

Seek the Welfare (Shalom) of the City

Այս Քաղաքին Խաղաղութիւնը Փնտռեցէ՛ք

1 Thessalonians 5:12-21

We are studying the letter written to the church of Thessalonica. Their city was also full of terror and fear. The Romans were not very happy to see a new movement called Christianity. They persecuted the church. In chapter 4, Paul moves on to practical guidance to live a holy life. He starts the chapter saying:

Finally, then, brothers, we ask and urge you in the Lord Jesus, that as you received from us how you ought to walk and to please God, just as you are doing, that you do so more and more. (1 Thessalonians 4:1 ESV)

NT Wright says: “God longs for us to become the sort of humans who will reflect His image.”¹

Although our final home is in heaven with God, yet we are also citizens of this land. We, the church members, brothers and sisters, are **the ambassadors of Christ**. We should be involved in the city’s welfare. We should be **the aroma of Christ** in this broken world. Paul is urging the Thessalonians to lead that kind of a life. This is a not political speech. **This is a call for a holy life**, a life that is set apart to do God’s will in this world. We are set apart for God’s purpose.

Be at peace among yourselves. And we urge you, brothers, admonish the idle, encourage the fainthearted, help the weak, be patient with them all. See that no one repays anyone evil for evil, but always seek to do good to one another and to everyone. Rejoice always, pray without ceasing, give thanks in all circumstances; for this is the will of God in Christ Jesus for you. (1 Thessalonians 5:13-18 ESV)

Two years ago during the AEUNA Biennial convention in Chicago, our speaker Rev. Jackson Crum challenged us and asked us to truly care for our cities. He quoted from prophet Jeremiah:

But seek the welfare (*shalom, peace*) of the city where I have sent you into exile, and pray to the LORD on its behalf, for in its welfare you will find your welfare. (Jeremiah 29:7 ESV)

Pastor Jackson asked this question: “If you decided to close your church, sell your church building and move out, will your neighborhood, the city council, the mayor, or the police notice or care?”

The question can be asked today to PACC and to each of you. “Does your presence in your neighborhood or in your work place, make any difference?” “Do people know you as the ‘aroma of Christ’?”

Illustration: One of my joys of the last week VBS was our neighbors attendance to our school. To see my neighbors coming everyday was extremely important how I see PACC. This church is here for a purpose and reason.

Illustration: When mr Vartevan Cholakian passed away in Beirut, the father of two Pastors Vicken and Hrayr, the neighbors of his business said, “An angel is gone from our street.”

Seek the welfare of the city. I looked in the dictionary the definition of **welfare**: the state of doing well especially in respect to good fortune, happiness, wellbeing, or prosperity.²

The Hebrew text uses the word ***Shalom***, which we usually translate as peace. The Biblical understanding of the word peace is much more than the regular definition of the word peace. Peace does not mean the absence of war. To greet someone saying *shalom aleichem*, or *salam alaykom* (Arabic) means “**May God’s presence be on that person, may God bless the person, may God grant good health, care, financial care, relational peace.**” Peace in all aspects of life.

Seek or pray for the welfare of the city. This is my topic. Paul is encouraging the church of Thessalonica to **live a holy life**, a transformed life, a Christ-centered life. They need to become the aroma of Christ in their city in their neighborhoods. Although they were rejected by the authorities, which did not stop them from being a testimony in the places where they lived.

1-The God of Peace will Sanctify You

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. (1 Thessalonians 5:23-24 ESV)

These verses are a prayer of blessing. They summarize the entire letter Paul wrote. May the God of peace, *erene* or *shalom* sanctify the person completely. What does it mean?

To sanctify someone means to set him/her aside for something. **Our God who is the source peace sanctifies us**. When His peace resides in us, our lives are changed. Paul mentions in the beginning of this passage: **“Be at peace among yourselves.”** (5:13). God will help them be at peace with Him and with each other. This peace comes from Lord Jesus. Our sanctification is an ongoing process for our entire life. We are under construction.

Coming back to Thessalonica, in the previous chapters Paul asked the church to love God and each other. You see Christianity is not individualistic faith; it starts with the individual but it reflects out to the “other”. Seek the welfare of the city...

2-God’s Part and Our Responsibility

How does this work? Where is God’s part and where is our part in this process?

Respect those who labor among you ... **esteem** them very highly in love... **Be at peace** among yourselves... **admonish** the idle, **encourage** the fainthearted, **help** the weak, **be patient** with them all. **Do not repay** anyone evil for evil... **seek to do good** to one another and to everyone.

Rejoice always, **pray** without ceasing, **give thanks** in all circumstances... **Do not quench** the Spirit. **Do not despise** prophecies, but **test** everything; **hold fast** what is good. **Abstain** from every form of evil. (1 Thessalonians 5:12-22 ESV)

There are 17 verbs in this short passage. It reminds me of the Ten Commandments. The commandments of Moses have two parts. The first four are about our relationship with God. The rest of the laws are about our relationship with other people. Here we have two parts. **Nine commandments (vs 12-15) are about human relationships** and **eight commandments (vs 16-22) are about our relationship with God.**

Up until verse 23, however, it looks as if it's up to us—our determination, our willpower—to keep the commandments. In verses 23- 24, however, Paul prays that God would help us—that He would “sanctify” us—and he even expresses the confidence that God “will surely do it.” Let me read those verses again: **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.** (1 Thessalonians 5:23-24 ESV)

Some stress human responsibility while others believe only God does and we watch Him do things. Paul is suggesting both. **It is a partnership.** Without God's initiation nothing happens. He is the source of reformation in our lives. He is the source of sanctification. He is Holy, and His holy grace comes on us to sanctify us (*the God of peace himself sanctify you*). We will receive His holy grace, which sanctifies us. Glory to HIM.

What is our responsibility?

Respect ... esteem ... be at peace ... admonish... encourage... help... be patient... do not repay anyone evil for evil... seek to do good

Rejoice... pray... give thanks... do not quench the Spirit... do not despise prophecies... test everything... hold fast what is good... abstain from every form of evil.

If we live like this, we spread the “aroma of Christ.”

Dallas Willard says it best: **“Grace is not opposed to effort; it is opposed to earning. Earning is an attitude. Effort is an action.”**⁴

3-The Will of God

Some people struggle with finding the will of God. As I was giving a seminar in Chicago about church dynamics, many asked how you know God's will.

I know this is a tough question we struggle with. The revealed will of God in His word is clear. But the subjective will of God such as where to live, what to work, whom to marry, questions like this people get stuck.

What is Paul's answer?

Paul answers those questions:

For you know what instructions we gave you through the Lord Jesus. For this is the will of God, your sanctification: that you abstain from sexual immorality; (1 Thessalonians 4:2-3 ESV)

Rejoice always, pray without ceasing, give thanks in all circumstances; for this is the will of God in Christ Jesus for you. (1 Thessalonians 5:16-18 ESV)

Pastor Chip Ingram has a series on parenting: "Our goal is not to raise happy children, but holy children." God's will is a call for all of us to live set apart lives, holy lives, sanctified lives. Paul gives details of spiritual disciplines about living a holy life. Paul stresses three verbs: Rejoice, be thankful, and pray.

Rejoice means to be content in our lives even though things are not necessarily as you want them to be.

A thankful heart is another command from Paul. Be thankful in ***all*** circumstances. Warning: not ***for all*** circumstances but ***in all*** circumstances.

My friend Pastor Scott Grant says: "God sanctifies us insofar as we rejoice, pray, and give thanks. If we want to be sanctified, then, we should rejoice always, pray without ceasing, and give thanks in all circumstances."⁴

Some think that joy will come when they get married, find a new job, or when their circumstances are very smooth. All those are circumstantial. They come and

go. If your joy and inner peace are built on those external circumstances, watch out, you can lose them very easily.

Rejoice and thank God for who God is, what He has done, is doing, or will do. And this is not temporary. Paul uses words like “always”, “without ceasing,” and “in all circumstances.” If God is to sanctify us ‘completely’ and if our ‘whole’ being is to be kept blameless, then half-hearted participation will not do. In fact, words that convey comprehensiveness (e.g., “all,” “always,” “everyone,” “every,” “everything,” “completely,” “whole”) appear thirteen times in verses 12-28. Paul isn’t messing around. Neither is God. God not only wants all of us, He also wants all of us all the time.⁵

-Application:

Seek or pray for the welfare of the city. Paul is encouraging the Calvary church to live a holy life, a transformed life, a Christ-centered life. We need to become the aroma of Christ in our city, in our neighborhoods. Even though some will reject us, that will not stop us from being a testimony in the places where we live.

God is doing His part. God is holy and He passes His holiness to us through the death and the resurrection of Jesus Christ. Now His Spirit is at work in our lives. We are called to pray for the welfare of the city. We are called to be receptive to God’s presence in our lives. We are called to rejoice, thank and pray all the time, in all circumstances.

May God help us to obey His commandments.

1 N.T. Wright, *Paul for everyone Thessalonians*. P 117

2. <http://www.merriam-webster.com/dictionary/welfare>

3. Dallas Willard, *The Great Omission*

4. Scott Grant, *SETTING THE STAGE* PBC May 10, 2015

5. *ibid*