're coming from and where we're headed for the next few weeks in November. Here in these verses, we see the action of sanctifying is that action by which something or someone is set apart, is made consecrated and dedicated to be included or to be associated with someone or something that's holy.

For example, in the Old Testament, you see the priests consecrating pieces of furniture and different components that make up temple worship. They are sanctifying those items in order to be used in the presence of the holiness of God. And in the same way, that is a representation of what God is doing to sanctify His people so that they can be set apart. Something that is unholy is made holy to be in the presence of holiness.

Here are a couple focal points as we walk through this action of God, this sanctification. First, sanctification is a work of God's grace. It is part of God's complete salvation. It's not that I'm saved and then I go and be sanctified. No. I want us to see God's comprehensive salvation through Jesus Christ's death and resurrection is your salvation. Now, what your salvation includes is like a rainbow. When you see a rainbow in the sky, you're seeing light refracted through water droplets in the sky, and you're seeing the colors or frequencies of light that make up light. And our salvation is similar. It's the light of

God's salvation being refracted and seeing the colors of what makes up His comprehensive, total, and complete salvation.

For example, we see God calling a people to Himself. He is bringing them from death to life. This initial calling is sometimes called regeneration, or you may have read it in John 3 when Jesus is talking about being born again. This regeneration is how a dead sinner comes alive to a living God.

But our salvation also includes justification which is an act of God's grace where God is declaring a guilty sinner righteous which gives us access to a holy God because our status has been changed. You and I are not righteous, and yet through Jesus you are declared righteous as if you have never sinner. But in that act of free grace, we see the ongoing work of God's sustaining grace, and that is where we see the context for our relationship to be fulfilled in our adoption as sons and daughters in Christ. And in our adoption, we see how we are a loved sinner who is welcomed into the family of God. In the context of our changed status from death to life, from orphan to adopted family, we see God working His grace in us where we experience transformation and growth. Our sanctification deals with how a saved sinner takes on the features and practices the values of the family of God.

The total salvation is a work of God's grace. It's not that I'm saved by grace through faith for my justification and then it's based on my works. No. It's grace through and through.

But we do learn a couple things about sanctification from scripture. Sanctification is declared and definitive. For example, from 1 Corinthians 6:11, "And such were some of you, 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." Hebrews 10:10 says, "And by that will, we have been sanctified through the offering of the body of Jesus Christ once for all." There is something definitive in God declaring you as a child of God saved by grace through Jesus Christ as sanctified.

But sanctification is also a process. It's also progressive. Just a few verses later, Hebrews 10:14 says, "For by a single offering, he has perfected for all time those who are being sanctified." Romans 6:19, "I am speaking in human terms because of your natural limitations, for just as you once presented your members as slaves to impurity and to lawlessness leading to more lawlessness, so now present your members as slaves to righteousness leading to sanctification." So it is declared: you are sanctified. And it's a process: you are being sanctified.

We learn something else about sanctification in that it will be complete, and it will be perfect. And this is where we come back to 1 Thessalonians 5:23-24. "Now may the God of peace himself sanctify you completely." "Completely" is the totality of your being. He picks it up again. "May your whole spirit and soul and body," the wholeness of who you are, everything that which has been touched by the fall of mankind is redeemed in Christ and completed and perfected in Christ. Your mind, your heart, your motivations and desires, your very body, these things are being made holy.

The totality of the completeness as well as the perfection is found in that word "blameless." These things are in the realm of possibility. They are in the future and rooted in a specific event. Paul is pointing them to what is to come with the coming of Jesus Christ.

We've briefly looked at how sanctification is both declared that you are sanctified, and it's a process that you are being sanctified, and it will be completed. You will be sanctified completely. This is the ongoing work of God's grace in your life. It is throughout the whole man. And yet, we experience the imperfection. So we live in between being declared sanctified and the process and what is yet to come. We live in between those realms. Our day to day, our moment by moment, the times where we're experiencing closeness and intimacy with the Lord and when we're experiencing distraction and disillusionment and discouragement and just a sense of separation from God, both of those existences in our lives fall within God's sanctifying work where we are being kept. We're being preserved. In that here and now is often a warlike experience between what remains within us as the old nature and what is being renewed in the new nature. This is the work of God.

That's a little bit about what it is. But when does sanctification happen and how does it happen? Just a couple points. Sanctification happens by abiding in Christ. John uses this language quite often such as in John 15 where Jesus says, "I am the true vine, and my Father is the vinedresser. Every branch in me that does not bear fruit he takes away, and every branch that does bear fruit he prunes, that it may bear more fruit." He goes on to say, "Abide in me, and I in you. As the branch cannot bear fruit by itself, unless it abides in the vine, neither can, you unless you abide in me. I am the vine; you are the branches. Whoever abides in me and I in him, he it is that bears much fruit, for apart from me you can do nothing."

Sanctification is happening when and as we abide in Christ. It is the word of God and the Spirit of God dwelling in us, and the dominion of the whole body is being renewed from the sin that destroys. Those things that capture our attention that feel like they have a grip on us, the process of sanctification is that grip of our old nature being loosened and weakened. Where we live unto the life of God in Christ, those things are being strengthened and perfected.

As we've mentioned, sanctification certainly happens by the Holy Spirit. But the Lord Himself provides the means by which we experience sanctification. Now, these are not exhaustive, and each of them could be their own sermons. But just in reference to a few, the means by which God gives for our sanctification is in His very grace given to us and what it means to be in relationship with Him.

Christian, remember your baptism. Remember who you are. Remember who marks you. Remember the seal upon which you have by the Holy Spirit to be identified with Christ. Christian, partake in the Lord's supper. The Lord provides a meal where He welcomes His disciples to come to celebrate this communion with Him, to celebrate the forgiveness of our sins, to celebrate this growth that we have in maturity, and to celebrate the fellowship that we have together as well. We celebrate the Lord's supper which flows into how we also in our daily lives worship the Lord personally and individually, how we gather together corporately whether that's on Sunday with the gathered church or in smaller groups. The way we worship the Lord is the very mechanism, if you will, of how we experience God's sanctifying work in our lives, reading, meditating, taking in His word, seeking to experience that communion and fellowship with God through prayer but also the communion and fellowship we have with one another as the body of Christ.

This involves discipleship. This involves being mentored. If you are a younger believer in Christ, pursue other believers in your life. Pursue good books. Pursue good examples in your life that you might grow toward maturity. If you are a more mature believer, practice. Equip yourself. Be encouraged. Grow in your skills to go toward another believer and help them grow. This is the body of Christ working together, helping and participating and working along with how God is working in us.

The sanctification process brings about change in you and through you. So this is all part of what we talk about often with growth. Am I growing? Are you growing? I don't feel like I'm growing. I'm stalled. I feel kind of stagnant. All of these things that we talk about are very intuitive ways to talk about the change process in us and through us.

Oliver Wendell Holmes has been attributed in saying, "I would not give a fig for the simplicity of this side of complexity, but I would give my life for the simplicity on the other side of complexity." "I would not give a fig for the simplicity on this side of complexity." It means nothing to just reduce complexity to the parts that no longer have substance, but rather I would give my life for the simplicity that comes on the other side. When you truly appropriate something as complex as our salvation but yet as simple as life breathed out to you and made alive, these experiences that we put words to provide meaning, but they also fall short of the beauty and the majesty of what God is doing. Sanctification is complex yet profoundly simple.

If you are more interested in this topic, there is a great book called *How Does Sanctification Work?* by David Powlison. And in that book, there are five factors that he highlights that bring about change through the sanctification process. And I'm going to list them briefly and would commend the book to you. We've already highlighted the first one which is that God changes you. God Himself is part of the

change process in you. A key piece of this is the means of God's grace of how He changes you, and that being the word of His truth changes you as we submit to the truthfulness of God's word and the effectiveness of what God is disclosing about Himself and what He intends for His people to know about Him and to live. We submit to the word of truth and experience change.

Thirdly, we've touched on this a little bit with the community aspect, but wise people change you. This includes having examples in your life that are both demonstrating faithfulness and demonstrating their own growth in the gospel, but also wise people who are helping to encourage you and shed light on areas of your heart where there may be thoughts or beliefs you have where you are needing further understanding of the truth of God's word or the condition of your heart or the patterns in your life. Wise people become an incredibly important part of how God changes you.

Now, the fourth highlight that he brings, we could take the rest of our lives talking about this one. So I don't do it justice just mentioning it. But as I say it, I can imagine the thoughts starting to fire in your own minds. But we see how God brings about change and experience it through our suffering. We see it in how we struggle and in the troubles that we may face. We intimately and painfully see God at work in our lives, and we are changed.

The fifth highlight he brings up is that you change. That becomes a very important piece to the equation. It's that you actually have to change. There is a passive acceptance of these things that God is working in you, but there is a responsibility. There is a part that we play in how we grow toward maturity. Although God is working in you and through you, it involves you. We can't do it naturally, and so we need His grace. And I agree completely with Powlison when he writes, "You are 100 percent responsible, and yet you are 100 percent dependent." This is the walk of faith with Christ, 100 percent responsible yet 100 percent dependent.

This process is sometimes discussed as mortification. We don't really go around saying that word so much. Maybe your English translations sometimes use the word mortify. Mortify just means to kill or to put to death.

John Owen several hundred years ago said this. "The vigor and the power and the comfort of our spiritual life depends on the mortification of the deeds of the flesh." This is what's getting at the old person and the new person that are at war with each other which is part of our experience of sanctification. He also said this famously. "Be killing sin or it will be killing you." I see a lot of head nods with that one. It's our experience of wrestling with what is true of who we are in Christ and yet what still dwells within us. Deep-seated patterns of sin, frustration, discouragement, all of these things are ways that we fall short of the glory of God, where we fall short of the very holiness that has been declared. But it's part of how God is working in us and transforming us from the inside out.

As you think about your own spiritual growth, consider what hinders your sanctification. Is it patterns of sin that are actually you choosing that which is in conflict with who you are in Christ? What are your motives? Are your motives to truly be in line with the love of God for you, or is it self-dependence? Is it some form of self-improvement or some form of self-actualization that really is maybe just smearing on some spirituality but not really being ruled and guided by the grace of Jesus Christ? Is there even a false dichotomy like, oh yeah, God's doing it. It's going to take place. I'll use these verses to explain it. God's got me. It's okay. Yeah, I fall short. I'm not perfect. Is there a complacency there that you're just holding out and presuming that God is doing the work but you're not activating your faith? Or you're not resting and receiving in the power of the gospel for you in your moment by moment?

Another way our sanctification gets hindered is just having the wrong sources. And that goes back to stuff we've previously talked about in this series. You're slipping into the subtle ways our hearts formulate idols that really take us away from the glory of God and resting in the finished work of Christ.

Lastly, we can sometimes experience hinderance in our sanctification just because we're frustrated with outcomes. We're not changing fast enough. We're not changing deep enough in the ways we would like. And that comes with the process itself.

And that brings us to the final question which is why does this matter? Why spend 30 minutes on a Sunday morning talking about this word that we never use outside of the context of the church or if you happen to read it in the Bible? Because it matters. Why does it matter? Because the question that we have to ask as Christians is where are you drawing your strength from? Are you drawing your strength from the grace of God and the finished work of Christ? Or are you drawing your strength on your own abilities, your own capacities, your own desires for self-dependence, your own intellect, your own wealth, your own ability to provide for yourself?

Or maybe it's more spiritual than that. Maybe you're wrestling with whether or not you are finding the encouragement of being assured of God's love for you. And we slip into putting ourselves into a pre-conversion place. A lot of times, we don't do this knowingly. We do this unknowingly. But sanctification matters because you don't confuse sanctification with justification because when we're wrestling with sin or we're complacent in our growth, we try to muster up the strength and the encouragement to do. And we sometimes put ourselves back. We confuse the assurances that come out of the gospel with our need to be justified, and we fail to see that God's act of justification is final. And we miss out on what God is doing in the work of sanctification to grow us. We become this perpetual cycle of faith and renewal, self-dependence, and then our form of repentance is not surrendering and humbling ourselves for renewal, but we want to go back to a pre-conversion experience. Maybe that's been your tradition. Maybe that's been even your own ways that you've done that in your own mind and your own heart.

But sanctification matters for the Christian whether you are a new believer just hours or weeks old believing for the first time, your sanctification matters because you have a long road ahead of God growing you, and resting in what God is doing by His grace is going to be the fuel that empowers you to go the long haul. We come back to this verse, that it is God who is sanctifying you, and it is God who is keeping you. That's why it matters. It is the very encouragement and motivation to keep going.

It matters to those who've been walking with the Lord for some time, perhaps maybe ten years or longer, because there comes a point in the life of a Christian where it's exciting when it's new. It's exciting when you've never heard something before, and new information changes you quickly. I didn't know it. Now I know it, and it's changed my life. There comes a point where the beauty of the gospel is there's no new tears to get to. The gospel is presented freely and completely. And so you come to a point where you know a lot, but you have to still live in light of those truths. So you come into the hard middle of the road. Sanctification matters to be the very strength and bedrock for you as you journey down the road.

And sanctification matters for those who are approaching the latter seasons of life as the finish line may be just around the corner. It could be a few years away, a few decades away maybe. But the reality is we never really know. The total complete salvation of God is that you are sanctified, you are being sanctified, and you will completely be sanctified.

And that's where I end today with a grammar lesson. We started with a science lesson, and we're going to end with a grammar lesson. And you may be asking, what is this all about? But the beauty of these passages is in the grammar. You see the verbs that God is doing, the actions that God is doing. He is sanctifying, and He is keeping us. And that's the passive, that we're being kept. What's beautiful about what Paul is saying is that this is in the realm of possibility. But if you just leave it there, it's possible. It's possible that you might be sanctified. It's possible that He's going to grow you towards maturity. This realm of possibility is nice and full of wishful thinking. But what is it rooted to? It's rooted to who God is. And who is He? He's the God of peace. He's faithful.

This is the beauty because it hinges on what he ends with. He doesn't end with possibility. He ends with future actuality. He ends with, "He will surely do it." So what is the realm of desire? What is the realm of possibility? He will do it.

When you are that new believer, and you are struggling in a particular way such as feeling like you were changed, but now you're slipping back into old patterns, or that Christian that's been walking with the Lord for decades and is still plagued by something you learned when you were eight years old, or that Christian who's trying to finish well, it matters because at every stage of the way when you are discouraged with where you are, where you are frustrated with the patterns you may be experiencing, you have to ask, won't He do it? He will surely do it. Won't He do it? I send again, won't He do it? He will surely do it. I keep getting angry. Won't He do it? He will surely do it. I'm so afraid. I'm so scared all the time. Won't He do it? He will surely do it.

This is the assurance that Paul gives us. And this is why sanctification matters. And this is the crucible of formation. It is the truth of the gospel, the good news of your salvation, that God is sanctifying you completely. And dear Christian, you will be kept blameless at the coming of our Lord and Savior Jesus Christ. He will surely do it. Let us pray.

Our Father in heaven, we give you thanks and praise for your good news, the proclamation, the demonstration, the message of hope that comes about in your Son Jesus Christ. We come alive by hearing it with our ears. We come alive by reading it from your scripture, and we bump up against the reality of our lives, and we want to have those match. So help us, Father. May we grow in maturity that is into our identity in Christ and be empowered by your Holy Spirit. Will you surely do it? We pray this in Jesus's name. Amen.