

STANDING FIRM

XI. “Complete Wholeness”

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1 Thess 5:23-28

INTRODUCTION

A few weeks ago, we were confronted with the tragedy of the interstate bridge collapsing in Minneapolis, killing 13 people and injuring 79 others. This last week, the 911 tapes were released so we could hear the panic and desperation in some of those first calls after the accident. While the exact cause is not known, this eight-lane bridge collapsed because of some undetected inner flaw in a crucial support. When that failed, everything came down like dominoes.

In light of our text, I see in tragedy a solemn warning for our lives. How often do we see a person’s life come crumbling down because of some deeply hidden character flaw? Sometimes they cause tremendous suffering for others. Think of the Enron scandal. Our church secretary, Phyllis’s dad, lost all his retirement in that collapse and, though suffering with major health problems at 73, he still has to work in a 24 hour quick stop gas station— all because of a few people at the top lacking integrity. Their flaws brought the whole, huge corporation down.

Most of us look pretty good and upright on the outside. But are you aware of some deep flaws within your character— secret sins, bad attitudes, anger, resentments you harbor and host of other imperfections? Under enough stress, these things can cause our lives to break apart.

Wouldn’t you like to have your life marked by a deep inner wholeness, purity of character, with everything solid upon The Rock, Christ Jesus that cannot be shaken? Paul, as he closes this letter to the Thessalonians, gives us a wonderful prescription for wholeness in this great benediction:

23 May God himself, the God of peace, sanctify you through and through. May your whole spirit, soul and body be kept blameless at the coming of our Lord Jesus Christ. 24 The one who calls you is faithful and he will do it.

SPIRIT, SOUL, AND BODY

Before we understand how we get this wholeness, we need a little lesson in the anatomy of our inward parts. Paul gives us a helpful trinitarian structure of our lives. God is a trinity: Father, Son, and Holy Spirit. Our humanity is made “in the image of God (Gen. 1:27),” so it makes sense that we are also trinitarian in structure. We are composed of a spirit, a soul, and a body. The word, “whole,” as in *May your whole spirit, soul and body be kept blameless....*, comes from the Anglo-Saxon word, “hal,” meaning completeness, integration, or whole. It implies all our inner stuff coming together in a unified whole. To understand how this works, let’s first consider the three parts we’re made up of.

Our spirit is that inner part of us that relates directly to God. This is a unique gift given to humans. It is empty, or darkened before we become a Christian. It is that “God-shaped vacuum” that Pascal referred to. It is the inner emptiness people often feel before coming to Christ. This is the part within us that died in the rebellion of Adam and Eve in the garden. Jesus came to resurrect our spirits, to make this part of us alive again. Jesus refers to this miracle as the new birth or being born again. As we trust in Him as our Lord and Savior, Jesus imparts His Spirit to our spirits, bringing them to life. This life is eternal– it continues on forever after our bodies die.

The soul is the seat of our personality, our intellect, our self-awareness, our conscience, and our independent will. Much of this is again unique to our humanness. Self-awareness allows me to step outside myself and consider my identity, who I am. People talk about “finding themselves.” We search for meaning, purpose and fulfillment. Our dogs don’t concern themselves with this– they just are. With our imaginations we can create things beyond the present reality. We don’t just react to conditions, we have the power to decide in what way we will act. We are not like animals living out of conditioning and instincts. We have an independent will that transcends all that.

When we had our dog, he was amazingly sensitive to the click of the cookie jar lid. He could be sleeping in the sun in a bedroom, and I would, as carefully as I could, lift the cookie jar lid, thinking I was making no noise he could hear– and before I put the lid back on, he would be there at my feet. Now I’m sure he never considered whether he would respond to that stimulus– like we do in wrestling with the decision of whether to have dessert. He loved cookies, so...

Now, sometimes in Scripture, “spirit” and “soul” are used interchangeably. But Paul, in using both words here, is obviously wanting us to think about all the dimensions of our inner selves.

The body is then our physical being, our material structure. This is also a part of who you are: body structure, hair color, eyes, bones, muscles. Yes, God is concerned about our bodies too. Cor 6:19-20 says it well:

Do you not know that your body is a temple of the Holy Spirit, who is in you, whom you have received from God? You are not your own; you were bought at a price. Therefore honor God with your body.

Here’s a diagram of how I sometimes picture this in my mind– three concentric circles:

BODY

SOUL

SPIRIT

Now, here's the point Paul is making. He wants our entire beings— everything we are— to be sanctified “through and through.” Remember a few weeks ago, I talked about sanctification. It comes from the same Greek root as “holy” or “holiness.” It means to be without sin, pure, and blameless. And of course, Jesus was the perfect expression of this. So, it means to be like Jesus in all that we are, spirit, soul, and body. This includes our minds, our emotions, our motivations, and our bodies all under the control of the Master, the Lord Jesus.

Most importantly, this is not something we do. God does it for us, if we cooperate.

THE GOD OF PEACE

God is the source of this purifying, making holy, sanctifying process. It begins in our spirits, from the inside out. As we are born again, the Holy Spirit enters into us (“God Himself”) and begins to move outward, transforming every part of our beings. It is part of what Jesus means in saying the greatest commandment is to *love the Lord your God with all your heart and with all your soul and with all your mind* (Mtt. 22:37). Everything within us to be directed toward God. Then, He in turn will make our spirits, souls, and bodies a reflection of His love.

To give us further assurance, Paul refers to God as “the God of peace.” The Greek word used for peace here implies not only an absence of conflict, but a knitting together of what has been fragmented. Who among us doesn't at times feel fragmented, pulled in all directions at once? “I want to be here, but I also want to be there. But I can't be two places at once.” “Bill wants me to... but Sue wants me to... but I want to...” And of course we know what it is to have sinful passions and desires pulling us in one direction and God's Word telling us something different. Paul pictures it for us as two natures at war within us in Rom 7:19-23. I'm using The Living Bible paraphrase, for I think it captures well the impact Paul is making here:

When I want to do good, I don't; and when I try not to do wrong, I do it anyway. Now if I am doing what I don't want to, it is plain where the trouble is: sin still has me in its evil grasp.

It seems to be a fact of life that when I want to do what is right, I inevitably do what is wrong. I love to do God's will so far as my new nature is concerned; but there is something else deep within me, in my lower nature, that is at war with my mind and wins the fight and makes me a slave to the sin that is still within me. In my mind I want to be God's willing servant, but instead I find myself still enslaved to sin.

So you see how it is: my new life tells me to do right, but the old nature that is still inside me loves to sin. Oh, what a terrible predicament I'm in! Who will free me from my slavery to this deadly lower nature?

But then, Paul answers his rhetorical question with this concluding sentence:

Thank God! It has been done by Jesus Christ our Lord. He has set me free.

The victory over sin in our lives has been won by Jesus on the cross. But, there is an ongoing process in cleaning out sin in our lives. The way is not self reform, but a process of displacement. The more of Jesus' life we let in, by the Spirit, the more it displaces the ugly, sinful junk in our hearts and personalities. Here's a visual aid [glass with ice cubes.... pour in water, displace ice].

Our focus needs to be in getting more of the power of Jesus' life within, letting it flow to all parts, so it pushes out sinful attitudes, sinful practices, and breaks the bondages that have bound us.

Unfortunately, many Christians don't continue to let this sanctifying process go on. They get to a certain place and stop. I remember Polly and me being in a Christian bookstore when the woman at the cash register took a phone call. We heard her say in a very irritated voice, "I can't understand a word you're saying! You have not learned our language well enough for me to understand you. If you slow down, maybe I can figure out what you are trying to say." All this was very clearly within our hearing, yet as she checked us out, we could tell she obviously saw nothing wrong in her treatment of that person. We left thinking, "How sad. She had never let Jesus soften prejudice, sweeten her spirit, and give her patience toward those who were struggling with English."

This not only applies to sin in our hearts, but also to our damaged emotions. This last winter, Skip and Barb Conner's daughter told me of the ministry of The Father's Ranch, located between Tonasket and Republic. Polly and I went to see it and visit with the director, Craig Loftus. We were very positively impressed. They take in young women suffering from eating disorders— anorexia, bulimia, or both. Usually they are also addicted to drugs. Most of them have been through major counseling and treatment programs that have failed to give them the healing they've needed. They come discouraged and dangerously close to death. Their approach is rooted in extensive exposure to the Word of God which has, *everything pertaining to life and godliness* (2 Pet. 1:3), practicing those truths in Christian community, and prayer. As these young women stay and participate for about a year, they go back into their worlds healed and equipped to live in that wholeness.

From my experience and study, I know eating disorders are some of the toughest problems to cure. They are rooted in deep emotional damage. But a place like The Father's Ranch is an ongoing witness to the power of God's Word, ingested and assimilated, to do whatever is needed to transform a life. This is the "God of peace" putting them together, making them whole.

CONCLUSION

Paul ends with, *the one who calls you is faithful and he will do it*. Our place is to just keep putting our lives in His hands. As we keep surrendering to Him and follow His directions, He keeps bringing the fragmented, the rebellious parts of our lives into a wholeness He alone can

give.

Don't you long for that deep, inner wholeness— peace infusing every single part of who you are? We can have a heart that is pure, where there are no lurking pockets of sin to trip us up. It happens:

- as we come regularly to God's Word, letting it work deeply within, forming a life that is congruent with God's purpose for us;
- as we spend time prayerfully soaking in His presence, examining our hearts, and seeking His way to let His life take shape within us;
- as we come to worship with surrendered hearts, letting the Holy Spirit penetrate every part of our beings, remolding, us in the image of Christ;
- as we, in faith, receive Him through the sacraments.

Let's come to the Lord's Table this morning with eager, open hearts to receive Him, asking Him to sanctify us "through and through"— spirit, soul, and body.