

Good morning, Moon Valley!

Today we bring to a close our sermon series titled, □ “Living Like He’s Coming.” It has been a study through the New Testament letter of 1 Thessalonians, which I have thoroughly enjoyed.

Our text for today is □ 1 Thessalonians 5:23-28, the ending of the letter. From this passage, we are going to learn some principles that will help us set priorities and make decisions that will count forever. We are going to discover some guidelines for maximizing our joy both today and in eternity.

This concluding passage is something called a *peroratio*. It is a concluding part in which a summary of the major theme of the letter is presented. The summary is actually in verses 23 and 24. The subsequent verses tack on some additional details that aren’t technically part of the summary.

The verses not part of the summary include verses □ 25 through 28, where Paul says,

ESV 1 Thessalonians 5:25 Brothers, pray for us. 26 Greet all the brothers with a holy kiss. 27 I put you under oath before the Lord to have this letter read to all the brothers. 28 The grace of our Lord Jesus Christ be with you.

From these verses, we could glean good insights for living. But I am going to skip them. Not because they are unimportant. But because I want to focus on the powerful summary in □ verses 23 and 24. It’s where Paul says,

ESV 1 Thessalonians 5:23 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. 24 He who calls you is faithful; he will surely do it.

Notice that this summary is in the form of a prayer for the Thessalonians. The English word, □ “may” is the tipoff that the original Greek verbs are in the optative mood, expressing an obtainable wish or a prayer.¹ This is Paul’s prayerful wish for his spiritual children.

Paul’s focus is familiar. He has in view □ “the coming of our Lord Jesus Christ.” Paul has mentioned the coming of the Lord near the end of every chapter in 1 Thessalonians. It is a theme. It is why this sermon series has the title, “Living Like He’s Coming” because that is the primary thread woven throughout. Paul prays that the Thessalonians would be ready for the coming of Christ.

I have mentioned before that, at his coming, all believers will appear before the judgment seat of Christ. Paul mentions this in 2 Corinthians 5:10, saying to believers,

ESV 2 Corinthians 5:10 For we must all appear before the judgment seat of Christ, so that each one may receive what is due for what he has done in the body, whether good or evil.

The term, □ “judgment seat” is a translation of the Greek word, βῆμα (Bema, pronounced *BAY-mah*). Often the judgment seat of Christ is simply referred to as the Bema (pronounced BEE-mah), which is the gringo pronunciation of the Greek term. The Bema is a kind of judicial bench from which judgments will be rendered by Jesus himself. Ultimately, all people will be judged at one time or another, but only believers will be judged at the Bema.

¹ Wallace, Daniel B., *Greek Grammar Beyond the Basics*, 480.

The judgments rendered are not to decide whether we're going to heaven or hell. On this, an irreversible verdict has already been rendered in our favor. Through faith in Jesus, all believers have already been justified before God and are going to heaven, regardless.

The judgments at the Bema will decide gain or loss of rewards in eternity. All believers in Jesus are going to heaven, but not all will be equally rewarded. Some may be richly rewarded; others may suffer loss of reward.

So, Paul is praying for the Thessalonians to be ready for the Bema. He wants them to be in the best possible position to be rewarded at the coming of Christ.

To that end, back in □ verse 23 of our text, Paul says to the Thessalonians that he is praying for the Lord to “sanctify you completely.”

The original Greek term for “sanctify” is ἁγιάζω (*hagiázō*). It means to purify, skimming off impurities incompatible with holiness.² It involves becoming more and more like Christ, who himself is perfectly holy. Sanctification is the process by which we mature as Christians.

Paul wants the Thessalonians to be completely sanctified or wholly mature or fully Christlike. To be completely sanctified is not to be without sin.³ Rather, it is to be devoted to God in all areas of life, including marriage, work, parenting, sexuality, eating, and so forth.⁴

² Arndt, W., Danker, F. W., Bauer, W., & Gingrich, F. W. (2000). In [A Greek-English lexicon of the New Testament and other early Christian literature](#) (3rd ed., p. 10). University of Chicago Press.

³ 1 John 1:8.

⁴ Wilkin, Robert N., “The First Epistle of Paul the Apostle to the Thessalonians,” in *The Grace New Testament Commentary*, ed. by Robert N. Wilkin (Denton, TX: Grace Evangelical Society, 2010), 949.

And notice carefully who does the primary work of sanctifying. You may be surprised that it is not you and me. It is God. Paul prays, □ “may the God of peace *himself* sanctify you.” More on that in a moment.

Paul describes God here as the God of peace. He could have said the God of justice or the God of grace or the God of wrath or the God of love, all of which would be true. Why emphasize peace when the coming of Christ is in view?

The original Greek term translated “peace” is εἰρήνη (*ayráynay*). It conveys the general idea of wellbeing. In certain contexts, specific aspects of wellbeing are highlighted, including a feeling of rest, or a state of reconciliation with God, or eternal salvation—all made possible by God.⁵ Here, Paul seems to be emphasizing that the God who sanctifies us is the God who is the source of every aspect of our wellbeing. God sanctifies us for our own good.

Earthly parenting provides a helpful parallel. When children reach adulthood, parents want them to be ready. So, parents prepare them. The goal of the preparation is the children’s wellbeing. Parents want to maximize every aspect of their children’s wellbeing for the future.

Similarly, when we appear before the Bema, our heavenly Father wants us to be ready. So, he sanctifies us in preparation. The goal of the preparation is our wellbeing. Our Father wants to maximize our wellbeing for the future.

Our earthly mothers and fathers prepare us. Similarly, our heavenly Father sanctifies us. Which is not to say that, as children, we play no

⁵ Foerster, Werner, “Εἰρήνη, Εἰρηνεύω, Εἰρηνικός, Εἰρηνοποιός, Εἰρηνοποιέω,” ed. by Gerhard Kittel, Geoffrey W. Bromiley, and Gerhard Friedrich, *Theological Dictionary of the New Testament* (Grand Rapids, MI: Eerdmans, 1964–), 400–420.

role. We just can't do it on our own. We are dependent. Our role is contingent on God's role of initiating and empowering. We listen. We believe. We follow. We obey. But God sanctifies. God produces the fruit in us and through us.

In addition to praying for the Thessalonians to be sanctified by the God of peace, Paul also prays, □ “may your whole spirit and soul and body be blameless.”

In saying, “spirit and soul and body,” Paul is simply praying that, at the coming of Jesus, every part of them would be blameless.⁶ The sanctification process resulting in blamelessness involves the whole person.

To be blameless may sound like a state of sinless perfection. Thankfully, it is not. Otherwise, none of us would look forward to Christ's coming. Because we all sin.

In this case, being “blameless” is the functional equivalent of being approved for reward. That's what Paul wants for his spiritual children. That's what the sanctifying God of peace want for us, too.

Paul assures the Thessalonians that God is a good Father who is faithful to do his part in sanctifying us so that we can be blameless at the Bema. In □ verse 24, Paul says, “He who calls you is faithful; he will surely do it.”

This is not a guarantee that we will be ready for Christ's coming, only that God will surely provide all that we need to be ready. As the Vine,

⁶ Ryrie, C. C. (1995). *Ryrie study Bible: New American Standard Bible, 1995 update* (Expanded ed., p. 1910). Moody Press.

the Lord Jesus is faithful to produce the fruit of sanctification in us, but only to the extent that we, as branches, abide in the Vine. God sees to it that we *can* be fully ready. He provides everything we need. But the extent of our readiness depends on our response to his provision.

And so, the big idea from the text focuses on our part: □ Live like he's coming. Begin today with the end in mind. Expect Jesus to come at any time and walk accordingly. Be ready for the Bema.

This raises an important question. How will we be judged? What are the specific evaluative criteria? What principles will Jesus use to reward us?

If we are going to go for gold, it would be helpful to know the score-card categories Jesus will be using at the Bema.

Paul does not address this, nor could he, in this two-verse summary. But we can glean some principles from elsewhere in Scripture. Paul discussed some of these principles earlier in his letter to the Thessalonians, and it was likely a topic of conversation when he was with them. Other parts of Scripture also give insight to the evaluative criteria Jesus will use.

Thankfully, □ Dr. Joe Wall has done some important work for us in his book titled, *Going for the Gold: Reward or Loss at the Judgment Seat of Christ*, which I commend to you. Dr. Wall received his Th.D. from Dallas Theological Seminary, he has authored several books, he has pastored several churches, he has served as President of Colorado Christian University, and he is one of the founders of Grace School of Theology, where he now serves on the faculty.

In Chapter 6 of his book, Wall lists a dozen principles Jesus will use to judge believers at the Bema. Knowing what some of these principles

are puts us in a better position to make wise choices today relating to our part in sanctification.

In his book, Wall supports each of the principles from Scripture. Time does not permit me to do much of that this morning. I am just going to list and briefly explain the principles. As I do, I invite you to prayerfully consider which one(s) the Lord may want you to focus on right now. You will notice some of them overlap.

The first principle is this: ☐ Jesus will judge you based on how much you give to Bob so he can buy a jet. I speak of myself in the third person out of humility.

You may be surprised to know that most people don't believe this principle. Probably because it's not true.

The real ☐ first principle is this: At the Bema, Jesus will judge our deeds, our words, our thoughts, and our motives.

For me, the sobering part of this idea is that the thoughts and motives behind my words and deeds will be weighed. Seemingly good things said and done with bad motives will not count; they will be worthless.

For example, if all my efforts in preaching are done for the selfish purpose of manipulating people or getting them to like me, there will be no return on my investment.

If I go to church only because I'm attracted to a girl who attends, I may score some points with the girl, but I'm not scoring any points with God.

By the way, I confess, I started going to church solely to chase a girl. I got the girl. But God got me. And turned me into one of the pastors I used to mock. So, be careful. God has a wicked sense of humor.

In 1 Corinthians 4:5, Paul says,

ESV 1 Corinthians 4:5 Therefore do not pronounce judgment before the time, before the Lord comes, who will bring to light the things now hidden in darkness and will disclose the purposes of the heart. Then each one will receive his commendation from God.

At the Bema, our thoughts and motives will be judged along with our words and deeds.

The second principle is this: Only the fruit that the Holy Spirit produces in our lives will have any value at the Bema. Jesus will reward only those things we do as we abide in him. For apart from him, we can do nothing.

Plenty of people have worked hard at doing good and tell themselves and others that they are doing it for the Lord, when, in fact, they are not abiding in him at all and are perhaps just doing it to feel better about themselves.

I have done that. And I am still quite capable of doing it.

I am a recovering performance junkie. I grew up believing that my acceptability as a person is based on my performance. And so, I work hard, sometimes compulsively, at most things I do.

But if I do this apart from the Lord, if I do it out of compulsion and not faith, if I do it by my own strength and not by the power of the Spirit

within me, if I do it cut off from close communion with the Lord, it doesn't amount to much.

And in my own experience, you eventually hit a wall that knocks you flat. Which is exactly what I need sometimes to drive my back to the Lord to abide in him for the power I need to be truly fruitful.

In John 15:5, Jesus says to his disciples,

ESV John 15:5 "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."

The third principle is this: At the Bema, Jesus will reward us according to our persevering faith in God and his promises.

In Galatians 6:9, Paul says,

ESV Galatians 6:9 And let us not grow weary of doing good, for in due season we will reap, if we do not give up.

We will reap reward at the Bema to the extent that we faithfully persevere in serving the Lord.

In Revelation 22:12, the Lord Jesus promises,

ESV Revelation 22:12 "Behold, I am coming soon, bringing my recompense with me, to repay each one for what he has done."

When we cling to faith in the Lord's promises and live accordingly, we are storing up treasures in heaven.

The □ fourth principle is this: Jesus will reward us in proportion to our faithful and wise stewardship.

Through several parables in the gospels, Jesus teaches the connection between our management of what he has entrusted to us and our resulting reward.

The Lord has given us all a unique blend of physical abilities, natural talents, spiritual gifts, training, family ties, wealth, time, energy, etc. We will be judged according to what we have done for the Lord with what we have been given. More is expected from those who have been given more. The question will be: How have I invested what God has entrusted to me?

As an aside, because we are all created differently, there is no basis for us to compare or compete with others. Or to expect others to be exactly like us. We play to an audience of one. In the end, only his applause counts.

The □ fifth principle is this: At the Bema, Jesus will take into account how we responded to the Word of God. We will be rewarded for studying and applying the principles found in Scripture.

We talked about this last Sunday. The Word of God is the fuel the Holy Spirit uses to do his refining work in us. Thus, we need to fuel the fire by studying and applying Scripture to our lives. We quench the Spirit by neglecting the Word. To the extent that we fuel the fire, we will be rewarded.

It is ironic that many of us rationalize that we just can't afford the time to personally study and apply the Bible to our lives. The reality is, we can't afford *not* to invest our time in this way. Reading and applying the

Bible to our lives is a highly leveraged investment in our enjoyment of eternity.

Let's say you decide to invest 45 minutes a day, for an average of 5 days a week toward a devotional time when you prayerfully read and apply the Bible to your life. If you sleep an average of 7 hours per night, then your devotional time would take up only 3% of your waking hours.

Is an investment of 3% of your time in this life worth an eternity of reward in the life to come?

The □ sixth principle is this: At the Bema, Jesus will judge and reward us according to the moral purity of our lives. The Lord will take into account the holiness of our character.

In □ 1 Corinthians 9:27, Paul says,

ESV 1 Corinthians 9:27 But I discipline my body and keep it under control, lest after preaching to others I myself should be disqualified.

Paul is careful to be disciplined and self-controlled, lest by some moral indiscretion or by going off the rails he should be disqualified. He is not talking about being disqualified from heaven but being disqualified from reward.

The □ seventh principle is this: Jesus will take into account how long we have been saved.

In Jesus' parable of the landowner in Matthew 20, we have evidence that rewards will *not* be strictly a matter of seniority. We might think that the longer someone is saved the more he or she will be rewarded. But this is not necessarily so. We don't get credit for simply marking time as a Christian. We get credit for what we do with our time.

Five years spent as a Christian who takes advantage of every opportunity to serve the Lord is better than fifty years spent as an apathetic Christian who squanders such opportunities.

This is good news for those who are saved and enter the Lord's service later in life. Though you may have fewer years to serve, you can still be richly rewarded.

It is also good news for those who realize they have been coasting. If you're still here, there's still time.

The eighth principle is this: Jesus will reward us for supporting the ministry of others.

In Matthew 10:41-42, Jesus says,

ESV Matthew 10:41 "The one who receives a prophet because he is a prophet will receive a prophet's reward, and the one who receives a righteous person because he is a righteous person will receive a righteous person's reward."

This suggests that, when we support the ministry of another person—whether it be a prophet or a righteous person or a missionary or the like—we get to participate in and enjoy the rewards that person may receive at the Bema. When we partner in their ministry, we also partner in their reward.

For example, those who have supported our own Roger Fankhauser in his missions trip to the Philistines stand to share in any Bema rewards Roger may receive for his work.

No pressure, Roger, but we're counting on you.

This also suggests we should back the people we think the Lord will commend. Support of the Save the Silverfish Foundation may not provide a good return on investment.

The □ ninth principle is this: Jesus will judge us according to how we have judged others.

In □ Matthew 7:2, Jesus says,

ESV Matthew 7:1 “Judge not, that you be not judged. 2 For with the judgment you pronounce you will be judged, and with the measure you use it will be measured to you.”

Contrary to popular opinion, Jesus is *not* warning against judging others. Rather, he is warning against hypocrisy in our judgments, condemning others for the very same things that we do. Somehow, the moral yardstick we apply to others will be applied to us at the Bema.

Scripture is not clear as to how exactly this is going to work. Be we need to be careful because, in some way, hypocritical judging boomerangs at the Bema.

The □ tenth principle is this: Jesus will reward us for the results of our ministry in the lives of others.

In □ 1 Thessalonians 2:19, you may recall that Paul links his reward to the results of his ministry in the lives of the new believers in Thessalonica. He says,

ESV 1 Thessalonians 2:19 For what is our hope or joy or crown of boasting before our Lord Jesus at his coming? Is it not you?

We score when we have a hand in the salvation or spiritual growth of others. This certainly includes leading someone else to faith in Christ. But it can also include things like sponsoring a high-school student to go to camp, where he or she might have an opportunity to grow in Christ.

The □ eleventh principle is this: Teachers will receive a stricter judgment.

□ James 3:1 says,

ESV James 3:1 Not many of you should become teachers, my brothers, for you know that we who teach will be judged with greater strictness.

This is sobering, as it should be. Bible teachers like me are in a position to influence others. To the extent that we diligently and accurately handle the word of God by the Spirit with integrity, we can do some good.

But to the extent that we mishandle or twist the word of God for our own agendas, we can do great damage.

Therefore, it is only right that teachers be judged with greater strictness.

The □ twelfth and final principle is this: Not only production but contribution to production will receive reward. All contributors to a ministry larger than themselves will get to enjoy rewards for that ministry.

In our culture, those who are most visible tend to get the credit for outcomes to which many have contributed. If the church produces good results, the up-front guys like me tend to get the credit.

But we all have different roles to play in the growth of the body of Christ. And we will all be rewarded according to the part we play, whether it is highly visible or not.

In 1 Corinthians 3:6-8, Paul uses a word picture to characterize his contribution and that of Apollos to the growth of the church. He says,

ESV 1 Corinthians 3:6 I planted, Apollos watered, but God gave the growth. 7 So neither he who plants nor he who waters is anything, but only God who gives the growth. 8 He who plants and he who waters are one, and each will receive his wages according to his labor.

The one who plants and the one who waters are part of one body—the body of Christ. And we will all receive wages according to our labor. The wages refer to rewards at the Bema for our part in building up the church.

- The one who preaches sermons and the one who cleans toilets.
- The one who leads worship and the one who changes diapers.
- The one who leads a life group and the one who stocks the k-cups.

Rewards are not just for the up-front luminaries but also for the behind-the-scenes ordinaries who do their part.

We have covered all twelve principles. They can seem overwhelming. And their application can be difficult. But it all boils down to a big idea that is pretty simple: Live like he's coming.

The Lord has given you and me everything we need to do it.

Let's pray. Lord, keep sanctifying us. Help us to live in light of Christ's coming that we may be holy and blameless on that day. Amen.