

FAITHFUL TO THE WORD

Systematic Theology Series

SOTERIOLOGY

The Doctrine of Salvation

By Grace Alone, Through Faith Alone, In Christ Alone, To the Glory of God Alone

UNIT 8: SANCTIFICATION — THE PROGRESSIVE WORK OF GRACE

Conformed to the Image of Christ

Lesson 23

Definitive and Progressive Sanctification

Set Apart Once for All and Being Set Apart Day by Day

Already Holy in Christ, and Becoming Holy by the Spirit

“But we all, with unveiled face, beholding as in a mirror the glory of the Lord, are being transformed into the same image from glory to glory, just as from the Lord, the Spirit”

Key Texts: 1 Corinthians 1:2; 6:11; 2 Corinthians 3:18; Philippians 2:12–13; 1 Thessalonians 5:23–24; Hebrews 10:14

“Now may the God of peace Himself sanctify you entirely; and may your spirit and soul and body be preserved complete, without blame at the coming of our Lord Jesus Christ. Faithful is He who calls you, and He also will bring it to pass.”

1 Thessalonians 5:23–24, NASB 1995

Dr. Joshua Nichols

Pastor, Theologian, Author

faithfultotheword.com

Introduction

With Lesson 23 the Soteriology series enters its eighth unit: Sanctification, The Progressive Work of Grace. Units 6 and 7 established the two great declarative acts of the divine saving purpose: justification (the forensic verdict of righteousness pronounced over the believing sinner) and adoption (the relational act by which the acquitted defendant was received into the divine family as a beloved child). Both are complete in themselves, permanent in their character, and grounded in the accomplished work of Christ rather than in the progress of the believer's moral life. Sanctification is different in kind from both. It is not a verdict pronounced once and standing irrevocably; it is a process, progressive, ongoing, lifelong, genuinely transforming, and aimed at the conformity of the whole person to the image of the incarnate Son. And yet sanctification is as genuinely the work of God as justification, as deeply grounded in the divine purpose as adoption, and as certain in its ultimate completion as the omnipotent faithfulness of the God who "also will bring it to pass" (1 Thessalonians 5:24, NASB 1995).

Sanctification is also the doctrine where the most persistent pastoral confusions in the whole of Christian experience are concentrated. The confusion of sanctification with justification produces the moralism that treats the Christian life as the earning or the maintaining of the divine acceptance rather than as the grateful, Spirit-empowered expression of the acceptance already received. The separation of sanctification from justification produces the antinomianism that treats the justified standing as a license for moral indolence, as if the forgiveness of sin had dissolved the obligation to pursue holiness. The confusion of the definitive dimension of sanctification (already set apart, positionally holy in Christ) with the progressive dimension (being set apart, progressively conformed to Christ) produces either the complacency of the one who thinks she is already everything she needs to be or the despair of the one who thinks she is nothing because she is not yet everything. And the misunderstanding of sanctification's synergistic character, the genuine and necessary human effort that the Spirit both empowers and requires, produces either the passivism that waits for God to produce holiness without any human participation or the activism that pursues holiness through sheer willpower without the Spirit's enabling.

This lesson will address all of these confusions by establishing the precise doctrinal account of sanctification in its two dimensions (definitive and progressive), its relationship to justification, its Trinitarian agency, its means, its synergistic character, and its necessary imperfection in this life. The lesson proceeds through seven major sections, covering the full scope of the outline's content: sanctification defined; the definitive dimension; the progressive dimension; the relationship between justification and sanctification; the Trinitarian agency of sanctification; the synergistic character (Philippians 2:12–13 as the governing text); and the imperfection of sanctification in this life and the prospect of its completion in glorification. The governing conviction throughout is the Westminster Confession's formulation: sanctification is the work of God's free grace, by which the Spirit renews the whole person in the image of God, so that the reign of sin is increasingly weakened and destroyed, and the graces of the Spirit increasingly strengthened and exercised (WCF XIII).

A note on the series' structure at this point. The order of the doctrines in the *ordo salutis*, regeneration, conversion, justification, adoption, sanctification, perseverance, glorification, is the logical rather than the necessarily chronological order in which these realities occur in the life of the believer. Regeneration and justification occur simultaneously at the moment of genuine saving faith; adoption accompanies both; sanctification begins at that same moment and continues throughout the life of the believer. The lesson's placement of sanctification after justification and adoption does not mean that justification is completed before

sanctification begins; it means that sanctification presupposes and is grounded in the justification and adoption that have already been established. The justified, adopted child of God is simultaneously a sanctified person, set apart in Christ by the Spirit's indwelling presence, and a person being sanctified, progressively conformed to the image of Christ through the Spirit's ongoing work.

I. Sanctification Defined

Holy in Standing and Becoming Holy in Character

A. *The Meaning of Sanctification*

Sanctification derives from the Latin *sanctus* (holy) and *facere* (to make), literally, “the making holy.” In its biblical usage the concept is broader than a single definition can capture, because the biblical vocabulary of holiness operates on at least two distinct levels that must be carefully distinguished: the positional (the holy standing before God that is conferred by God’s sanctifying act) and the progressive (the holy character that is produced in the believer by the Spirit’s ongoing transforming work). Both levels are expressed by the same Greek word group (*hagiazō*, to sanctify; *hagiasmos*, sanctification; *hagios*, holy; *hagiosūnē*, holiness), and the failure to distinguish them in any given text is the source of much pastoral and theological confusion.

The basic concept of holiness (Hebrew: *qadosh*; Greek: *hagios*) is not primarily a moral concept but an ontological and relational one: to be holy is to be set apart, consecrated, dedicated to the service and the purposes of the holy God. In the Old Testament, the holy is distinguished from the common or profane; it belongs to the realm of the divine, set apart for divine use, marked off from ordinary human purposes. Objects, places, times, and persons could all be sanctified, set apart for God’s purposes, without any necessary implication of moral purification, though the moral dimension becomes increasingly central as the Old Testament develops. The New Testament inherits and deepens this concept, adding to the positional/relational dimension (set apart for God) the moral dimension (being made like God in character) and grounding both in the person and work of the Holy Spirit, who is both the agent of the setting-apart and the author of the moral transformation.

B. *Sanctification in the Ordo Salutis*

Sanctification’s place in the *ordo salutis*, the logical ordering of the components of salvation, is both its sequential position (after regeneration, justification, and adoption, and before perseverance and glorification) and its relational character (as the necessary fruit and companion of justification rather than its ground or its supplement). The Westminster Confession’s formulation establishes both dimensions with characteristic precision: “They who are effectually called and regenerated, having a new heart and a new spirit created in them, are further sanctified really and personally, through the virtue of Christ’s death and resurrection, by His Word and Spirit dwelling in them; the dominion of the whole body of sin is destroyed, and the several lusts thereof are more and more weakened and mortified, and they more and more quickened and strengthened in all saving graces, to the practice of true holiness, without which no man shall see the Lord” (WCF XIII.1).

The phrase “really and personally” in the Westminster Confession’s definition is the Reformed tradition’s explicit rejection of any account of sanctification that reduces it to a mere legal or positional status. Unlike justification (which is a forensic declaration about the sinner’s legal standing before the divine tribunal) and more like regeneration (which is an inner transformation of the person’s spiritual nature), sanctification is a real, personal, subjective transformation, the dominion of sin is really destroyed; the lusts of the flesh are really weakened and mortified; the graces of the Spirit are really strengthened and exercised. The transformation is genuine and progressive; it produces real moral change in the real person who is being sanctified. It is not completed in this

life (complete sanctification awaits glorification), but it is genuine in every stage of its progress, and its genuineness is the evidence and the fruit of the justification and adoption that produced it.

II. Definitive Sanctification

Set Apart Once for All in Christ

A. The Positional Holiness of the Believer in Christ

The first and often underemphasized dimension of sanctification is definitive sanctification: the once-for-all act by which God sets the believer apart as holy at the moment of union with Christ through faith. This is not the progressive, experiential sanctification that most Christians think of when they hear the word; it is the positional, legal, already-accomplished sanctification that is the believer's status in Christ from the first moment of genuine faith. The believer who was justified this morning was also definitively sanctified this morning; the definitive sanctification is as complete, as permanent, and as grounded in Christ's accomplished work as the justification that accompanies it.

First Corinthians 1:2 provides the clearest single statement of the definitive sanctification: Paul addresses the letter to "the church of God which is at Corinth, to those who have been sanctified in Christ Jesus, saints by calling" (NASB 1995). The perfect passive participle "have been sanctified" (*hēgiasmenois*) is the grammatical signature of the definitive dimension: the perfect tense indicates a completed past action with permanent ongoing result; the passive voice indicates that the sanctification was accomplished by God, not by the Corinthians' own moral progress. And the Corinthians were, by any measure, not morally exemplary Christians, the letter that follows is one long catalogue of their failures (divisions, sexual immorality, lawsuits, abuse of the Lord's Supper). But they had been definitively sanctified at the moment of their faith, and it is on the basis of that definitive sanctification that Paul addresses the progressive failures of their actual moral lives.

First Corinthians 6:11 provides the second great statement of the definitive sanctification, in a context that makes its importance for pastoral moral correction explicit: "Such were some of you; but you were washed, but you were sanctified, but you were justified in the name of the Lord Jesus Christ and in the Spirit of our God" (NASB 1995). The three aorist passives, you were washed, you were sanctified, you were justified, describe the single, complete, past saving event that transformed the former idolaters, fornicators, and thieves into members of the church of God at Corinth. The sanctification is listed alongside the justification as an accomplished past event, not as an ongoing progressive process that will eventually, if the Corinthians work hard enough at it, produce the moral purity they currently lack. They have already been sanctified; the call to moral purity in the following chapters is the call to live out in their practice the definitive holiness that has already been conferred.

Hebrews 10:10 provides the most explicit theological account of the definitive sanctification and its basis: "By this will we have been sanctified through the offering of the body of Jesus Christ once for all" (NASB 1995). The once-for-all offering of Christ is the historical basis of the definitive sanctification, just as it is the basis of the justification that the preceding context has established. The "we have been sanctified" is the same perfect passive structure as 1 Corinthians 1:2: completed past action with permanent ongoing result. And Hebrews 10:14 completes the account with the formulation that holds the definitive and the progressive dimensions in careful tension: "For by one offering He has perfected for all time those who are sanctified" (NASB 1995). "He has perfected for all time",

the definitive, once-for-all completion of the sanctified standing. “Those who are sanctified”, the present passive participle indicating the ongoing, progressive character of the sanctifying work that is happening in the same persons whose standing has been definitively perfected.

B. The Pastoral Significance of the Definitive Dimension

The pastoral significance of definitive sanctification is closely parallel to the pastoral significance of justification: it grounds the assurance of the believer’s standing before God in the completed work of Christ rather than in the progress of the believer’s own moral transformation. The believer who understands that she has been definitively sanctified, set apart, consecrated to God, positionally holy in Christ, at the moment of her faith has a stable, permanent identity as God’s holy person that does not fluctuate with the quality of her daily spiritual performance. She may be struggling deeply in the progressive dimension of her sanctification; she may be failing in specific areas of moral life; she may be experiencing a season of intense spiritual difficulty. But the definitive sanctification has not been reversed: she is still set apart in Christ, still the Spirit’s temple, still consecrated to the purposes of the holy God. The progressive failures are real and must be addressed; but they are the failures of one who is definitively holy, not the reversals of one whose holiness was conditioned on the quality of her performance.

The pastoral power of the definitive dimension is also expressed in Paul’s consistent pattern of addressing his readers as “saints” (*hagioi*, holy ones) rather than as people who are striving to become holy. The “saints” are not those who have reached an advanced level of moral holiness; they are all those who have been definitively sanctified through the Spirit’s indwelling and whose standing before God as “holy ones” is established by the completed work of Christ. Paul addresses the Corinthians as “saints” in 1 Corinthians 1:2 despite their numerous failures precisely because their standing as saints is based on the definitive sanctification, not on their progressive moral achievement. The identity precedes and grounds the imperative: “You are saints; therefore live as saints.”

III. Progressive Sanctification

Being Transformed from Glory to Glory

A. The Nature and Necessity of Progressive Sanctification

Progressive sanctification is the ongoing, lifelong, genuinely transforming work of the Holy Spirit by which the believer is increasingly conformed to the image of Christ in thought, affection, desire, and conduct. Unlike definitive sanctification (which is complete, positional, and the basis of the believer’s standing), progressive sanctification is exactly what its name implies: progressive, incremental, gradual, developing across the whole course of the Christian life, with advances and setbacks, seasons of vigorous growth and seasons of painful struggle, always moving toward the goal of Christlikeness without reaching it in this life.

Second Corinthians 3:18 provides the most beautiful and most theologically precise description of the process of progressive sanctification in the entire New Testament: “But we all, with unveiled face, beholding as in a mirror the glory of the Lord, are being transformed into the same image from glory to glory, just as from the Lord, the Spirit” (NASB 1995). Every element of the verse illuminates the character of the progressive sanctification. “We all”: the progressive transformation is not the experience of the spiritually elite but of every believer, in whom the

Spirit is consistently at work. “With unveiled face”: in contrast to Moses, who veiled his face to conceal the fading glory (2 Corinthians 3:13), the new covenant believer has direct, unveiled access to the glory of God in the face of Jesus Christ (4:6). “Beholding as in a mirror the glory of the Lord”: the instrument of the transformation is beholding, looking with sustained, attentive, contemplative focus at the glory of the Lord revealed in the Word and in the person of Christ.

“Are being transformed” (metamorphoumetha, present passive): the transformation is an ongoing, continuous process, not a past event but a present reality, not complete but in progress. The passive voice is the Spirit’s work: the believer is being transformed by the Spirit who is doing the transforming. “Into the same image”: the goal of the progressive transformation is the image of Christ Himself, the same image that the believer beholds in the Word and in the person of the glorified Son. The progressive sanctification is not an improvement in generic moral character; it is the increasing conformity to the specific, personal, historically incarnate character of Jesus Christ. “From glory to glory”: the transformation moves by increments of glory, each stage of the progressive sanctification is itself a dimension of the glory of the new creation, and each stage becomes the platform for the next. “Just as from the Lord, the Spirit”: the agent of the transformation is the Spirit who is the Lord, the Holy Spirit, working in the believer’s heart with the same sovereign creativity that He exercised in the original creation.

Philippians 1:6 provides the apostolic confidence in the progressive sanctification’s continuation and completion: “I am confident of this very thing, that He who began a good work in you will perfect it until the day of Christ Jesus” (NASB 1995). The confidence is not in the Philippians’ moral consistency but in the divine faithfulness: the “He who began” is the same One who “will perfect”, the Author and Completer of the sanctifying work is God Himself, and the divine purpose is not frustrated by the believer’s inconsistency. The “good work” that was begun at the moment of saving faith will be brought to its completion at the day of Christ Jesus, not before, because the completion awaits the glorification that the day of Christ will bring, but certainly, because the divine faithfulness does not abandon its works before they are finished.

B. The Goal: Conformity to the Image of Christ

The specific goal of progressive sanctification is stated explicitly in Romans 8:29: “For those whom He foreknew, He also predestined to become conformed to the image of His Son, so that He would be the firstborn among many brethren” (NASB 1995). The conformity to the image of the Son is not merely a spiritual or moral improvement project; it is the specific, eschatological destiny of every person whom the Father has predestined for salvation. The progressive sanctification is the present-age dimension of that eschatological conformity: the Spirit is working now, in the life of every believer, to produce the beginning of the conformity that will be completed in the glorification that the day of Christ brings.

The image of the Son to which the believer is being conformed is the image of the incarnate, crucified, risen, and glorified Christ, not a disembodied spiritual ideal but the specific, historically embodied, morally concrete character of Jesus of Nazareth as the Gospels reveal Him: His love for the Father and for the neighbor, His compassion for the suffering and the outcast, His honesty and His humility, His courage before the powerful and His gentleness toward the weak, His zeal for the Father’s glory and His patience with the disciples’ failure, His perfect trust in the Father’s sovereignty in the face of the cross. The progressive sanctification is the Spirit’s work of producing these specific Christlike qualities in the believer’s specific character, one dimension at a time, across the whole course of the specific life the believer is living.

IV. Justification and Sanctification Distinguished and United

Inseparable Companions, Never Confused

A. *The Distinction*

The relationship between justification and sanctification is the most practically important structural relationship in the whole of the *ordo salutis*, and its misunderstanding, in either the direction of confusion (treating sanctification as part of justification) or the direction of separation (treating justification as independent of sanctification), produces the most common and most serious pastoral errors in the Christian life. The distinction must be maintained with precision: justification declares the sinner righteous; sanctification makes the believer righteous. Justification is a forensic act; sanctification is a moral transformation. Justification is complete and instantaneous; sanctification is progressive and lifelong. Justification is entirely God's work, received through faith alone, without any human contribution; sanctification is God's work through the Spirit, empowering genuine human effort and cooperation. Justification changes the believer's legal standing; sanctification changes the believer's actual character.

The distinction matters pastorally for at least three specific reasons. First, it grounds the assurance of salvation in the right place: the certainty of the justified standing rests on Christ's imputed righteousness (perfect and permanent), not on the quality of the sanctified life (imperfect and progressive). The believer who is struggling in sanctification has not lost the justified standing, because the justified standing was never grounded in the quality of the sanctified performance. Second, it prevents the moralism that treats the Christian life as the earning or maintaining of the divine acceptance: the believer who has understood the distinction knows that the obedience of the sanctified life is the fruit and the expression of the accepted standing rather than its cause or its condition. Third, it maintains the genuine seriousness of the call to holiness: because sanctification is distinct from justification, the failure to pursue holiness cannot be excused on the grounds that the justified standing already covers everything. Justification covers the guilt; the Holy Spirit demands and enables the holiness.

B. *The Inseparability*

The distinction between justification and sanctification must be equally balanced by their inseparability. Calvin's famous statement in the *Institutes* captures the inseparability precisely: "Do you wish to attain righteousness in Christ? You must first possess Christ; but you cannot possess Him without being made partaker of His sanctification, because He cannot be divided into pieces" (*Institutes* III.16.1). The Christ who is received by faith in justification is the whole Christ, not the justifying Christ without the sanctifying Christ, not the forgiveness of sin without the renewal of life. Faith unites the believer to Christ, and union with Christ carries both the justification (the believer's sins are charged to Him, His righteousness is credited to her) and the sanctification (the believer is indwelt by His Spirit, who produces the fruit of the new creation). The person who claims to be justified but shows no evidence of the Spirit's sanctifying work has made a claim that the New Testament consistently and urgently calls into question: Hebrews 12:14 ("pursue... the sanctification without which no one will see the Lord") and 1 John's persistent insistence on the evidences of regeneration as the marks of genuine faith.

The inseparability of justification and sanctification does not make them the same thing; it establishes that they are inseparable gifts received together in the same act of faith that unites the believer to Christ. Calvin's image is illuminating: just as the heat and the light of the sun are distinct things (different in their character and their effects) but are inseparable realities (you cannot have the sun without having both), so justification and sanctification are distinct in their nature and their effects but inseparable as the gifts of union with Christ. The person who has one genuinely has both; the person who claims one without any evidence of the other has cause to question whether she has either.

V. The Trinitarian Agency of Sanctification

Father, Son, and Spirit, Each Fully Engaged

A. The Father and the Son in Sanctification

One of the most enriching dimensions of the doctrine of sanctification is its Trinitarian character: all three Persons of the Godhead are active participants in the sanctifying work, each in a manner appropriate to the pattern of Trinitarian activity in the economy of redemption. The sanctification is not merely the Spirit's work alone (though the Spirit's role is the most proximate and most personally experienced); it is the work of the whole Trinity, with the Father and the Son each contributing in specific and biblically-described ways.

The Father sanctifies: John 17:17 records Jesus' great high priestly prayer in which He asks the Father to sanctify His disciples: "Sanctify them in the truth; Your word is truth" (NASB 1995). The Father's sanctifying work is mediated through the truth of His Word, the instrument through which the Spirit's transforming work is consistently accomplished and through which the Father's own holy will is revealed to the believer who is being conformed to it. First Thessalonians 5:23 addresses the Father's sanctifying purpose with the comprehensiveness that the full sanctification of the whole person requires: "Now may the God of peace Himself sanctify you entirely", the divine intention is the entire sanctification of the entire person, and the divine Sanctifier is the God of peace, who has already established the peace of the justified standing as the basis from which the sanctifying work proceeds.

The Son sanctifies: Ephesians 5:25–26 presents Christ's love for the church as the model and the ground of the husband's love for the wife, but in the process reveals the specific sanctifying purpose that motivated the cross: Christ "loved the church and gave Himself up for her, so that He might sanctify her, having cleansed her by the washing of water with the word" (NASB 1995). The death of Christ was not merely the ground of the justified standing; it was the act of self-giving love that had the church's sanctification as one of its specific purposes. Hebrews 2:11 adds the note of the solidarity of the sanctifying Christ with the sanctified believers: "For both He who sanctifies and those who are sanctified are all from one Father; for which reason He is not ashamed to call them brethren." The Sanctifier and the sanctified share the same Father, which means that the sanctification is the family business of the divine household, the work of the elder Brother who loves the younger siblings too much to leave them as they are.

B. The Spirit as the Primary Agent

While all three Persons of the Trinity are engaged in the sanctifying work, the Holy Spirit is the most proximate and the most personally experienced agent of sanctification, the one whose indwelling presence is the specific mechanism through which the progressive transformation of the believer's character is accomplished. Second Thessalonians 2:13 names the Spirit's role in sanctification with explicit clarity: "God has chosen you from the beginning for salvation through sanctification by the Spirit and faith in the truth" (NASB 1995). First Peter 1:2 provides the Trinitarian account with the Spirit's sanctification in its proper place: those chosen "according to the foreknowledge of God the Father, by the sanctifying work of the Spirit, to obey Jesus Christ and be sprinkled with His blood." The Father's foreknowledge, the Spirit's sanctifying work, and the Son's blood together constitute the Trinitarian ground of both the definitive and the progressive sanctification.

The Spirit's sanctifying work operates through the regenerated nature that He has implanted, producing from within the new heart and the new desires the specific moral fruit of the Christlike character toward which the progressive sanctification is aimed. Galatians 5:22–23's list of the fruit of the Spirit, love, joy, peace, patience, kindness, goodness, faithfulness, gentleness, self-control, is not the list of moral qualities that the believer produces through her own disciplined effort and then offers to the Spirit for approval; it is the list of the moral qualities that the Spirit Himself produces in the believer who is "led by the Spirit" (v. 18) and who "walks by the Spirit" (v. 16). The agency is the Spirit's; the genuine participation of the believing person is real and necessary (as Section VI will establish); but the originating power and the ultimate credit belong to the Spirit who is the principal agent of the sanctifying work.

The specific means through which the Spirit accomplishes the sanctifying work will be developed at length in Lesson 25 (the means of grace). For the present lesson it is sufficient to note that the Spirit works through ordinary, creaturely, Word-saturated, prayer-shaped, community-embedded, suffering-employing means, rather than through immediate, unmediated, spectacular supernatural interventions that bypass the believer's natural faculties and ordinary circumstances. This is the pattern of the Spirit's work throughout redemptive history: sovereign and supernatural in its ultimate origin, but operating through the ordinary structures of human life, language, community, suffering, memory, habit, and the daily disciplines of the Christian walk, to accomplish the extraordinary goal of conforming sinful human beings to the image of the eternal Son.

VI. The Synergistic Character of Progressive Sanctification

God's Work and Human Effort, Philippians 2:12–13

A. The Governing Text: Philippians 2:12–13

The most important single text for understanding the synergistic character of progressive sanctification, the genuine cooperation between the divine agency and the human effort that characterizes the sanctifying life, is Philippians 2:12–13: "So then, my beloved, just as you have always obeyed, not as in my presence only, but now much more in my absence, work out your salvation with fear and trembling; for it is God who is at work in you, both to will and to work for His good pleasure" (NASB 1995). The two verses together, "work out your salvation" (v. 12) and "for it is God who is at work in you" (v. 13), establish the irreducible double-sidedness of the sanctifying life: genuine human effort is commanded and required, and the divine activity is the ground and the empowerment of that human effort.

“Work out your salvation with fear and trembling” (v. 12): the command is to the believers themselves, addressed to their own effort, their own will, their own perseverance. “Work out” (katargazesthe, to work thoroughly, to accomplish, to bring to completion) is a strong, active verb describing a genuinely effortful process, not a passive reception but an active engagement. The “fear and trembling” is not the anxiety of the unaccepted but the serious, reverential engagement of those who understand the gravity and the importance of the work they are being called to: the ongoing, costly, countercultural, flesh-mortifying pursuit of holiness that the Spirit’s sanctifying work requires of those whom it is transforming. Paul does not say “wait for God to work out your salvation” or “let go and let God”; he says “work it out,” with the active, effortful seriousness that the holy life demands.

“For it is God who is at work in you, both to will and to work for His good pleasure” (v. 13): the ground of the human effort is the divine activity. The “for” (gar) is causally explanatory: the reason the believers can and must work out their salvation is that God is working in them. The divine activity does not eliminate the human effort; it empowers, enables, and grounds it. God is at work in you “to will”, producing in the believer the desire and the inclination toward the good that her fallen nature could not produce on its own, and “to work”, empowering the actual performance of the good that the divine will has produced the desire for. The God who is at work is not working around the believer’s will or bypassing her agency; He is working within and through the believer’s will and agency, producing from within the desire and the power that the sanctified life requires.

B. Monergism and Synergism Properly Defined

The outline specifically identifies the distinction between the monergistic character of justification and regeneration and the synergistic character of progressive sanctification, and this distinction requires careful definition to avoid the misunderstanding that the synergism of sanctification compromises the sovereignty of God or introduces a semi-Pelagian human contribution to the sanctifying work. Monergism (from the Greek monos, alone, and ergon, work) is the theological description of a divine act that is accomplished by God alone, without any human contribution or cooperation: regeneration is monergistic (God alone imparts the new life to the spiritually dead sinner, who contributes nothing to the act of her own spiritual birth); justification is monergistic (God alone pronounces the justified verdict, on the basis of Christ’s alien righteousness, received through the gift of faith that God also gives). The human being is purely passive in both acts.

Synergism (from the Greek syn, with, and ergon, work) describes the cooperative character of the progressive sanctification: God and the believer work together, each genuinely active, each genuinely contributing, in the ongoing pursuit of holiness. The divine activity is primary, originating, enabling, and empowering; the human activity is genuine, necessary, and real. The believer does not merely receive the sanctification passively (as if the Spirit were making her holy without her participation), nor does the believer produce the sanctification independently (as if holiness were achieved by her own disciplined effort without the Spirit’s enabling). She works, because God is working in her; and God works in her specifically through and in conjunction with her genuine, responsible, Spirit-empowered effort.

The Reformed tradition’s account of the synergism of sanctification is careful to preserve the priority and the sovereignty of the divine agency while genuinely affirming the necessity and the reality of the human effort. This is not the Arminian synergism that places the decisive initiative in the human will; it is the synergism of the creature whose will has been renewed by the Spirit and who therefore genuinely wills and works the good that the Spirit has first willed and worked within her. The sanctified believer’s effort is the Spirit’s gift, not the contribution that the Spirit then uses; the desire for holiness is the Spirit’s implanted desire, not the human

initiative that the Spirit then empowers. But within that divine priority, the human effort is genuine, the human responsibility is real, and the human failure to pursue the Spirit-enabled holiness is genuinely culpable.

VII. The Imperfection of Sanctification and the Prospect of Glorification

Not Yet Complete, Certainly Coming

A. *The Necessary Imperfection of Sanctification in This Life*

One of the most important and most practically liberating truths in the doctrine of sanctification is the explicit biblical teaching that the progressive sanctification of the believer will not be completed in this life. The complete sanctification, the entire person, in every dimension of thought, affection, desire, and conduct, fully conformed to the image of Christ and without any remaining trace of sin's distortion, awaits the glorification that the day of Christ will bring. In this life, the sanctified believer is simultaneously and persistently "simul iustus et peccator" (Luther's formulation: simultaneously righteous and a sinner), definitively holy in standing and progressively but imperfectly being made holy in character.

First John 1:8 provides the most direct statement of the ongoing reality of sin in the life of the genuine believer: "If we say that we have no sin, we are deceiving ourselves and the truth is not in us" (NASB 1995). The "we" is the whole community of genuine believers: the claim to have no sin is not the mark of the most advanced saint but the self-deception of the one who has lost sight of the persistent reality of indwelling sin. The ongoing reality of sin in the believer's life is not the mark of a deficient or unregenerate Christian; it is the normal, expected, biblically described condition of every genuine believer in the present age. The regenerate nature is real and produces genuine desire for holiness; the remaining flesh (in Paul's usage) is equally real and produces persistent resistance to that holiness. The resulting conflict is described with great psychological and spiritual precision in Romans 7:14–25 and in Galatians 5:17, and it is the consistent experience of the genuinely sanctified Christian who is honest with herself about the condition of her inner life.

The pastoral significance of the necessary imperfection of sanctification is primarily the liberation it provides from the perfectionism that demands a level of holiness in this life that the New Testament explicitly says cannot be attained before glorification. The perfectionist expectation, that genuine sanctification must produce the elimination of specific sins, the achievement of a stable plateau of holiness, or the consistent experience of spiritual peace and moral consistency, is not grounded in the biblical account of the sanctified life. The biblical account is more honest and more realistic: the genuine believer grows in holiness, but the growth is uneven, the progress is accompanied by setbacks, and the destination of complete conformity to Christ is not reached in this life. The specific comfort this provides to the believer who is struggling is not the comfort of lowered standards but the comfort of realistic expectations: the struggle is normal, the imperfection is expected, and the failure to reach the destination in this life does not indicate the failure of the Spirit's sanctifying work.

B. *The Certain Completion: Glorification*

The necessary imperfection of sanctification in this life is not the final word; it is the penultimate word. The final word is 1 Thessalonians 5:23–24: "Now may the God of peace Himself sanctify you entirely; and may your spirit

and soul and body be preserved complete, without blame at the coming of our Lord Jesus Christ. Faithful is He who calls you, and He also will bring it to pass” (NASB 1995). The prayer for entire sanctification, the comprehensive, complete, whole-person holiness that the present progressive sanctification is moving toward but has not yet reached, is answered by the divine faithfulness: “Faithful is He who calls you, and He also will bring it to pass.” The completion of the sanctifying work is not dependent on the believer’s sustained effort or moral consistency; it is dependent on the faithfulness of the God who called and who does not abandon His work.

Glorification, the eschatological transformation of the whole person (spirit, soul, and body) that will occur at the resurrection of the dead and the final revelation of Christ, is the completion of the sanctification that the Spirit has been progressively accomplishing throughout the Christian life. First John 3:2 describes the eschatological transformation with the brevity of the profoundly confident: “but we know that when He appears, we will be like Him, because we will see Him just as He is.” The “we will be like Him” is the eschatological completion of the progressive sanctification’s goal: the complete conformity to the image of Christ that 2 Corinthians 3:18’s “from glory to glory” has been moving toward throughout the believer’s entire life. The seeing of the glorified Christ is itself the mechanism of the final transformation: the full, unmediated, face-to-face vision of the One whose image the Spirit has been progressively forming in the believer will complete the formation instantly and permanently.

Romans 8:29–30’s golden chain places the glorification at the end of the unbreakable sequence that began in the eternal foreknowledge of the Father: “those whom He foreknew, He also predestined... whom He predestined, these He also called; and whom He called, these He also justified; and whom He justified, these He also glorified.” The past tense of “glorified”, expressing the eschatological certainty of what is yet to occur in the experience of the believer, establishes the glorification as so certain in the divine purpose that it can be described as already accomplished. Every sanctified believer, however imperfect the present state of her progressive sanctification, is already, in the divine intention and the divine certainty, glorified. The not-yet of the progressive sanctification’s completion is bounded on both sides by the already of the definitive sanctification and the already-in-God’s-certain-purpose of the glorification that will complete it. The believer is already holy in Christ; she is being made holy by the Spirit; and she will be entirely holy when Christ appears.

“But we all, with unveiled face, beholding as in a mirror the glory of the Lord, are being transformed into the same image from glory to glory, just as from the Lord, the Spirit.”

2 Corinthians 3:18, NASB 1995

Theological Terms and Definitions

Sanctification	The gracious work of the Triune God by which the justified, adopted believer is progressively conformed to the image of Christ in thought, affection, desire, and conduct, with the final completion of that conformity awaiting the glorification of the last day. Sanctification has two dimensions: definitive sanctification (the once-for-all act by which God sets the believer apart as holy in Christ at the moment of faith, establishing the positional holiness that is the basis of the believer's identity as a "saint") and progressive sanctification (the ongoing, lifelong transformation of the believer's actual character by the Spirit). The two dimensions are distinct but inseparable: the definitive holiness grounds the call to progressive holiness; the progressive holiness expresses and evidences the definitive holiness that has been received.
Definitive Sanctification	The once-for-all, positional, legally-accomplished act by which God sets the believer apart as holy in Christ at the moment of saving faith, not a progressive moral achievement but a completed divine act that establishes the believer's status as a "holy one" (hagios) on the basis of Christ's accomplished work and the Spirit's indwelling presence. Evidenced in: 1 Corinthians 1:2 (the Corinthians "have been sanctified", perfect passive participle, despite their numerous failures); 1 Corinthians 6:11 (you "were sanctified" as a past completed event alongside being washed and justified); Hebrews 10:10 (sanctified "once for all" through the offering of Christ's body). The pastoral significance: the believer's identity as God's holy person does not fluctuate with the quality of her progressive spiritual performance.
Progressive Sanctification	The ongoing, lifelong, genuinely transforming work of the Holy Spirit by which the justified and definitively sanctified believer is increasingly conformed to the image of Christ in actual character, in thought, affection, desire, and conduct. Progressive sanctification is synergistic (involving genuine human effort empowered by divine grace, Philippians 2:12–13), incremental (advancing by degrees across the whole course of the Christian life), and incomplete until glorification (1 John 1:8: "If we say that we have no sin, we are deceiving ourselves"). Its instrument is the Word, prayer, ordinances, fellowship, suffering, and the disciplines of the Christian life, all empowered by the Spirit. Its goal is the complete conformity to the image of Christ that will be accomplished at the glorification.
Simul Iustus et Peccator	Latin: "simultaneously righteous and a sinner." Luther's formulation of the paradoxical condition of the justified believer in the present age: simultaneously declared righteous in Christ (justification) and persistently sinful in her own ongoing experience (the remaining flesh). The formula guards against both perfectionism (claiming a holiness in the present life that the New Testament says awaits glorification) and despair (interpreting the ongoing experience of sin as evidence that the justification has been forfeited or the Spirit's work has failed). The righteousness is real and complete (Christ's righteousness imputed); the sin is real and persistent (the flesh's resistance to the Spirit's sanctifying work). Both are genuinely true simultaneously, and neither cancels the other.
Synergism	From the Greek syn (with) and ergon (work): the cooperative character of the progressive sanctification, in which God and the believer work together, God as the primary, originating, enabling agent; the believer as the genuine, responsible, effort-expending participant. Distinguished from monergism (God alone works, the human being is purely passive, the character of regeneration and justification) and from semi-Pelagian synergism (human will takes the decisive initiative, which God then cooperates with). The Reformed account of sanctification's synergism: the believer's genuine effort is the Spirit's gift (He works the willing and the working, Philippians 2:13), but within that divine priority the human effort is real, the human responsibility is genuine, and the failure to pursue the Spirit-enabled holiness is genuinely culpable.

Metamorphoumetha	Greek: “are being transformed,” from metamorphoo (the same root as “metamorphosis”). The present passive verb in 2 Corinthians 3:18 that describes the progressive sanctification: continuous (present tense), ongoing; wrought by the Spirit (passive voice, indicating divine agency); and genuine transformation rather than mere positional change (metamorphosis in the sense of real structural change). The transformation is “into the same image” of Christ, moving “from glory to glory”, each stage of the progressive sanctification is itself a dimension of the glory of the new creation, and each stage becomes the platform for the next. The verb establishes the progressive, Spirit-accomplished, genuinely transformative character of the sanctifying work with a single word.
Sanctification by the Spirit	The Holy Spirit’s role as the primary proximate agent of both the definitive and the progressive sanctification, the one whose indwelling presence establishes the definitive holiness (“temple of the Holy Spirit,” 1 Corinthians 6:19) and whose continuous transforming work accomplishes the progressive conformity to Christ (2 Corinthians 3:18: “just as from the Lord, the Spirit”). The Spirit’s sanctifying work operates through the renewed nature He has implanted (producing from within the new desires and the new will) and through the means of grace (the Word, prayer, ordinances, fellowship, suffering). The fruit of the Spirit (Galatians 5:22–23) is the specific moral character that the Spirit produces in the believer who walks by the Spirit, not the achievement of the believer’s own disciplined effort but the expression of the new nature the Spirit has created.
Entirely Sanctified	The eschatological state of complete conformity to Christ in thought, affection, desire, and conduct that 1 Thessalonians 5:23–24 describes as the goal of the sanctifying work: “Now may the God of peace Himself sanctify you entirely.” This complete sanctification is not achieved in the present life (1 John 1:8 establishes that the claim to be without sin in the present life is self-deception) but is the certain destination of every believer whose progressive sanctification the Spirit is accomplishing, grounded in the divine faithfulness of verse 24: “Faithful is He who calls you, and He also will bring it to pass.” The entire sanctification is the specific content of the glorification that the day of Christ will bring, the final, complete, irreversible conformity to the image of the Son that the Spirit has been progressively working toward across the whole of the Christian life.
Mortification and Vivification	The twin operations of the Spirit’s sanctifying work, drawn from Romans 8:13 (“if you are living according to the flesh, you must die; but if by the Spirit you are putting to death the deeds of the body, you will live”, NASB 1995) and developed extensively in the Reformed tradition (particularly by John Owen, whose treatise on the mortification of sin remains one of the most practically penetrating accounts of the progressive sanctification). Mortification (from the Latin mors, death): the active, Spirit-empowered putting to death of the sinful desires, habits, and patterns of the old nature that remain in the believer. Vivification: the Spirit-produced quickening and strengthening of the new nature’s desires, loves, and holy habits. Both are ongoing, both are necessary, and both are the Spirit’s work accomplished through the believer’s genuine, effortful, prayerful cooperation.
Glorification	The eschatological completion of the sanctifying work at the resurrection of the dead and the final revelation of Christ, the transformation of the whole person (spirit, soul, and body) into the complete, irreversible, permanent conformity to the image of Christ that 2 Corinthians 3:18’s “from glory to glory” has been moving toward throughout the Christian life. Described in Romans 8:29–30 as the final link in the golden chain of the divine saving purpose (foreknew → predestined → called → justified → glorified). The past tense of “glorified” in 8:30 expresses the eschatological certainty of what is yet to occur in the believer’s experience: so certain in the divine purpose that it is described as already accomplished. The glorification is the sanctification’s completion: entire, permanent, effected by the face-to-face vision of Christ (1 John 3:2: “we will be like Him, because we will see Him just as He is”).

Practical Application

A. For the Mind: What Must We Believe?

We must believe that the definitive sanctification is as real, as complete, and as permanently grounded in Christ's accomplished work as the justification that accompanies it. This means that the believer's fundamental identity before God is "holy one", not "person who is trying to become holy" or "person whose holiness depends on the quality of the current spiritual effort," but the one who has been definitively set apart in Christ, permanently and irrevocably, at the moment of faith. The definitive holiness does not fluctuate; the progressive holiness does. And the progressive failures of the sanctified life are the failures of one who is definitively holy, not the reversals of one whose holiness was always conditional.

We must also believe that the progressive sanctification is genuinely the work of God, accomplishing genuine moral transformation in genuinely resistant human nature, through genuinely ordinary means, by the genuinely sovereign operation of the Holy Spirit. This means resisting both the passivism that waits for God to produce holiness without any human effort and the activism that pursues holiness through sheer willpower without the Spirit's enabling. The truth of Philippians 2:12–13 must be held together: work out your salvation (human effort, commanded, necessary) because God is at work in you (divine activity, primary, enabling). Neither clause cancels the other; both are simultaneously and fully true. The believer who is genuinely pursuing holiness is both working (genuinely, effortfully, seriously) and being worked in (by the Spirit whose power is the only ground of the working's effectiveness).

We must believe that the imperfection of the progressive sanctification in this life is not a failure of the Spirit's work or a mark of the believer's deficiency but the normal, expected, biblically described condition of every genuine believer in the present age. First John 1:8 is addressed to the entire community of genuine believers: the claim to be without sin is self-deception. The struggle with remaining sin, the persistence of specific failures despite genuine effort and genuine repentance, and the experience of inconsistency and unevenness in the spiritual life are all within the biblical account of the normal sanctified life. This does not mean the failures are unimportant or should be excused; it means that they do not call the genuineness of the sanctification into question. The genuinely sanctified believer struggles, repents, grows, fails, repents again, and grows again across the whole course of her life toward the glorification that will complete what the Spirit has begun.

B. For the Heart: What Must We Feel and Desire?

Desire the specific combination of humility and confidence that the correct doctrine of sanctification produces: the humility of those who know that the progressive sanctification is incomplete, that the remaining sin is real, and that the distance between the current state and the glorified destination is vast; and the confidence of those who know that the definitive sanctification is established, the divine faithfulness guarantees the completion, and the "He who began a good work in you will perfect it" of Philippians 1:6 is as certain as the God who said it. The humility without the confidence produces despair (the believer who sees the distance and has no assurance of the completion); the confidence without the humility produces complacency (the believer who rests on the definitive standing without engaging the progressive pursuit). Both together produce the mature, realistic, perseverant, hope-grounded posture of the genuine pilgrim.

Desire the genuine, Spirit-produced longing for holiness that the regenerate heart is capable of and that the new nature inclines toward, not the performed religiosity of the person who pursues holiness because she fears the consequences of failing to do so, but the genuine, love-motivated, identity-expressing desire for conformity to Christ that flows from the adopted child's love for the Father who is forming her. Romans 7:22's "I joyfully concur with the law of God in the inner man" is the description of the regenerate person's deepest desire, even while the flesh wars against it. Desire to live from that deepest desire rather than from the flesh's resistance to it, to let the Spirit-produced longing for holiness be the dominant motivating force of the daily pursuit of conformity to Christ.

Desire the patience and the long-term perspective on the sanctifying work that both the progressive character of sanctification and the certain completion of it in glorification require. The believer who expects sanctification to produce immediate, dramatic, permanent victory over specific sins will be perpetually disappointed. The believer who expects the gradual, inconsistent, Spirit-sustained, lifetime progress toward Christlikeness that the New Testament actually describes will be neither surprised by the failures nor discouraged by the imperfection, because both are within the scope of the biblically realistic expectation. Desire the patience of 2 Corinthians 3:18's "from glory to glory", the confidence that each stage of the progressive transformation, however small, is genuinely a stage of glory, and that the destination is certain.

C. *For the Hands: What Must We Do?*

- Read 1 Corinthians 1:2 and 6:11 together as the double statement of the definitive sanctification that grounds the progressive pursuit of holiness. In 1:2, Paul addresses people he knows to be struggling with division, pride, and immorality as "saints", holy ones, on the basis of their definitive sanctification in Christ. In 6:11, the three aorist passives (washed, sanctified, justified) describe the single, completed past event of their saving transformation. Ask: how does the fact that Paul addresses the Corinthians as "saints" despite their failures illuminate the character of the definitive sanctification? And how does the definitive sanctification of 6:11 ground Paul's subsequent call to moral purity in 6:12–20 without making the purity a condition of the justified and sanctified standing?
- Meditate on 2 Corinthians 3:18's description of the progressive sanctification as "beholding... the glory of the Lord" as the instrument of transformation. The verse establishes that the progressive sanctification occurs through the sustained, attentive, contemplative engagement with the glory of God as it is revealed in Christ and in the Word. Apply this practically: examine the quality of your engagement with the Word of God over the past week. Is it the kind of sustained, attentive beholding that 3:18 describes as the instrument of transformation, or the hurried, obligation-fulfilling reading that characterizes the performance-oriented religious life? What specific practices, slower reading, Scripture memorization, lectio divina, extended meditation on a single text, would most help you cultivate the quality of beholding that 3:18 establishes as the means of transformation?
- Work carefully through Philippians 2:12–13 as the governing text for the synergistic character of sanctification. Identify the specific ways in which you are tempted to err in the direction of passivism (waiting for God to produce holiness without your effortful engagement) or in the direction of activism (pursuing holiness through your own disciplined effort without conscious dependence on the Spirit's enabling). Write down the specific forms of each error in your own experience. Then write down what the combination of "work out" (v. 12) and "it is God who is at work in you" (v. 13) would look like in practice in the specific area of your sanctification that is most actively being contested at this moment: what is the specific effort you are called to, and what is the specific divine enabling you are trusting?

- Read Romans 7:14–25 and Galatians 5:16–17 as the New Testament’s most honest accounts of the conflict that characterizes the genuinely sanctified life. Note in Romans 7:22–23 the double witness: “I joyfully concur with the law of God in the inner man” (the new nature’s genuine desire for holiness) and “I see a different law in the members of my body, waging war against the law of my mind” (the remaining flesh’s persistent resistance). Ask: does the description of the inner conflict in Romans 7:14–25 describe your experience of the Christian life? If so, how does the recognition that this conflict is normal, expected, and described by the apostle himself address the guilt or the despair that the ongoing conflict produces? And how does the “Thanks be to God through Jesus Christ our Lord!” of verse 25 establish the right conclusion to the honest acknowledgment of the conflict?
- Memorize 1 Thessalonians 5:23–24 as the doxological declaration of the certain completion of the sanctifying work: “Now may the God of peace Himself sanctify you entirely... Faithful is He who calls you, and He also will bring it to pass.” Use it as the specific pastoral word for the seasons of the sanctifying life when the imperfection is most visible, the progress is most uncertain, and the distance between the present state and the Christlike destination is most discouraging. The completion is not in doubt; the faithfulness of the One who will bring it to pass is as certain as His own character. The progressive sanctification is not a project whose completion depends on the believer’s sustained consistency; it is the work of the faithful God who called and who completes what He begins.

Key Texts: 1 Corinthians 1:2; 6:11; 2 Corinthians 3:18; Philippians 1:6; 2:12–13; 1 Thessalonians 5:23–24; Hebrews 10:14; 12:14; 1 John 1:8; 3:2; Romans 8:13, 29–30; Galatians 5:16–17, 22–23

Study and Discussion Questions

Opening Question

- Before studying this lesson, how would you have defined sanctification? Would your definition have included the definitive dimension (the once-for-all, positional holiness in Christ) or only the progressive dimension (the ongoing moral transformation by the Spirit)? And the lesson identifies the three most common pastoral confusions in the doctrine of sanctification: (1) confusing sanctification with justification; (2) separating sanctification from justification; and (3) confusing the definitive and progressive dimensions. Which of these three confusions are you most likely to have encountered, in your own thinking, in your own congregation, or in the broader evangelical culture you inhabit?

Observation Questions (What Do the Texts Say?)

- Read 1 Corinthians 1:1–2 and 6:9–11. In 1:2, what grammatical form is “sanctified” (*hēgiasmenois*, is it a present or perfect participle, and is it active or passive?), and what does the tense establish about the timing and the completion of the sanctification? In 6:11, what three aorist passive verbs describe the past completed events of the Corinthians’ salvation, and what does the sequence (washed, sanctified, justified) establish about the relationship of sanctification to justification as simultaneous acts? And how does the list of vices in 6:9–10 (describing what “some of you” were) illuminate the radical character of the definitive transformation described in 6:11?
- Read 2 Corinthians 3:12–18. What is the contrast Paul draws between Moses’ veiled face (vv. 13–15) and the unveiled face of the new covenant believer (vv. 16–18)? What is the specific instrument of transformation named in verse 18 (“beholding...”), and what is the goal (“being transformed into the same...”) ? What does “from glory to glory” describe, is it the stages of the transformation or the source and destination of it? And what is the significance of the passive voice in “are being transformed” (*metamorphoumetha*) for the question of divine versus human agency in sanctification?
- Read Philippians 2:1–13. What is the specific context of verses 12–13 (what has Paul been discussing in vv. 1–11, and what is the “so then” of v. 12 drawing as a conclusion)? What is the specific meaning of “work out your salvation”, is Paul telling the Philippians to earn their salvation, to maintain it, or to express and develop what has already been given? What is the specific content of God’s working in verse 13 (“both to... and to...”), and how does God’s working in them address the question of whether the “fear and trembling” is the anxiety of the uncertain or the serious engagement of the genuinely responsible?
- Read 1 Thessalonians 5:12–24. What is the specific context of the sanctification prayer in verses 23–24 (what ethical instructions in vv. 14–22 precede it)? In verse 23, what is the scope of the desired sanctification (“sanctify you...”), and what dimensions of the person are named? In verse 24, what is the ground of the confidence that the prayer will be answered (“Faithful is He who...”) ? And how does the connection between the ethical commands of verses 14–22 and the sanctification prayer of verses 23–24 establish the relationship between the human effort of progressive sanctification and the divine faithfulness that guarantees its completion?
- Read Hebrews 10:10–14. In verse 10, what is the basis of the sanctification that “we have been” (perfect passive), and what is its temporal character (“once for all”) ? In verse 14, what is the tension between the two participial clauses (“He has perfected for all time” and “those who are sanctified”, the first using a perfect verb and the second a present passive participle)? How does this tension in a single verse capture

both the definitive (“perfected for all time”, complete, permanent) and the progressive (“those who are sanctified”, presently being sanctified) dimensions of the doctrine?

Interpretation Questions (What Does It Mean?)

- The lesson argues that the distinction between definitive sanctification and progressive sanctification is the most important structural distinction in the whole of the doctrine, and that the failure to maintain it produces the most common pastoral errors. Evaluate this claim. Is the definitive/progressive distinction genuinely present in the New Testament’s usage of sanctification language, or is it an analytical imposition on texts that don’t actually distinguish the two dimensions? What specific exegetical evidence supports the distinction (particularly the perfect-tense “have been sanctified” texts versus the present-tense “are being sanctified” texts)? And what specific pastoral errors does the failure to maintain the distinction actually produce?
- The lesson presents the inseparability of justification and sanctification through Calvin’s formulation: “You cannot possess Christ without being made partaker of His sanctification, because He cannot be divided into pieces.” Evaluate the force of this argument. Is the inseparability of justification and sanctification established by the character of the Christ received in faith (the whole Christ, both justifying and sanctifying), or is it established by the logical structure of the *ordo salutis* (sanctification necessarily following from the regeneration that produces justifying faith)? And does the inseparability claim adequately address the concern that it might appear to make justification conditional on sanctification?
- The lesson distinguishes the Reformed account of synergism in sanctification from both the Arminian synergism (human will takes the decisive initiative) and the passivism that refuses to affirm any genuine human contribution. Evaluate the Reformed account’s adequacy. Does Philippians 2:12–13 genuinely establish the cooperative character of sanctification in the way the lesson claims, or could it be read as establishing a strictly sequential relationship (God works in you; therefore you work out what He has worked in) rather than a genuinely simultaneous cooperation? And what specific practical difference does the distinction between the Reformed and Arminian accounts of synergism make in the pastoral guidance of believers who are struggling in sanctification?
- The lesson argues that 1 John 1:8’s “If we say that we have no sin, we are deceiving ourselves” establishes that complete sanctification cannot be achieved in this life, and that the perfectionist expectation of sanctification is therefore not grounded in the biblical account. How does this text interact with the Wesleyan-Arminian tradition’s doctrine of entire sanctification, the claim that the Holy Spirit can and does produce a state of perfect love in this life in which the believer is freed from the deliberate commission of known sin? Is the Wesleyan account refuted by 1 John 1:8, or can the two be harmonized by defining “entire sanctification” in a way that is not incompatible with the ongoing presence of sin? And what are the pastoral consequences of the Wesleyan account, both for those who claim entire sanctification and for those who cannot?
- The lesson closes with the claim that the glorification at the last day is the “completion of the sanctification that the Spirit has been progressively accomplishing throughout the Christian life.” How does this account of glorification as the completion of sanctification relate to the account of glorification as the final state of the justified, adopted, persevering believer? Is glorification primarily the completion of the sanctifying process (which would make it primarily about the believer’s moral transformation) or primarily the final expression of the eschatological gift (which would make it primarily about what God does to the believer

from outside), or both? And how does 1 John 3:2's "we will be like Him, because we will see Him just as He is" illuminate the specific mechanism of the glorification's completion of the sanctifying work?

Application Questions (What Does It Demand of Us?)

- The lesson argues that the definitive sanctification provides the identity-establishing foundation from which the progressive pursuit of holiness is launched: "You are saints; therefore live as saints." Do you actually live from the identity of the definitively sanctified ("I am God's holy one in Christ; my fundamental identity is established") or primarily from the aspirational posture of the progressively becoming ("I am working toward holiness; my identity depends on my progress")? What specific practical difference would living from the definitive identity rather than the aspirational posture make in your approach to specific sins, specific failures, and specific seasons of spiritual difficulty?
- The lesson presents the synergism of sanctification as requiring genuine, effortful human engagement: "work out your salvation with fear and trembling." Are there specific areas of your sanctified life where you have been functionally passive, waiting for God to produce the holiness without your effortful cooperation? What specific spiritual disciplines, specific acts of mortification, specific patterns of obedience are you being called to that you have been deferring because you have been waiting for the motivation, the strength, or the desire before you begin? And how does Philippians 2:13's assurance that "it is God who is at work in you, both to will and to work" address the specific obstacle that has been preventing your effortful engagement?
- The lesson argues that the imperfection of sanctification in this life is the normal, expected, biblically described condition, that 1 John 1:8's denial of the claim to be without sin is addressed to the entire community of genuine believers. Does this teaching produce in you the relief of realistic expectations (the struggle is normal) or the concern about lowered standards (if imperfection is expected, why pursue holiness aggressively)? How do you hold together the genuine call to the progressive pursuit of holiness (Hebrews 12:14: "pursue sanctification without which no one will see the Lord") and the honest acknowledgment of the ongoing imperfection (1 John 1:8) without either dismissing the call or despairing of the imperfection?
- The lesson closes with 1 Thessalonians 5:23–24's assurance that the divine faithfulness will bring the entire sanctification to its completion. How does the certainty of the completion, grounded in the faithfulness of God rather than in the consistency of the believer, affect your experience of the seasons of the sanctifying life when the progress is slowest, the failures are most visible, and the distance to the destination is most discouraging? And what specific pastoral practices or disciplines, the weekly sabbath of rest in the finished work, the regular recitation of the faithfulness promises, the sustained meditation on the glorification's certain completion, most help you maintain the long-term perspective on the sanctifying work that the doctrine requires?

Prayer Focus

Open this lesson's prayer time by reading 1 Thessalonians 5:23–24 aloud as the corporate prayer of the sanctified community: "Now may the God of peace Himself sanctify you entirely; and may your spirit and soul and body be preserved complete, without blame at the coming of our Lord Jesus Christ. Faithful is He who calls you, and He also will bring it to pass." Let the prayer land on the specific word "entirely" (*holoteleis*, wholly, completely, without exception). Not partially, not in selected areas, not to the degree that the progressive sanctification has so far accomplished, but entirely, the whole person, in every dimension of thought, affection, desire, and conduct. This is the Father's intention for every adopted, justified, definitively sanctified child: entire holiness, the complete conformity to the image of Christ. Receive the prayer as addressed to you specifically, and receive the "Faithful is He who calls you, and He also will bring it to pass" as the ground of the prayer's certainty.

Pray with specific honesty about the current state of your progressive sanctification. Not the performed acknowledgment of general sinfulness that substitutes for genuine self-examination, but the honest, specific, named account of the specific areas where the Spirit's transforming work is most actively engaged and most actively resisted. Name the specific sins that persist, the specific patterns of thought and desire and conduct that are most inconsistent with the image of Christ toward which the Spirit is forming you. Bring them before the Father not to produce guilt (the definitive sanctification is not affected by the progressive failures) but to invite the Spirit's specific, targeted, personal engagement with the specific resistances that most need His transforming work. The Father already knows what they are; the prayer is the conscious invitation of His Spirit into the specific work.

Pray through 2 Corinthians 3:18 as the description of the means through which the Spirit accomplishes the progressive transformation: the beholding of the glory of the Lord. Ask the Spirit to deepen the quality and the consistency of your engagement with the Word of God, to transform your Scripture reading from obligation to beholding, from information processing to the sustained, attentive, glory-perceiving engagement that produces the transformation the verse describes. Ask for the eyes to see the glory of God in the face of Jesus Christ (2 Corinthians 4:6) as you read, the specific, named, historically incarnate glory of the One whose image the Spirit is forming in you, and for the transformation that the seeing of that glory produces to be the actual, ongoing, cumulative reality of your spiritual life.

Pray with the long-term, eschatological perspective on the sanctifying work that both its progressive character and its certain completion demand. Ask for the patience of Philippians 1:6, the confidence that "He who began a good work in you will perfect it until the day of Christ Jesus", to sustain your engagement with the sanctifying process through the seasons when the progress is slowest and the imperfection is most discouraging. Ask for the realism of 1 John 1:8 and Romans 7, the honest acknowledgment of the ongoing conflict with remaining sin that characterizes the normal sanctified life, to prevent both the perfectionist expectation that produces despair and the complacent acceptance of specific sins that produces stagnation. And ask for the forward-looking hope of glorification, the certain completion that awaits every sanctified believer, to orient your present engagement with the progressive work toward the destination that the divine faithfulness has guaranteed.

Close with a corporate reading of Romans 8:29–30 as the doxological declaration of the certain completion of the sanctifying work within the divine purpose: "For those whom He foreknew, He also predestined to become conformed to the image of His Son... and whom He predestined, these He also called; and whom He called, these

He also justified; and whom He justified, these He also glorified.” Let the golden chain be received as the declaration of your own specific place in the divine saving purpose: foreknown, predestined, called, justified, glorified. The glorification, the completion of the sanctification toward which the Spirit’s progressive work has been moving you, is as certain as every link in the chain that precedes it. You were foreknown before the foundation of the world; you have been called and justified in time; you will be glorified at the last day. The progressive sanctification is the present-age dimension of a divine purpose that began in eternity and ends in glory. It will be completed. He who calls is faithful. And He will bring it to pass.

“I am confident of this very thing, that He who began a good work in you will perfect it until the day of Christ Jesus.”

Philippians 1:6, NASB 1995

Key Texts: 1 Corinthians 1:2; 6:11; 2 Corinthians 3:18; 4:6; Philippians 1:6; 2:12–13; 1 Thessalonians 5:23–24; Hebrews 10:10, 14; 12:14; 1 John 1:8; 3:2; Romans 8:29–30; Galatians 5:16–17

Soli Deo Gloria

To God Alone Be the Glory

FAITHFUL TO THE WORD

Dr. Joshua Nichols

josh@faithfultotheword.com | faithfultotheword.com