

The wedding day was coming. The day the bride had been dreaming about since she was a little girl. When she would put on that white dress for real, not for pretend, and walk down the aisle to greet her beloved. Because she loved him, she wanted to be as beautiful as she could possibly be.

She and her mother started to go to work. They researched beauty treatments, bought creams and ointments, started a diet and an exercise routine, and tried 34 different hairstyles. And then they went to work on the dress. The alterations took hours. The cleaning took hours. The ironing took hours. But she counted those hours as nothing, because she loved him, and she knew that she was loved.

And that knowledge did something for her beauty, too, something that no external treatment or habit or practice could do. *Being loved* made her even more lovely than an entire fashion bible's worth of tips and tricks.

And this is what is going on in 1 Thessalonians 5. God gives us instructions to guide us in walking blamelessly: rejoice always, pray without ceasing, abstain from every form of evil. His love undergirds every command that He gives, because His goal for us is that we be kept blameless at the coming of our Lord Jesus Christ.

But while love gives those instructions, love goes *deeper* than those instructions, and through the love of God we are made lovely and kept blameless by God. We aren't kept blameless simply by reading instructions in a book! We are kept blameless in our whole spirit and soul and body, because we know and love God, and because we are known and loved by God.

I want you to see this first point clearly, though: **God's goal for you is that you be blameless at the coming of our Lord Jesus Christ.** He does not want that day to be marked by the smears and stains of sin, but by the glory of holiness shining through your life. When Jesus returns, God wants you to be ready, and this means being holy.

And so when God gives you instructions and commands, these instructions and commands are preparing you for what's coming. They are making the Church beautiful for her wedding day. They may be difficult, they may require a great deal of work and effort, but they are motivated by God's love, they are a concrete expression of that love, and they are good. When the bride's friend brushes the rat's nest out of the bride's hair, it's painful, but it's not as painful as walking down the aisle with a ratty hair and a dress covered in spots, wrinkles, and blemishes. You might not understand God's instructions, and at times they might feel like a burden, but God's instructions are not the commands of a slave driver or a critical perfectionist. They are the life-giving, beautifying instructions of one who desires your good. God wants you to be blameless, clothed in the beauty of holiness, when you meet Jesus.

Since that's God's goal, this is what He does: He tells you how to reach that goal. God wants you blameless, and so He tells you *how to be blameless*, and what's more, He tells you *to be blameless*. What's the difference? It's the difference between *information* and *transformation*. It's the difference between a wedding rehearsal and a wedding ceremony. "Tomorrow, you stand here and say this, she says that, and I will pronounce you man and wife." That's information, and we need it! We need instruction. But we also need powerful words that effect transformation: "I now pronounce you man and wife."

God's commands don't just tell you *about* sanctification; they *sanctify* you. They have inherent power to move you to act, and so you are *transformed*, you are *sanctified*, you are *kept blameless*, by God's commands. They don't just *tell* you to do something; they *cause* you to do something. When God says "rejoice always", you either *refuse*, and heap up more blame for yourself, or you *obey*, and become blameless.

And so I am not here to tell you that "God likes rejoicing". I am here in God's name to say "Rejoice! Pray! Give thanks!" This is God's will for you in Christ Jesus. Those are three applications for you to constantly practice. God will not check your sermon notes to see if you wrote them down; He will check your life to see if you did them! God is not just informing you so that you *know* what blamelessness is; He is sanctifying you so that you will *be* blameless!

Now, where is sanctifying power found? Is the power in you, the command-keeper, or in God, the command-giver? Answer that question starting with Genesis 1: in the beginning, there was nothing until God said: "Let there be light." And God's command brought light into existence out of nothing. The power is in the Word of God. Blamelessness doesn't come about by trying really hard. It comes by hearing God's Word with living faith. The command communicates sanctifying power from the command-giver to you, so that you keep the command. You are the one who keeps the command, but it is God who works in you.

And so if you thought that v.16-22 are what *you* do, and v.23-24 are what God does, then that's where you'd be wrong. V.16-22 are God's powerful, transforming Word, and when faith receives that Word, the Word gives life and obedience is the result of God's speaking. God works to make you blameless by revealing His will through instructions and commands.

And what are those commands? There are six here in the text: rejoice always, pray without ceasing, give thanks in all circumstances, do not quench the Spirit, do not despise prophecies but test everything; hold fast to what is good; abstain from every form of evil. This is what a blameless life looks like; this is what it means. When we preach through 1 Thess, we'll spend more time looking at each one, but for now, just see the main point: by giving you these commands, God is sanctifying you. **Hear His Word**, and you will be blameless. God's Word communicates God's will, and because it's *God's* living and powerful Word, that will is accomplished, and you are made blameless.

But God not only works through the Word to conform your will to His. He Himself also works to sanctify you completely. His instructions come in the context of a relationship with you, as He walks with you through His Spirit as you seek to carry out His Word. His personal presence in your life will never conflict with His Word, but your relationship with God goes beyond the Word. When you pray, you don't pray to the Bible. When you sing, you don't sing to the Bible. God is present in your life not as a list of instructions, but as someone that you can know, interact with, and love. The God who wills blamelessness in Christ Jesus through the Spirit for you is someone whom you can know and love.

And through that living relationship with God, you are *kept*. You are *held*. You are *sanctified*. This isn't just the function of your mind knowing about a list of instructions. You are not kept blameless by love for a list! You are not kept blameless by being afraid to disappoint a list! You are kept blameless by loving and fearing and serving and knowing and enjoying Father, Son, and Holy Spirit. And not just your mind; your whole person. Your whole spirit and soul and body are kept blameless through your relationship with God. God sanctifies you. God keeps you blameless.

This sanctification is *total*. It's *complete*. There is no part of you that God will allow to remain blameworthy. He will not rest until you are completely sanctified, until you are no longer at war with sin and death, until the God of peace has brought you complete peace. When Jesus comes, and you walk down the aisle, there will be no remaining flaws for you to hide. You won't have to worry about showing Jesus "your good side". Doesn't that encourage you? Doesn't that help you rejoice always, and give thanks for all circumstances, even those that seem so painful now?

And notice *that* connection: why is it God's will that you give thanks in all circumstances? Because God is sanctifying you completely. God is using everything about your life, every twist and turn in your story, to remove the spots and blemishes from you. So thank Him for that. If God were to sanctify you partially, then you would only have to give thanks for those circumstances. But God is working to sanctify your whole spirit and soul and body, and so His will for you is that you give thanks in all circumstances.

God's goal is for you to be blameless when Christ returns, and He accomplishes that goal by revealing His will in a transforming way, and by His own holy work of keeping you and sanctifying you. Because it's God's work, it comes with God's guarantee. Look at v. 24: "He who calls you is faithful; He will surely do it."

Because God is faithful, His will is done. Because God is faithful, His work is done. Because God is faithful, His Word accomplishes that for which He sent it. And because of all this, it is absolutely certain that you will be completely sanctified. You will be kept blameless at the coming of our Lord Jesus.

And as we enter into the joy of Advent, remembering Christ's birth, when He began His good work in the world, we find encouragement and hope in the fact that He will be faithful to complete His work, culminating in His return. The incarnation led to the crucifixion, which **accomplished** blamelessness for the world. In between the two advents of Christ, that blamelessness which Christ bought with His blood is **applied** to all who believe. Jesus applies it to us by speaking these powerful, transforming words: "Rejoice always. Pray without ceasing. Give thanks in all circumstances. Abstain from every form of evil."

And as this blamelessness is applied to us, God keeps us until the coming of our Lord Jesus Christ, at which point our blamelessness will finally and fully **appear**. We will walk down the aisle to be united to our Beloved in the beauty of holiness, with our whole spirit and soul and body having been completely sanctified by the Word and work of God. And we will finally experience the blessedness that we were created for, that we were redeemed for, that we were sanctified for: we will be found blameless in the presence of our Lord Jesus Christ. He who calls you is faithful; he will surely do it.

"Now to him who is able to keep you from stumbling and to present you blameless before the presence of his glory with great joy, to the only God, our Savior, through Jesus Christ our Lord, be glory, majesty, dominion, and authority, before all time and now and forever. Amen."

- *In the name of the Father, and of the Son, and of the Holy Spirit, Amen.*