

**Sequoyah Hills Presbyterian Church**  
**Knoxville, Tennessee**  
**Dr. Jay Howell**  
September 20, 2020

**“Falling Short: The Holy Honey Do”**  
**1 Thessalonians 5:12-24**

As we look to wrap up this series “Falling Short” next week, I want to offer a quick primer on what’s coming next. On October 4, we’ll celebrate World Communion Sunday and will welcome our mission partners Linda and Fawzy Attia as our guests to the pulpit. Then the next week, October 11, we’ll begin a seven-week series in the Gospel of John we’re calling “Signs and Wonders,” going through the so-called seven signs in the first half of John’s Gospel. As a very short teaser of it, if you’ve ever felt like you just want God to show you something in a hard season like this, maybe tune in.

Now I recently learned that another church in the area in fact not long ago did a very similar series, so similar in fact that the series title was also “Signs and Wonders.” I got a kick out of that. But just in case you think I’m just copying someone else; we had this whole thing planned almost a year ago, but that doesn’t mean I’m not going to go listen to those sermons and steal whatever I think is good. More on that in three weeks.

But as we wrap up our current series “Falling Short,” if you listened to the passage we just read from 1 Thessalonians, no one could blame you for thinking that we’ve just ended up where we started, left to live up to impossible expectations. Will you pray with me?

**Holy God for the Word spoken and heard today, may it not be mine but yours. Amen.**

Three things are daily reminders of how I fall short. Not the only three things, but they are: a stack of boxes, a set of matching doorknobs, and a flat-screen TV. More on those later.

Throughout this series, we’ve been digging into some of the anxieties we have about being good enough or doing enough, only to see ourselves fall short. We can perceive those expectations to come from family or friends or work or school, or we can even perceive them to come from God, as in being good enough for God. And what we’ve found, or what I hope you’ve heard, is that we are freed, we are released by the gospel of Christ from whatever burden we sense from trying to be good enough, not because of anything we’ve done, but because of what Christ has done. I hope you have heard that, for the good news it is, over these past few weeks. It means you don’t have to live up to anything. Any success or any failure we perceive does not merit us any more or less love or grace from the Lord. We are free in his grace.

In the past two weeks though, we’ve been shifting to take a refocused look at what we do, through the lens of grace, and asking how grace not just saves us but also transforms us, changes what we do and why we do it. Last week, Pastor Mark walked us through a passage in James chapter 2 in which James makes it very clear that the life of faith cannot be an idle one, but rather enlivened and emboldened by works, by what we do. And I hope you were encouraged as I was by his message last week.

But then we come to a passage like the one here in Paul’s first letter to the Thessalonians, one about just what works are supposed to look like. Paul gives it to us rapid fire. Starting in verse 12: “But we appeal to you, brothers and sisters, to respect those who labor among you, and have

charge of you in the Lord and admonish you; esteem them very highly in love because of their work. Be at peace among yourselves. And we urge you beloved to admonish the idlers, encourage the fainthearted, help the weak, be patient with all of them. See that none of you repays evil for evil, but always seek to do good to one another and to all. Rejoice always, pray without ceasing, give thanks in all circumstances; for this is the will of God in Christ Jesus for you. Do not quench the Spirit. Do not despise the words of prophets, but test everything; hold fast to what is good; abstain from every form of evil.”

Whew. That’s a lot, and quite a list. To be honest when I read it, I don’t feel so emboldened or enlivened by them. I’m just reminded of how much I’m not doing.

It’s like those three things that are daily reminders of how I fall short: the stack of boxes, the set of matching doorknobs, and the flat-screen TV.

Many of y’all know this already, but Frances and I bought a house and moved about six months ago. Like with any move, there’s kind of a burst of stuff you need to do in those early months: figuring out where things go, getting what you need immediately out of boxes and bags, and then there are projects that come up. Those projects often end up on a list, a list that has been called the “honey-do” list, a list from a spouse or significant other of tasks that you are respectfully requested to complete.

Well, I’ve got one, and Frances has got one, but Frances is much better about getting to hers than I am to mine. And that’s what brings us to the stack of boxes, the set of matching door knobs, and the flat-screen TV.

First, the stack of boxes. We’ve got a spare room in our house, and most any box that we didn’t have an immediate place for found its way into this spare room. Now long term a lot of those boxes will find their way into the attic, and I have promised Frances that I would sort and move these boxes up there. You want to guess where those boxes are right now? Yep, still sitting there in the spare room.

Next, the set of matching door knobs. We found when we moved in that a handful of the doorknobs didn’t fully catch closed, so we went ahead and got a whole matching set of new doorknobs for all the doors in the house. Now, immediately, I fixed and changed out the ones that didn’t fully catch, just so visiting family members would have, you know, a closing door, because of hospitality, and I promised Frances that I would change out the other ones. You want to guess where those other doorknobs are right now? Yep, still sitting in the box they came in.

Finally, the flat-screen TV. In our living room, we’ve got this old table. Really not much to look at, but it’s good for a TV to sit on, but better if that TV were on the wall. Now, the TV works fine sitting on the table, but I’ve told Frances that I would mount the TV on the wall, and I’ve got the mounting kit and everything you need. You want to guess where that TV is right now? Yep, still sitting on the table.

And I mention all that first because it might actually motivate me to get those things done if I bring it up in a sermon, but second because every day when I see that stack of boxes or one of those doorknobs or the flat-screen TV, it only reminds me of what I haven’t done, of how I’ve fallen short.

And *that*, if I’m honest, is how I feel—and maybe how you feel too—when I read a list like Paul offers at the end of 1 Thessalonians.

I mean, how else are we supposed to feel when we read this? Some of this is just downright impractical. “Rejoice always”? “Pray without ceasing”? “Give thanks in all circumstances”? “Abstain from every form of evil”? Paul just sees fit to throw those in at the end of a letter? “Oh, just a few last things to add. Just make sure every word, thought, or action you ever do is praise,

prayer, or thanksgiving and don't do anything bad while you're at it. No big deal." He actually sneaks in a really sneaky one too. Look at v. 15: "See that none of you repays evil for evil." You might not catch it at first glance, but he's actually saying that everyone needs to see that everyone else in the church doesn't repay evil for evil. That makes you and you and you in part responsible for what I do, and it makes me responsible in part for what you do.

Now, show of hands. How many of you after hearing all of those are thinking, "You know, I'm doing alright. Got a good handle on all of those"? Right. No one. How many of you feel better about yourselves about hearing a list like that? Right. No one.

Now how many of you, and you don't have to raise your hands for this one, hear a list like that and, like me, you're just reminded of all the ways you've fallen short of it? Can't say I blame you.

I also couldn't blame you if right now you're thinking, "Preacher, you started this whole series talking about how in Jesus we are set free from feeling like we're just inadequate or falling short all the time, and then we read a list like this, and it's kind of hard not to feel like we're inadequate or falling short all the time. So, what gives?"

What gives is in fact what Paul says right afterward. Starting in v. 23: "May the God of peace himself sanctify you entirely; and may your spirit and soul and body be kept sound and blameless at the coming of our Lord Jesus Christ. The one who calls you is faithful, and he will do this."

Those are some very important words there, especially given what we've been talking about, but there's one in particular that I'd point your attention to: "sanctify." That's one of those words that can get tossed around in church jargon sometimes. Maybe you've heard this verse before, maybe you haven't, but what it means here is "to make holy." "To purify" isn't too far off. Under the umbrella of "holy" you could lump in all those things Paul has told us to do. Rejoicing always, praying without ceasing, giving thanks in all things: those are markers of a holy life. So, to be made holy would entail doing all of those things.

But the really important thing to remember about this "sanctifying" is who is doing it. Does Paul say that you and I are the ones doing the sanctifying here, as in, does he say that we are to make ourselves holy? No. What does he say? "May the God of peace himself sanctify you entirely." Then in v. 24, "The one who calls you is faithful, and he will do this."

Now this is huge. This is what simultaneously frees us getting pulled back into feeling inadequate or like we're falling short all the time and also points us into a life of faith emboldened and enlivened by works, by what we do. And the way the gospel does this is by assuring us that it is the gracious action of God that changes you: changes your very will, changes your very desire, changes the very drive behind your action, changing a heart so that the natural outpouring of faith would be to rejoice always, pray without ceasing, give thank in all circumstances. This change is something that can be gradual or sudden, steady or intermittent, but it is a change within us nonetheless that Lord is faithful to do in the hearts of those who follow him.

We've got a word for this in the Presbyterian Church: sanctification, and it's the lifelong process by which the Holy Spirit shapes us and changes us by grace into becoming more and more like Christ, more and more holy. It's not something we ever complete—at least not in this life—but it is something that the Lord is faithful to do, and therefore is something we shouldn't be so worried about.

Instead what we might guard against is letting ourselves drift too far to either side. If you find yourself right now thinking, "Well, that's a relief. Guess I don't have to do anything after all. I'll just sit back and wait for God to get to sanctifying me," maybe read Paul's honey do list starting

in v. 12 a bit more regularly, and maybe ask yourself just why you don't feel compelled to rejoice always, to pray without ceasing, to give thanks in all circumstances.

But if you find yourself right now still thinking, "I still just don't think I'll ever be good enough," maybe read Paul's assurance that it is not you that can bring about this change in your life, but rather the Lord who can do this, and in him you will never fall short, for "the one who calls you is faithful," one doorknob at a time.

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