

Godly Living as a Christian and Final Greetings of the Letter

1 Thessalonians 5:16-28

1 Thessalonians 5:16-28 - *“Rejoice always, ¹⁷ pray without ceasing, ¹⁸ in everything give thanks; for this is the will of God in Christ Jesus for you. ¹⁹ Do not quench the Spirit. ²⁰ Do not despise prophecies. ²¹ Test all things; hold fast what is good. ²² Abstain from every form of evil. ²³ Now may the God of peace Himself sanctify you completely; and may your whole spirit, soul, and body be preserved blameless at the coming of our Lord Jesus Christ. ²⁴ He who calls you is faithful, who also will do it. ²⁵ Brethren, pray for us. ²⁶ Greet all the brethren with a holy kiss. ²⁷ I charge you by the Lord that this epistle be read to all the holy brethren. ²⁸ The grace of our Lord Jesus Christ be with you. Amen.”*

Background Notes

Paul began his first letter to the Thessalonians with a reference to “the grace of God”: *“Grace and peace to you” (1:1)* And in chapter 5 he ended with this same theme, in the last verse of the book: *“The grace of our Lord Jesus Christ be with you” (5:28)*. The Christian faith is **grace** - from beginning to end. What a great truth to appreciate!

Notice that Paul charged the church leaders to read his letter publicly in the church at Thessalonica (v27). The teaching in this letter was important for the all believers of the 1st century, and it’s just as important for all believers today. Remember - the theme of 1 Thessalonians is the return of the Lord.

Paul asked the Thessalonian believers to pray for him and his missionary team: *“Brethren, pray for us.”* Prayer is so important. Recently a Christian said to me, “Don’t bother praying for me, Dave. Spend your time praying for more important things.” That attitude may sound humble, but it is certainly not biblical! And it’s not wrong to ask for prayer - in fact, it’s necessary. (I’ll take all the prayer that I can get!) Of course we all have to be involved in praying for others as well - not just requesting others to pray for us.

There are several dos and don’ts for the Christian life in verses 16-22, and they will be covered in our practical application. Our doctrinal points come from verse 23.

Verse 26 says, *“Greet all the brethren with a holy kiss.”* Is this exhortation good for today, as it was in the 1st century? Why not? But notice it is a **holy** kiss. And remember - in the 1st century, it was a kiss on the cheek. Most cultural studies indicate that it was primarily used for men greeting men and women greeting women. It was the outward expression of Christian love in that culture. So whatever communicates holy, Christian love in our culture today would be biblical - including a holy kiss or a brotherly hug.

Doctrinal Points

1. Complete sanctification is God's will for the believer.

Verse 23: *"Now may the God of peace Himself sanctify you completely."*

To "sanctify" means to "set apart for God's holy use." In fact, the word "sanctification" comes from the same root word as "holy" and "saint." However, as a result, some Christians have wrongly taken verse 23 to be a proof text that it is possible for Christians to become sinless in this life! The Bible does **not** teach such a doctrine, neither here, nor anywhere else. In fact, 1 John 1:8 (which is written to Christians) says, *"If we say that we have no sin, we deceive ourselves and the truth is not in us."*

The confusion arises because the New Testament uses the concept of sanctification in more than one way. There is **positional** sanctification, there is **progressive** sanctification, and there is **perfect** sanctification. What's the difference?

All Christians are sanctified **positionally** in God's sight the moment they believe. Paul told the Corinthian believers that they were saints and sanctified: *"To the church of God which is at Corinth, to those who are sanctified in Christ Jesus, called to be saints" (1 Corinthians 1:2)*. As you know, the Corinthian believers were not very saintly, but they were "set apart" for God's use, and thus they were saints. **Positionally**, they were sanctified and were righteous in God's sight, through the work of Jesus Christ on the cross. This is true of all believers.

Perfect sanctification will be our condition in Heaven when we have our new sinless, resurrected bodies. Philippians 3:21 says that our bodies will be conformed to Christ's glorious body!

Meanwhile, there is **progressive** sanctification, and that's what is in view in verse 23: *"Now may the God of peace Himself sanctify you completely."* God is at work in us right now, progressively setting us apart from sin and self and the world. We will never become sinless in this life, but we should sin less because of progressive sanctification.

Progressive sanctification continues right up until we go to Heaven. Philippians 1:6 says, *"He who has begun a good work in you will complete it until the day of Jesus Christ."* Also verse 24 here says, *"He who calls you is faithful, who also will do it."* Complete sanctification is God's will for the believer.

2. Complete preservation is God's will for the believer.

Verse 23, *"May your whole spirit, soul, and body be preserved blameless at the coming of our Lord Jesus Christ."*

Notice that we are tri-partite beings: body, soul, and spirit. We know what the body is, but what about the soul and spirit? They're not identical, although some believers do not realize this truth. Hebrews 4:12 says that *"the word of God divides between soul and spirit."* The soul has to do with our emotions and desires and propensities. The spirit includes our God-consciousness and our moral consciousness. God's will is for our complete persons - **body, soul, and spirit** – to be preserved blameless.

Notice that, from God's perspective, "spirit" is mentioned first in verse 23. God's will is that our **whole person** – spirit, soul, and body – be preserved blameless. Our spirits, souls, and bodies can be defiled by evil thoughts and lusts and actions. 2 Corinthians 7:1 says, *"Let us cleanse ourselves from all filthiness of flesh and spirit."* 1 Peter 2:11 exhorts us to *"abstain from fleshly lusts which war against the soul."* And Romans 6:19 says that we should not *"present the members of our bodies as slaves of uncleanness and lawless as before, but as slaves of righteousness."*

This preservation is only possible by the power of the Holy Spirit and a steady diet of the Word of God and prayer. Fellowship and accountability to other believers are also very important. Preservation is possible because God is faithful: *"He who calls you is faithful, who also will do it" (v24).*

Progressive sanctification and **complete preservation** - it really does work, folks! Complete preservation is God's will for the believer.

Practical Application

Let's practice the "dos and don'ts" of Scripture!

Most Christians have certain "dos and don'ts" that govern their lives as believers. This is okay - **as long as the list is from Scripture**. Unfortunately, some Christians have lists that are based more on religious tradition or their own legalistic ideas, and that can be very dangerous, as well as unbiblical. Verses 16-22 are a **biblical** list of dos and don'ts.

a. Do rejoice always (v16). *"Rejoice always"* is the shortest verse in the Greek New Testament. (John 11:35 - *"Jesus wept"* - is the shortest verse in the English Bible.) We may not always be happy, but even in times of sorrow we can rejoice, because our joy in Christ is independent of circumstances. We know that our loving and gracious God controls all circumstances of our lives.

b. Do pray without ceasing (v17). The phrase "without ceasing" was used in the Greek language to describe a continual cough! That's an interesting way to think about "praying without ceasing." It's not prayer without interruption

– it’s continual prayer. While we’re working, while we’re driving, while we’re caring for our children, while we’re playing golf – we should pray without ceasing! It’s the idea of being in a continual attitude of prayer.

c. Do give thanks in everything (v18). “*In everything give thanks.*” Notice that this verse says *in* everything - not *for* everything - because everything that happens is not always good. It may be evil, and we don’t thank God for evil. But we know that God is working everything together for the good of those who love Him and are called according to His purpose (Romans 8:28). Therefore, we can give thanks in all circumstances.

d. Don’t quench the spirit (v19). The work of the Holy Spirit can be “quenched” in the life of a believer - including in your life and in the life of the church. How? By sin, by unbiblical tradition, by manmade legalistic rules, by disunity, by lack of Christian love, and by many other things. Don’t smother or extinguish the voice and work of the Holy Spirit of God in your life! Is it possible that someone who is listening right now to this “Talk” is crushing and extinguishing the work of the Holy Spirit in his or her life, or in his or her church?

e. Don’t despise prophecies (verse 20). “Prophecy” today means to speak forth and teach the Word of God as it is recorded in Scripture. You may not personally like the style of some excellent preachers and teachers of God’s Word, but to criticize wrongly or to mock them would be to “despise prophecy.” ***Don’t scoff at those who speak the truth!***

f. Do test all things and hold fast what is good (v21). Don’t jump on every bandwagon that comes along because the preacher looks good or his message sounds good. Test everything by the Word of God to see if it’s truly of God. For example, carefully test some silver-tongued TV preachers and their glamorous ministries.

And don’t reject something just because you don’t like it at first. Test it by the Word of God, then hold fast to what is good. Did you know some very conservative Christians rejected Emmaus Bible College when it was getting started? They thought all teaching should be done in the local church, and that a Bible school was too “progressive.” They harshly criticized the school and its founders. But Emmaus Bible College has been tested by time and by Scripture. Over the years it has been shown to be a work of God, with graduates faithfully serving the Lord around the world.

So - test all things! And hold fast that which is good!

g. Do abstain from every form of evil (v22). Evil comes in a lot of different forms, including thoughts as well as activities. That would include even the *appearance* of evil (KJV). When in doubt, “don’t.” That’s a good rule of thumb for the believer.

Let’s practice the dos and don’ts of Scripture!