

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 26

The Mortification of Sin and the Pursuit of Holiness

Killing Sin and Running After Christ

Be Killing Sin, or Sin Will Be Killing You

“Pursue peace with all men, and the sanctification without which no one will see the Lord”

Key Texts: Romans 8:13; Colossians 3:1–17; Hebrews 12:14; 1 Peter 1:15–16; Philippians 1:6; 3:12–14;

2 Corinthians 7:1

“If by the Spirit you are putting to death the deeds of the body, you will live.”

Romans 8:13, NASB 1995

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Introduction

Lessons 23 through 25 established the doctrinal structure of sanctification (definitive and progressive), the role of the law as the normative guide for the grateful believer's obedience, and the ordinary means of grace through which the Spirit consistently accomplishes the sanctifying transformation. Lesson 26 is the lesson that brings all of that doctrinal preparation to its most practically urgent and most personally costly point: the actual, specific, Spirit-empowered, flesh-resisting, holiness-pursuing engagement with the sin that remains in the believer's life and with the Christlike character that the progressive sanctification is aimed at producing. If previous lessons have established the map of the sanctified life, this lesson is the terrain, the specific, demanding, warfare-marked reality of a believer who is genuinely fighting against sin and genuinely running after Christ in the particular circumstances of a particular life.

The lesson's governing image is the double movement of sanctification that Colossians 3:5–14 describes with striking parallelism: “put to death” (v. 5) and “put on” (v. 12), “put off” (v. 8–9) and “put on” (vv. 12–14). The sanctified life is not one-dimensional but two-dimensional: it involves the active, Spirit-empowered, Spirit-requiring mortification of the specific sinful desires, habits, and patterns that the old nature produces, and the equally active, Spirit-empowered, Spirit-requiring vivification of the specific Christlike virtues that the new nature expresses. Both movements are necessary; neither alone is sufficient. The person who is only mortifying (putting to death) without vivifying (putting on) is the ascetic whose holiness is merely negative, defined by what she avoids rather than by the positive character she is developing. The person who is only vivifying (putting on) without mortifying (putting to death) is the optimist whose positive spirituality is undermined by the specific sins she is not seriously addressing. The full sanctified life requires both movements simultaneously and persistently.

This lesson will proceed through seven major sections: the double movement of Colossians 3:5–14 in full; John Owen's account of the mortification of sin as the most practically penetrating treatment of the subject in the Reformed tradition; the pursuit of holiness as a positive, intentional, Hebrews-12:14-grounded imperative; the standard of holiness (“Be holy, for I am holy”, 1 Peter 1:16) as the simultaneously humbling and motivating character of the divine call; the already-not-yet tension of the sanctified life; the danger of perfectionism (Philippians 3:12–14 and 1 John 1:8 as its most direct refutation); and the encouragement of genuine, Spirit-grounded, patience-demanding progress toward the Christlikeness that the divine faithfulness has guaranteed. Throughout, the governing word is from the title: be killing sin, or sin will be killing you. The warfare is real, the stakes are high, and the power for the fight is the Spirit alone.

I. The Double Movement of Sanctification

Mortification and Vivification in Colossians 3

A. *Colossians 3:1–4: The Indicative Ground of the Imperatives*

Colossians 3's account of the sanctified life is one of the most complete and most practically rich in the entire Pauline corpus, and it opens with the theological foundation from which all the imperatives that follow derive their authority and their motivation. Colossians 3:1–4: "If then you have been raised up with Christ, keep seeking the things above, where Christ is, seated at the right hand of God. Set your mind on the things above, not on the things that are on earth. For you have died and your life is hidden with Christ in God. When Christ, who is our life, is revealed, then you also will be revealed with Him in glory" (NASB 1995). The indicative of verses 1–4, you have been raised with Christ; you have died; your life is hidden with Christ in God, is the theological ground from which all the imperatives of verses 5–17 derive their character and their authority. The mortification and vivification are not the conditions of the union with Christ; they are the expressions of it.

The "if then you have been raised up with Christ" of verse 1 is not a conditional that casts doubt on whether the resurrection-union has occurred; it is the "if" of logical deduction: "Given that you have been raised up with Christ, which you have, the following imperatives follow necessarily." The indicative of the union with Christ in His death and resurrection (the baptismal reality of Romans 6:3–4, now recalled) is the ground from which the moral imperatives of the chapter flow. The Colossians are called to "keep seeking the things above" (v. 1) and to "set your mind on the things above" (v. 2) not as the conditions of their union with Christ but as the expressions of it, the specific, active, orientation-of-the-whole-person-toward-God that is the natural living-out of the resurrection-union with the glorified Christ at the Father's right hand.

The "you have died and your life is hidden with Christ in God" of verse 3 establishes the specific character of the believer's present existence: she has died to the old self and its orientations (the death of Romans 6:2–7 and the crucifixion of Galatians 2:20), and her life is not visible in the present age in its ultimate form, it is hidden, concealed, waiting for the revelation that the day of Christ will bring ("when Christ, who is our life, is revealed, then you also will be revealed with Him in glory," v. 4). The hiddenness of the present life, the fact that the believer's true identity and her ultimate glory are not yet visible to the world or even fully to herself, is the eschatological context within which the mortification and vivification are practiced: in the gap between the already of the resurrection-union and the not-yet of the glory-revelation.

B. *Colossians 3:5–9: Mortification, Put to Death and Put Off*

Colossians 3:5 opens the first movement of the double sanctification with a blunt imperative: "Therefore consider the members of your earthly body as dead to immorality, impurity, passion, evil desire, and greed, which amounts to idolatry" (NASB 1995). The word "consider as dead" (*nekrōsate*, aorist active imperative of *nekroō*, to put to death, to mortify) is Paul's clearest expression of the mortification imperative: the believer is commanded to actively, decisively, Spirit-enabled-ly treat the specific sinful desires and patterns of the old self as dead, to refuse them the acknowledgment and the feeding that would keep them alive. The list that follows, immorality, impurity, passion, evil desire, greed/idolatry, moves from the external acts of sexual sin to the internal desires that produce

them, and climaxes with greed as idolatry: the radical claim that covetousness is the worship of something other than God, which means that the mortification of greed is not merely the management of a bad habit but the dethronement of a false god.

Colossians 3:8–9 adds the second list of old-self characteristics to be put off: “but now you also, put them all aside: anger, wrath, malice, slander, and abusive speech from your mouth. Do not lie to one another, since you laid aside the old self with its evil practices” (NASB 1995). The imperative “put them all aside” (apothesthe, aorist active imperative of apotitheimi, to put away, lay aside, strip off, the language of removing a garment) is the second expression of the mortification: the active, decisive removal of the specific relational and communicative vices that the old self generates. The ground of the imperative (“since you laid aside the old self with its evil practices”) recalls the indicative of the earlier verses: the old self has already been laid aside in the definitive sense of the death-with-Christ; the imperative calls the believer to live out in the progressive sense what has already been accomplished in the definitive sense.

C. Colossians 3:10–14: Vivification, Put On the New Self

The second movement of the double sanctification is introduced by the “put on the new self” of verse 10: “and have put on the new self who is being renewed to a true knowledge according to the image of the One who created him” (NASB 1995). The “new self” (neon ... ton anakainoūmenon, the new one being renewed) is simultaneously the accomplished indicative (the new self that was created in the definitive sanctification of the new birth) and the progressive process (“being renewed”, present passive participle, indicating the ongoing renewal that the Spirit is consistently accomplishing). The renewal is “to a true knowledge according to the image of the One who created him”, the knowledge-producing, image-restoring renewal that is the progressive sanctification’s specific content, pointing all the way back to the creation of the human being in the image of God (Genesis 1:26–27) and forward to the eschatological completion of that image-bearing in the glorification (Romans 8:29; 1 John 3:2).

Colossians 3:12–14 specifies the content of the “put on” with one of the most beautiful and most comprehensive virtue-lists in the New Testament: “So, as those who have been chosen of God, holy and beloved, put on a heart of compassion, kindness, humility, gentleness and patience; bearing with one another, and forgiving each other, whoever has a complaint against anyone; just as the Lord forgave you, so also should you. Beyond all these things put on love, which is the perfect bond of unity” (NASB 1995). The address, “as those who have been chosen of God, holy and beloved”, is the indicative that grounds the imperative: the character of the God who chose them, declared them holy, and loves them is the character they are being called to express. The virtue list, compassion, kindness, humility, gentleness, patience, bearing with, forgiving, is the positive shape of the Christlike character toward which the mortification of the vices has been clearing the way. And the love that completes the list (“beyond all these things put on love”) is the garment over all the garments, the integrating virtue that holds all the others together and gives them their coherence and their motivation.

II. Romans 8:13 and the Mortification Imperative

Be Killing Sin, or Sin Will Be Killing You

A. The Text and Its Force

Romans 8:13 is among the most urgent and most directly practical verses in the entire letter: “For 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). The verse is not a hypothetical threat addressed to an unbelieving audience; it is a direct, present-tense imperative addressed to those who have been described in the preceding verses as indwelt by the Spirit of God (v. 9) and as having the Spirit of the One who raised Jesus from the dead dwelling in them (v. 11). The ones to whom Paul says “if by the Spirit you are putting to death” are the ones who are regenerate, justified, adopted, and Spirit-indwelt. And what he says to them is bluntly binary: life or death, mortification or the spiritual death of the flesh’s dominion.

The present-tense, active, ongoing character of the mortification imperative is one of its most important features: “you are putting to death” (ei de Pneumati tas praxeis tou somatos thanatouōte) is a present active indicative in a conditional clause, describing an ongoing, continuous, habitual activity, not a once-for-all act of decisive renunciation (though that is also necessary at specific turning points in the sanctified life) but the sustained, daily, never-completed, always-necessary work of mortifying the specific sinful deeds of the body. The mortification is never finished in this life because the flesh is never finally dead in this life; the remaining sin of the simul iustus et peccator requires the ongoing, active, Spirit-empowered resistance that the mortification imperative describes. The believer who thinks she has mortified a specific sin sufficiently and can now stop the active resistance is the believer who is about to discover that the sin she thought was dead was merely sleeping.

John Owen’s seventeenth-century treatise on *The Mortification of Sin* (1656) opens with one of the most quoted and most practically bracing lines in the whole of Puritan theology: “Be killing sin or it will be killing you.” The sentence is Owen’s paraphrase of Romans 8:13, and it captures the verse’s binary logic with maximal economy: there is no neutral ground in the battle with remaining sin; either the sin is being killed or the sin is doing the killing. The language is deliberately violent because the reality it describes is genuinely violent: the remaining sin in the believer’s life is not a mild tendency to be politely discouraged but a mortal enemy that, if left unaddressed, will progressively dominate and corrupt the spiritual life it is allowed to inhabit. Owen’s treatise remains one of the most practically penetrating treatments of the subject ever written, and the lesson draws on its wisdom throughout.

B. The Spirit’s Role in Mortification

The specific phrase “by the Spirit” (Pneumati, dative of instrument) in Romans 8:13 establishes the most important single fact about the mortification: it is a Spirit-empowered act, not a willpower-driven act. The believer who attempts to mortify sin through the sheer force of her own determination and self-discipline is attempting to do by the flesh what only the Spirit can accomplish. Owen is emphatic on this point throughout his treatise: “All other ways of mortification are vain, all helps leave us helpless; it must be done by the Spirit.” This is not the passivism that abandons the active effort and waits for the Spirit to mortify the sin without the believer’s participation; it is the recognition that the effort must be the Spirit’s effort through the believer, rather than the believer’s own effort alongside the Spirit. The mortification is genuinely the believer’s act (Paul says “you are putting to death,” not “the Spirit is putting to death for you”); and it is genuinely the Spirit’s act (it is done “by the Spirit,” not by the believer’s own unaided will). The synergism of Philippians 2:12–13 governs the mortification as it governs all of the progressive sanctification.

Owen identifies several specific ways in which the Spirit enables the mortification. He strengthens the new nature's desire for holiness that opposes the flesh's desire for sin (Galatians 5:16–17). He applies the grace of the gospel to the conscience in specific acts of conviction and renewal that weaken the specific sin's hold on the heart (1 John 1:9; Romans 8:1). He brings the Word's truth to bear on the specific sinful pattern with the illuminating and exposing clarity that no purely human self-examination can achieve. And He produces in the regenerate heart the specific desire to be free from the specific sin that enables the will to resist the sin's attraction with genuine rather than performed reluctance. Without the Spirit's enabling, the mortification effort is at best a behavior modification that leaves the underlying desire intact; with it, the effort reaches the desire itself, weakening it at its root rather than merely suppressing its surface expression.

III. The Pursuit of Holiness

Hebrews 12:14 and the Non-Optional Call

A. Hebrews 12:14: Sanctification Is Not Optional

Hebrews 12:14 is the New Testament's most direct statement of the non-optional character of the pursuit of holiness: "Pursue peace with all men, and the sanctification without which no one will see the Lord" (NASB 1995). The imperative "pursue" (Greek: *diōkete*, present active imperative of *diōkō*, to pursue, chase, run after, the same word used for the relentless pursuit of a fleeing enemy, the single-minded tracking of a quarry) establishes the active, urgent, effortful character of the sanctification's pursuit: it is not the casual, optional, as-convenient engagement of one who can take or leave the pursuit of holiness; it is the relentless, intentional, priority-establishing running after the holiness that the Spirit is producing and that the law's third use has instructed.

The clause "without which no one will see the Lord" is among the most sobering in the entire New Testament, and it requires careful handling to prevent misreading in either of two directions. The first misreading: sanctification is the condition of the justified standing before God, so that the failure to pursue holiness sufficiently puts the salvation itself at risk. This misreading confuses the inseparability of justification and sanctification (the insistence that genuine justification is always accompanied by genuine sanctification) with the dependence of justification on sanctification (the claim that the justified standing depends on the quality of the sanctification). Calvin's formulation protects both truths: "I confess that all who are of God are regenerated and made new creatures, so that they may walk in newness of life. But I say that sanctification and righteousness which are separate from justification are spoken of, and that in justification we obtain forgiveness of sins, but that regeneration follows as a subsequent and different blessing." The second misreading: the clause is a warning addressed only to those who are not genuinely regenerate, and the genuinely justified believer need not take it as a serious personal warning. This misreading underestimates the verse's direct, urgent, congregationally-addressed force.

The right reading of Hebrews 12:14 is the one that treats it as the direct address of the inspired apostle to genuine believers, calling them to the active, earnest, unrelenting pursuit of the sanctification that is simultaneously the Spirit's certain accomplishment and the believer's urgent responsibility. The sanctification without which no one will see the Lord is the real, progressive, Spirit-produced, human-effort-requiring transformation of the whole person toward the image of Christ, and the warning that its absence means the absence of the Lord's face is the

strongest possible assertion of the inseparability of justification and sanctification, not the introduction of sanctification as a ground of the justified standing. The person who is genuinely justified is genuinely sanctified (not completely, not perfectly, but genuinely and progressively), and the person whose life shows no evidence of the progressive pursuit of holiness has reason to question whether the justification she claims has actually been received.

B. *2 Corinthians 7:1 and the Cleansing Motivation*

Second Corinthians 7:1 provides both the specific motivation and the comprehensive scope of the holiness-pursuit that Hebrews 12:14 commands: “Therefore, having these promises, beloved, let us cleanse ourselves from all defilement of flesh and spirit, perfecting holiness in the fear of God” (NASB 1995). The “having these promises” grounds the imperative in the specific indicatives of the preceding context: the promises of 6:16–18, “I will dwell in them and walk among them... I will be a father to you, and you shall be sons and daughters to Me”, are the adoption-and-presence promises whose reception provides the specific motivation for the cleansing. The filial relationship with the Father who dwells in the community motivates the cleansing from all defilement: the adopted child who lives in the Father’s presence desires the specific purity that the presence of the holy Father requires, not as the condition of the Father’s presence but as the appropriate response to it.

The phrase “perfecting holiness in the fear of God”, or more literally, “completing holiness” (*epitelountes hagiosaynēn*), establishes both the goal (holiness brought to its completion) and the motivation (“in the fear of God”, the reverent, awe-filled, love-shaped awareness of the holy God whose presence the believer inhabits). The fear of God is not the slavish terror of the condemned but the filial reverence of the adopted child who is genuinely awed by the holiness and the majesty of the Father in whose household she lives and whose character she is being conformed to. This reverence is itself a means of sanctification: the believer who consistently inhabits the awareness of the holy God’s presence is the believer who finds the specific sins that the holiness-pursuit is addressing increasingly incongruous with the relationship she lives in.

IV. The Standard of Holiness

Be Holy, For I Am Holy

A. *1 Peter 1:15–16 and the Divine Standard*

The specific standard of the holiness to which the believer is called is established by 1 Peter 1:15–16 with a theological audacity that takes the breath away: “but like the Holy One who called you, be holy yourselves also in all your behavior; because it is written, ‘You shall be holy, for I am holy.’” (NASB 1995). The standard is not a revised and more achievable version of the divine holiness, tailored to the limits of the creaturely condition; it is the divine holiness itself, unreduced, in all its infinite perfection. “Be holy, for I am holy” (Leviticus 11:44–45; 19:2; 20:26, here cited by Peter as the permanent, new-covenant applicable standard) sets the bar where the Law always set it: at the level of the divine character itself.

The pastoral and theological significance of the divine standard is paradoxical: it is simultaneously the most humbling and the most motivating standard possible. It is humbling because the infinite distance between the divine holiness and the believer’s present state of progressive but imperfect sanctification means that the pursuit

of the standard can never produce the complacency of one who thinks she has arrived. The person who is measuring her holiness against the divine holiness will never be tempted to think that she has done enough; the divine standard keeps the pursuit always forward, always humble, always aware of how far the present state falls short of the perfect goal. And it is motivating because the same infinite standard establishes the specific, defined, ultimately glorious character that the progressive sanctification is aimed at: not a generic moral improvement but the specific conformity to the character of the God who is the Holy One, who is love, who is just, who is compassionate, who is faithful, who is truth, and who is the eschatological destination of every adopted, justified, Spirit-indwelt believer.

The connection between the divine standard and the Trinity's sanctifying work (developed in Lesson 23's treatment of the Trinitarian agency of sanctification) is direct: the Father who has called the believer to His own holiness is the same Father who is sanctifying her entirely (1 Thessalonians 5:23); the Son whose image she is being conformed to (Romans 8:29) is the Son whose character is the specific content of the divine holiness she is being called to reflect; and the Spirit who is the primary agent of the progressive sanctification is the Holy Spirit, the divine Person whose specific name captures the essence of the work He is doing in every life He indwells. The call to be holy, for God is holy, is therefore not a crushing burden but the specific, Trinitarian, relationship-grounded call to become what the indwelling Trinity is already working to make the believer into.

B. Holiness as Both Gift and Task

The Reformed tradition has consistently maintained that the call to holiness must be understood as both gift (the definitive holiness already given in Christ, the progressive holiness being worked by the Spirit) and task (the genuine human effort that the Spirit-empowered pursuit requires). The confusing of gift and task, treating holiness as either purely a divine gift received without effort or purely a human task accomplished without grace, produces the twin errors of passivism (waiting for God to make me holy without my cooperation) and moralism (pursuing holiness through unaided willpower as if grace were not required). The gift character protects the pursuit from the self-reliant performance anxiety of the moralist; the task character protects the pursuit from the passive self-indulgence of the one who says "God will make me holy in His time" and does nothing to cooperate with the Spirit's transforming work.

Paul's exhortation in Philippians 3:12–14 holds gift and task together with exemplary precision: "Not that I have already obtained it or have already become perfect, but I press on so that I may lay hold of that for which also I was laid hold of by Christ Jesus. Brethren, I do not regard myself as having laid hold of it yet; but one thing I do: forgetting what lies behind and reaching forward to what lies ahead, I press on toward the goal for the prize of the upward call of God in Christ Jesus" (NASB 1995). The gift character: "I was laid hold of by Christ Jesus", Paul's pressing on is the response to Christ's prior laying hold of him; the initiative is Christ's, and the human effort is the response to the divine initiative. The task character: "I press on" (twice, in both v. 12 and v. 14), the active, effortful, forward-leaning movement of one who is genuinely running after the goal. Neither the gift nor the task is absent; both are genuinely operative; and the combination of the two is exactly the synergistic character of sanctification that Philippians 2:12–13 establishes.

V. The Already-Not-Yet Tension

Between the Definitive and the Complete

A. *The Persistent Tension of Romans 7*

The already-not-yet of the sanctified life, already definitively set apart, progressively being transformed, not yet perfectly conformed to Christ, is not a temporary condition that will be resolved before the glorification; it is the permanent structure of the Christian's existence in the present age. Romans 7:14–25 is the most psychologically honest description of this persistent tension in the entire New Testament, and its relevance for the lesson's subject is direct: it describes the internal experience of the genuinely sanctified believer who is genuinely engaged in the mortification-and-vivification double movement but who continues to find the progress incomplete and the warfare unresolved. "I joyfully concur with the law of God in the inner man, but I see a different law in the members of my body, waging war against the law of my mind and making me a prisoner of the law of sin which is in my members" (vv. 22–23, NASB 1995).

The specific features of Romans 7:14–25 that are pastorally most significant are the simultaneity of the joy (v. 22: "I joyfully concur with the law of God in the inner man") and the warfare (v. 23: "a different law... waging war against the law of my mind"), and the resolution that Paul arrives at, not the resolution of the tension ("I have finally overcome the flesh entirely") but the doxological turning toward Christ ("Thanks be to God through Jesus Christ our Lord!", v. 25) from within the midst of the unresolved tension. The right pastoral word for the believer who is genuinely engaged in the mortification-pursuit and genuinely finding it incomplete is not the perfectionist's critique ("You should have overcome this by now") and not the antinomian's license ("This shows you don't need to worry about it"), but the apostolic realism: the warfare is real, the tension is persistent, and the turning toward Christ in the midst of it is the specific, Romans-7-grounded response of the genuinely sanctified believer who has not yet been glorified.

Galatians 5:17 provides the complementary New Testament statement of the persistent tension: "For the flesh sets its desire against the Spirit, and the Spirit against the flesh; for these are in opposition to one another, so that you may not do the things that you please" (NASB 1995). The conflict between the flesh and the Spirit is not the evidence of deficient sanctification; it is the evidence of genuine sanctification. The unregenerate person experiences no such conflict because there is no Spirit within her to resist the flesh's dominion; the genuinely regenerate person experiences the conflict precisely because the Spirit's indwelling presence creates the opposition to the flesh that was absent before. The presence of the conflict is the sign of the new birth, not its absence; and the absence of all inner conflict, the claimed elimination of all sinful desire through some form of "entire sanctification" in the present age, is the mark of the person who has silenced the Spirit's witness to remaining sin rather than the person who has completed the Spirit's sanctifying work.

B. *Philippians 3:12–14 and the Forward-Leaning Posture*

The already-not-yet tension of the sanctified life does not produce the paralysis of one who is overwhelmed by the gap between the present state and the eschatological destination. It produces the Philippians-3:12–14 posture: "forgetting what lies behind and reaching forward to what lies ahead, I press on toward the goal." The "forgetting what lies behind" is not the denial of the past (the specific sins that the conscience remembers, the failures of the progressive sanctification, the occasions of specific unfaithfulness) but the refusal to be defined by the past in a way that prevents the forward movement. The past failures have been confessed, repented of, and

forgiven; the justified standing has not been affected by them; and the posture of the sanctified life is forward-leaning rather than backward-looking: “reaching forward to what lies ahead” and “pressing on toward the goal.”

The “prize of the upward call of God in Christ Jesus” (v. 14) is the eschatological destination that the forward-leaning posture is aimed at: the glorification, the complete conformity to Christ, the entire sanctification of 1 Thessalonians 5:23 that the faithful God has guaranteed. The forward movement of the sanctified life is not aimless optimism; it is the specific, prize-oriented, upward-called running of one who knows where she is going and is pressing on toward it with the specific urgency of the person who has received the divine call and is running in response. The tension between the already and the not-yet is real and will persist until the glory-revelation of Colossians 3:4; but within that tension, the direction is forward, the posture is reaching, and the prize is in sight.

VI. The Danger of Perfectionism

Refuted by Paul, John, and the Daily Experience of Grace

A. Perfectionism Defined and Its Appeal

Perfectionism, in its theological form, is the claim that the progressive sanctification can reach a state of complete sinless perfection in the present life, that a genuine Christian, through the Spirit’s sanctifying work and the believer’s cooperation with grace, can arrive at a condition in which she no longer sins, either in the sense of no longer committing any deliberate sin or in the stronger sense of no longer having any sinful desire. The appeal of perfectionism is understandable: it offers the promise of the full liberation from sin’s power that the progressive sanctification is aimed at, and it does so in the present age rather than waiting for the glorification. The person who is genuinely engaged in the exhausting, never-completed, always-resurgent warfare with remaining sin finds the perfectionist promise attractive: the prospect of finally winning the war, finally being free from the specific sins that have most persistently dominated, finally living without the conflict of Romans 7 and the ongoing failure of the not-yet.

The most historically significant form of perfectionism in the Protestant tradition is John Wesley’s doctrine of “entire sanctification” or “perfect love”, the claim that the Holy Spirit can and does, in this life, produce a state of “perfect love” in which the believer is freed from the deliberate commission of known sin, though not from unintentional mistakes or the infirmities of the creaturely condition. Wesley was careful not to claim absolute sinlessness (he acknowledged involuntary mistakes and the ongoing need for the atonement) but did claim that the will can be entirely freed from deliberate rebellion against God through the Spirit’s sanctifying work. His successors in the Holiness Movement and the Pentecostal tradition have often gone further, claiming more complete forms of sinless perfection. In the contemporary evangelical world, perfectionism appears in subtler forms: the implicit expectation that genuinely mature believers should not struggle with certain categories of sin, or the pastoral pressure to testify to a level of victory over sin that the honest account of the continuing warfare would not support.

B. The Biblical Refutation

The perfectionist claim is refuted by three specific biblical witnesses that together establish the impossibility of sinless perfection in the present life with the clearest possible apostolic authority. First, Philippians 3:12–14: Paul’s

explicit, first-person, apostolic disavowal of having “already obtained it or having already become perfect” (v. 12). Paul, who could describe his pre-Christian righteousness as “blameless” under the Pharisaic standard (3:6) and whose apostolic credentials were unmatched, says clearly and explicitly that he has not yet obtained the goal toward which the pressing-on of verse 12–14 is aimed. If the greatest apostle, writing under divine inspiration, cannot claim to have arrived at the perfection toward which the sanctified life presses, the perfectionist claim has been disqualified by the most authoritative possible testimony.

Second, 1 John 1:8: “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 entire community of genuine believers; the claim to be without sin is not the mark of the most advanced saint but the self-deception of the one who has either ceased to take the law’s deep demands seriously (Lesson 24’s third use) or has silenced the Spirit’s convicting witness to remaining sin. John’s language is unusually direct: the claim to be without sin is not merely a theological error; it is deception, the self-deception of the person whose claim does not correspond to reality, and whose deception has displaced the truth. First John 1:10 adds: “If we say that we have not sinned, we make Him a liar and His word is not in us”, the claim to sinlessness contradicts the divine testimony about the human condition, and the person who makes it has, in effect, called God a liar.

Third, Romans 7:14–25: the passage that this lesson has already examined as the description of the persistent already-not-yet tension. If the passage describes the experience of the genuinely regenerate believer (which the Reformed tradition has consistently maintained, in contrast to the Lutheran reading that assigns it to the unregenerate under the law’s condemnation), then it establishes that the genuine, Spirit-indwelt, law-loving (“I joyfully concur with the law of God in the inner man”, v. 22) believer experiences the specific conflict between the inner person and the flesh that Galatians 5:17 also describes. The conflict that Romans 7 describes is not the conflict of someone who is failing in the sanctified life; it is the conflict that the genuinely sanctified life consistently experiences, and its resolution is not the conquest of perfection but the doxological turning toward Christ in the midst of the unresolved warfare.

VII. The Encouragement of Progress

He Who Began a Good Work Will Perfect It

A. The Certainty of Philippians 1:6

The warfare, the tension, the imperfection, and the persistent struggle of the sanctified life, all of which this lesson has addressed with honest realism, are not the final word. The final word is the divine faithfulness of Philippians 1:6: “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 of this verse is not the confidence of one who is optimistic about the human capacity for moral improvement; it is the confidence of one who knows the divine faithfulness and who grounds the certainty of the sanctification’s completion in the character of the One who began it rather than in the consistency of the one in whom it is being accomplished.

The “until the day of Christ Jesus” establishes the timeline of the completion: not before the day of Christ (the perfectionist’s claim), not potentially interrupted before it (the Arminian anxiety), but certainly at the day of Christ, when the glorification that is the sanctification’s completion will be accomplished in every person who has been

called and justified. The progressive sanctification may be slow, slower than the believer desires, slower than the congregation's patience would prefer, slower than the pastoral timeline would schedule, but it is certain. The God who "began a good work" is the God who does not abandon His projects, who does not run out of patience, who does not revise His purposes when the progress is unsatisfying, and who will accomplish in His own time and in His own way the complete conformity to Christ that the beginning of the work in the new birth already implied.

B. Progress as Evidence and Encouragement

While the certainty of the completion rests on the divine faithfulness rather than on the quality of the believer's progress, genuine progress in the progressive sanctification is both real and encouraging. The progression from 2 Corinthians 3:18 is from "glory to glory", each stage of the transformation is genuinely a stage of the divine glory expressed in the believer's life, and each stage is real and visible, however small. The believer who, this year, loves the neighbor she resented last year; the believer who, this season, is trusting the Father with a burden she was hoarding with anxiety last season; the believer who, this month, is addressing a specific sin with a seriousness and a Spirit-dependence she was not bringing to it last month, these are the real, observable, Spirit-produced advances in the progressive sanctification that Philippians 1:6's confidence guarantees will continue until the day of completion.

The encouragement of genuine progress does not permit the complacency of the one who thinks she has advanced sufficiently; the divine standard of "Be holy, for I am holy" always remains infinitely above the present state. But the honest recognition and the grateful celebration of genuine progress is itself a means of encouragement for the continuing pursuit, the specific confidence that the work is genuinely happening, that the Spirit is genuinely at work, and that the divine faithfulness is genuinely being expressed in the real (if imperfect, slow, and sometimes imperceptible) transformation of the specific person toward the specific image of the specific Christ toward whom the progressive sanctification is aimed. The believer who can look honestly at a specific area of her life and say "I am genuinely more Christlike here than I was five years ago" is the believer who has received the specific, grace-produced evidence of the Philippians-1:6 confidence in her own experience, and the appropriate response is not pride but gratitude.

The lesson closes with the Colossians-3 vision of the sanctified life brought to its eschatological horizon: "When Christ, who is our life, is revealed, then you also will be revealed with Him in glory" (3:4). The mortification of the specific sins, the pursuit of the specific virtues, the endurance of the specific warfare, the honest acknowledgment of the specific failures, and the forward-leaning pressing-on toward the specific goal, all of it is bounded on the near side by the already of the definitive sanctification and on the far side by the not-yet of the glory-revelation. Between the two, the double movement of Colossians 3, putting to death and putting on, mortifying and vivifying, is the specific, Spirit-enabled, grace-grounded, faith-expressed work of the believer who has been raised with Christ and who is pressing on toward the day when the hidden life will be revealed in the glory that was already hers in Christ before the foundation of the world.

"Therefore consider the members of your earthly body as dead to immorality, impurity, passion, evil desire, and greed... and have put on the new self who is being renewed to a true knowledge according to the image of the One who created him."

Colossians 3:5, 10, NASB 1995

Theological Terms and Definitions

Mortification	From the Latin mortificare, to put to death: the Spirit-empowered, active, ongoing putting to death of the specific sinful desires, habits, and patterns of the old nature that remain in the regenerate believer. Grounded in Romans 8:13 (“if by the Spirit you are putting to death the deeds of the body, you will live”), Colossians 3:5 (“consider the members of your earthly body as dead to immorality...”), and John Owen’s seventeenth-century treatise: “Be killing sin or it will be killing you.” Mortification is not the mere management of external behavior (suppressing sin’s surface expression) but the Spirit-enabled weakening of the sin’s underlying desire, habit, and grip on the heart. It is genuinely the believer’s act (“you are putting to death”) and genuinely the Spirit’s act (“by the Spirit”), the synergistic double agency of Philippians 2:12–13.
Vivification	The complementary movement to mortification in the double movement of sanctification: the Spirit-empowered putting on of the new self’s specific Christlike virtues, displacing the old nature’s vices with the positive character that the progressive conformity to Christ requires. Colossians 3:12–14’s virtue list (compassion, kindness, humility, gentleness, patience, bearing with, forgiving, love as the bond of unity) is the specific content of vivification: the active, intentional, Spirit-empowered cultivation of the positive Christlike character that fills the space that the mortification of sin has vacated. Vivification without mortification is optimistic virtue-cultivation undermined by unaddressed sin; mortification without vivification is merely negative asceticism without the positive character it was meant to create space for. Both are necessary.
Double Movement	The twin imperatives of Colossians 3:5–14 that together describe the full character of the progressive sanctification: putting to death (mortification, v. 5 and v. 8–9) and putting on (vivification, vv. 10–14). The double movement is grounded in the double indicative of verses 1–4 (you have been raised with Christ; you have died) and expresses in the progressive dimension what has already been accomplished in the definitive dimension: the old self has been definitively crucified (Galatians 2:20; Romans 6:6); the progressive sanctification is the consistent, daily, Spirit-empowered living out of what the definitive sanctification has established. The putting to death and putting on are not sequential (first mortify, then vivify) but simultaneous and mutually-reinforcing dimensions of the ongoing sanctifying work.
Nekrosate	Greek: “put to death,” aorist active imperative of nekroō, the primary mortification verb of Colossians 3:5. The aorist imperative conveys a decisive, urgent, action-calling command: not the gradual, mild discouragement of specific sins but the active, decisive, Spirit-empowered putting to death of the specific sinful desires and practices listed. The word carries the full weight of its literal meaning: the members of the earthly body are to be treated as dead to the sins listed, refused the feeding and the acknowledgment that would keep them alive. Used in contrast to the “put on” (endysasthe) of verse 12, establishing that the sanctified life requires both the negative movement (active death) and the positive movement (active wearing of the new character).
Diōkete	Greek: “pursue,” “chase,” “run after,” the pursuit verb of Hebrews 12:14 (“Pursue... the sanctification without which no one will see the Lord”). Diōkō carries the connotation of relentless, active, effortful pursuit, the single-minded tracking of a quarry, the relentless chasing of an objective. It is the same word used in Paul’s accounts of his former persecution of the church (Acts 22:4; Galatians 1:13, 23), the pursuit that does not give up, that follows the quarry wherever it goes, that accepts no discouragement. Applied to the pursuit of sanctification, diōkete establishes that the holy life is not a passive gift received without effort but an active, relentless, priority-establishing running after the holiness that the Spirit is producing and the law’s instruction has defined.

Perfectionism	The theological claim that the progressive sanctification can reach a state of complete sinless perfection in the present life, that the Spirit's sanctifying work can, in this age, produce a condition in which the believer no longer sins deliberately or no longer has sinful desire. Most historically significant in John Wesley's doctrine of "entire sanctification" or "perfect love." Refuted by Philippians 3:12 (Paul's explicit disavowal of having "already become perfect"), 1 John 1:8 ("If we say that we have no sin, we are deceiving ourselves"), and Romans 7:14–25 (the persistent warfare between the inner person and the flesh that characterizes the genuinely sanctified life). The perfectionist claim misunderstands the already-not-yet structure of sanctification: the complete conformity to Christ awaits glorification, not the advanced stages of present-age sanctification.
Already-Not-Yet	The structure of the sanctified life in the present age: the believer is already definitively sanctified in Christ (the positional holiness of 1 Corinthians 1:2 and 6:11), already being progressively sanctified by the Spirit (2 Corinthians 3:18), and not yet perfectly conformed to Christ (Philippians 3:12; 1 John 1:8; 1 John 3:2). The tension between the already and the not-yet is not a temporary condition that the advanced stages of sanctification will resolve before glorification; it is the permanent structure of the Christian's existence in the present age, to be maintained in the posture of honest warfare, forward-leaning pursuit, and eschatological hope. The resolution of the already-not-yet awaits the day of Christ (Philippians 1:6) when the sanctification will be perfected and the glory will be revealed (Colossians 3:4).
Owen's Mortification	The seventeenth-century Puritan John Owen's account of the mortification of sin in his treatise <i>Of the Mortification of Sin in Believers</i> (1656), the most practically penetrating treatment of the subject in the Reformed tradition. Key principles: (1) Mortification must be done by the Spirit, not by willpower alone: "Be killing sin or it will be killing you"; "All other ways of mortification are vain, all helps leave us helpless; it must be done by the Spirit"; (2) Mortification addresses the sin's root (the underlying desire and habit) rather than merely suppressing its surface expression; (3) The Spirit enables mortification by strengthening the new nature's desire for holiness, applying the gospel to the conscience, bringing the Word to bear on the specific sin, and producing the genuine desire to be free from the specific sin.
Epitelountes Hagiosynen	Greek: "perfecting holiness," "completing holiness", the specific phrase of 2 Corinthians 7:1 that describes the ongoing, progressive character of the holiness-pursuit. The present participle "epitelountes" (bringing to completion, perfecting, accomplishing fully) establishes the direction and the goal of the sanctified life: the holiness being pursued is not a static condition to be maintained but a living, growing, deepening reality being brought toward the completeness that the divine standard ("Be holy, for I am holy") requires. The motivation is "in the fear of God", the reverent, awe-filled, love-shaped awareness of the holy God whose presence the believer inhabits and whose character she is being conformed to.

Practical Application

A. For the Mind: What Must We Believe?

We must believe that the double movement of sanctification, mortification and vivification, is genuinely necessary and genuinely possible, and that neither movement alone is sufficient for the full account of the sanctified life. The person who is only mortifying (putting to death specific sins) without vivifying (putting on specific Christlike virtues) has understood half of Colossians 3 and is living the ascetic, negatively-defined holiness that is neither the New Testament's vision nor the Spirit's goal. The person who is only vivifying (cultivating the positive virtues) without mortifying (seriously addressing the specific sins that persist) is engaged in virtue-cultivation that is continually undermined by the specific sins she is not addressing. Both movements are commanded; both are necessary; and the discipline of the sanctified life requires the honest, specific, dual engagement with both.

We must believe that the already-not-yet tension of the sanctified life is real, persistent, and will not be resolved before the glorification. This means that the ongoing experience of the flesh's resistance, the continuing failure of the progressive sanctification in specific areas, and the persistent warfare between the Spirit's desire for holiness and the flesh's desire for sin are all within the scope of the normal, expected, apostolically-described Christian experience. They do not indicate the failure of the Spirit's work; they indicate its presence (the unregenerate experiences no such conflict because there is no Spirit to create the opposition). And the appropriate response to the persistent tension is not the perfectionist's denial (pretending the tension does not exist), the despairing believer's capitulation (concluding that the tension proves she cannot progress), or the antinomian's license (using the tension as an excuse for the specific sins that the mortification-pursuit is supposed to be addressing), but Paul's own response: "Thanks be to God through Jesus Christ our Lord!", the doxological turning toward Christ in the midst of the unresolved tension.

We must believe that Philippians 1:6's "He who began a good work in you will perfect it until the day of Christ Jesus" is the specific, personal, pastoral word for every season of slow or discouraged progress in the progressive sanctification. The certainty of the completion rests on the divine faithfulness, not on the quality of the progress. The work is being done; the Doer is faithful; and the pace is the Doer's sovereign wisdom, not the believer's managed schedule. We wait for the completion with the patience of those who know the Doer's character, the confidence of those who have received the promise, and the forward-leaning posture of those who are pressing on toward the goal in the power of the One whose faithfulness guarantees it.

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

Desire the specific, urgent, Owen-esque seriousness about specific sin that Romans 8:13's binary, be killing sin or sin will be killing you, demands. Not the performed guilt of the one who says the correct things about sin in theological class but goes home to the same specific sins without the Spirit-dependent, Colossians-3-nekrosate-level seriousness that the mortification imperative requires. The specific sins that are most persistently dominating your inner life, the specific desires, the specific patterns of thought, the specific habitual responses that the new nature knows to be contrary to the image of Christ, deserve the active, urgent, Spirit-invoking, Word-applying, community-supported assault that the mortification imperative describes. You are at war; the enemy within is not passive; and the stakes of the engagement are higher than the casual approach to sin in the evangelical culture tends to acknowledge.

Desire the Philippians-3:12–14 posture of the forward-leaning, forgetting-what-lies-behind, pressing-on-toward-the-goal pursuit. The specific failures of the past, the times when the mortification was inadequate, the times when the vivification was replaced by the old vices, the times when the warfare produced more loss than gain, are not the final definition of the sanctified life. They have been confessed, repented of, and forgiven; the justified standing has not been affected; and the appropriate posture is forward rather than backward, pressing rather than mourning, reaching rather than rehearsing. The forgetting that Paul practices is not the amnesia of the person who refuses to learn from the past; it is the gospel-grounded, grace-received, forward-directed refusal to be defined by the past in a way that prevents the future's pursuit.

Desire the honest, pastoral courage to help those in your care engage the specific sins of their lives with the specific seriousness and the specific Spirit-dependence that the mortification imperative requires. The pastoral culture that avoids the specific naming of specific sins, that offers general encouragement toward general virtue without the specific, named, Romans-8:13-level engagement with the specific sins that are most actively dominating the specific person's life, is a pastoral culture that has substituted the comfort of vagueness for the costly precision that genuine pastoral care requires. Desire the courage to name the sin, to call to the mortification, to offer the Spirit-dependence that makes the mortification possible, and to stand alongside the believer in the warfare with the specific pastoral presence that the double movement of the sanctified life demands.

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

- Read Colossians 3:1–17 in its entirety as the most complete single-chapter account of the double movement of sanctification in Paul's letters. Note the indicative foundation (vv. 1–4: the resurrection-union with Christ), the first mortification list (v. 5: sexual sins and greed as idolatry), the second mortification list (vv. 8–9: relational and communicative vices), the indicative of the new self being renewed (v. 10), and the vivification list (vv. 12–14: the Christlike virtues, culminating in love). For each list, ask: which specific item is most actively present in my own spiritual life right now? For the mortification lists: what specific Spirit-dependent, Word-applied, community-supported action am I taking against the specific sin? For the vivification list: what specific Spirit-empowered cultivation of the specific virtue am I pursuing?
- Read John Owen's *Of the Mortification of Sin in Believers* (1656), the full text is available freely online, attending specifically to Owen's account of why "all other ways of mortification are vain" and why the Spirit is the indispensable agent of the mortification. Note Owen's specific practical instructions for the mortification of a specific sin: (1) Recognize the seriousness of the sin (do not minimize it or make peace with its presence). (2) Understand the specific character of the sin's hold on you (the desire, the habit, the occasion, the root). (3) Bring it to the cross and to the Spirit's applying work rather than attempting to mortify it through willpower alone. (4) Engage the means of grace (the Word, prayer, fellowship, fasting) in specific relation to the specific sin. Apply Owen's framework to the one specific sin in your current life that most needs the sustained mortification effort.
- Identify one specific sin and one specific virtue that are the most urgent targets of the double movement of sanctification in your life right now. For the sin: name it specifically (not "pride" in general but the specific expression of pride that is most active in your relationships this week); identify the specific time, place, and relational context in which it is most powerfully present; name the specific action and the specific Spirit-dependent prayer that you will bring to the mortification of it this week. For the virtue: name the specific Christlike character from Colossians 3:12–14 that is most conspicuously absent in your life; identify the

specific situation in which its absence is most visible; and name the specific practice of putting-on that you will engage this week. Bring both to your study group for mutual accountability and prayer.

- Read Hebrews 12:1–14 as the comprehensive account of the disciplined, mortifying, forward-running, Christ-fixing, holiness-pursuing life that this lesson describes. Note the connections between the passage's elements: the cloud of witnesses providing the motivation for endurance, the laying aside of encumbrances (the spiritual disciplines' function of Lesson 25), the laying aside of entangling sin (the mortification of this lesson), the running with endurance (the Romans-5:3–5 patience), the fixing of the eyes on Jesus (the beholding of 2 Corinthians 3:18), the Father's discipline (the adoption of Lessons 21–22 and the means of grace of Lesson 25), and the pursuit of sanctification (verse 14's *diōkete*). Ask: how do all the elements of Unit 8's four lessons (Lessons 23–26) appear in Hebrews 12:1–14? And how does reading the passage as the integrated account of the sanctified life in its full dimensions clarify the specific practice to which you are being called?
- Practice Philippians 3:12–14's "forgetting what lies behind and reaching forward to what lies ahead" as a specific spiritual discipline for the next week. Each morning, identify the specific failure or specific sin from the preceding day that your conscience is most likely to rehearse. Bring it to the Father with the specific, honest, named confession that 1 John 1:9 describes. Receive the forgiveness that the justified standing has permanently secured. Then make the deliberate, specific, faith-grounded decision to forget it in the Pauline sense: to refuse to let it define the day ahead, to let its confession and forgiveness be the end of its backward pull, and to reach forward to the specific acts of mortification and vivification that this new day requires. Report to your study group at the week's end: what did the specific, daily, Philippians-3 practice of releasing the past produce in the quality of the forward-leaning pursuit?

Key Texts: *Romans 8:13; Colossians 3:1–17; Hebrews 12:1–14; 1 Peter 1:15–16; Philippians 1:6; 3:12–14; 2 Corinthians 7:1; 1 John 1:8–10; Galatians 5:16–24; Romans 7:14–25*

Study and Discussion Questions

Opening Question

- Owen's maxim "Be killing sin or it will be killing you" is the lesson's governing word. Before engaging the doctrinal content, evaluate the maxim honestly: does it describe your current approach to the specific sins that persist in your life? Are you "killing" them, actively, urgently, Spirit-dependently, specifically addressing them with the double-movement seriousness that Romans 8:13 and Colossians 3:5–14 describe? Or are you managing them, containing them, or simply coexisting with them in a way that could be described as the sin doing more killing than you? And what does the level of seriousness you bring to the specific sins in your life reveal about your understanding of the already-not-yet tension, do you believe the warfare is real and urgent, or has the pastoral culture you inhabit produced the impression that the conflict is less pressing than the apostolic texts present it?

Observation Questions (*What Do the Texts Say?*)

- Read Colossians 3:1–17. In verses 1–4, what is the theological foundation established before the imperatives (identify the three indicative statements about the believers' identity: "you have been raised...", "you have died...", "your life is hidden...")? In verse 5, what is the specific verb (Greek: *nekrōsate*) and what does it mean? In verse 8, what is the second mortification command (Greek: *apothesthe*) and what does the clothing-removal metaphor convey? In verse 10, what is the description of the new self ("who is being renewed... according to...")? In verses 12–14, what is the address that grounds the vivification command ("as those who have been...") and what is the crowning virtue ("beyond all these things put on...")?
- Read Romans 8:9–14. In verse 9, what is the condition that determines whether the Spirit indwells the believer, and what does the absence of the Spirit indicate ("if anyone does not... he does not belong...")? In verse 11, what is the connection between the Spirit's present indwelling and the future resurrection of the body? In verse 13, what is the binary that Paul presents (if you are living according to the flesh, you must...; if by the Spirit you are putting to death..., you will...)? What does "by the Spirit" (dative of instrument: *Pneumati*) establish about the agent of the mortification? And how does the context of verses 9–12 (the Spirit of the One who raised Jesus dwelling in you) ground the Spirit-dependent character of the mortification command of verse 13?
- Read Philippians 3:4–14. In verses 4–6, what credentials does Paul list that would constitute grounds for "confidence in the flesh," and how impressive are they by any human religious standard? In verse 8, what is Paul's evaluation of these credentials in comparison to knowing Christ? In verse 12, what two things does Paul explicitly disavow ("Not that I have already... or have already...")? In verse 13, what are the two movements of the apostolic posture (forgetting what lies behind; reaching forward to...)? In verse 14, what is the goal of the pressing on, and what is its character ("the upward call of...")? How does the passage as a whole establish both the impossibility of perfectionism (vv. 12–13) and the necessity of the forward-leaning pursuit (vv. 13–14)?
- Read Hebrews 12:1–14. In verse 1, what two categories of things are to be "laid aside" (encumbrances and sin that entangles)? In verse 2, what is the specific content of "fixing our eyes on Jesus" (what do we learn about Him that makes Him the object of the sustained gaze)? In verse 3, what is the purpose of the consideration of Jesus' endurance ("so that...")? In verses 7–8, what does the presence of discipline indicate (you are being treated as...) and what does its absence indicate (you are...)? In verse 14, what are the two

things to be pursued (peace with all men and...), and what is the specific qualifying clause about the sanctification (“without which...”)?

- Read 1 John 1:5– 2:2. In verse 6, what is the specific contradiction that walking in darkness creates for the person who claims fellowship with God? In verse 8, what is the specific self-description that constitutes self-deception (“If we say that we have no...”)? In verse 9, what is the pattern of confession that maintains the relational communion (“If we confess our sins, He is... and... to... and to...”)? In verse 10, what does the claim “I have not sinned” do to God (it makes Him...)? And in 2:1–2, how does John hold together the call to not sin (v. 1a), the pastoral realism about continuing sin (v. 1b), and the gospel provision for the continuing sin (v. 2: the propitiation of Christ)?

Interpretation Questions (What Does It Mean?)

- The lesson argues that the double movement of sanctification (mortification and vivification) is genuinely necessary and that neither movement alone is sufficient. Evaluate the adequacy of this claim. Is there a sense in which the vivification (putting on the new self) could be sufficient without the explicit mortification (putting to death the old self), i.e., does sufficiently putting on the new nature naturally displace the old nature without requiring the explicit, directed act of mortification? Or does the double movement of Colossians 3:5–14 establish that both are genuinely and independently necessary, not merely complementary dimensions of a single act?
- Romans 7:14–25 is one of the most debated passages in the New Testament, with the central question being whether Paul is describing the experience of the regenerate believer or the unregenerate person under the law’s condemnation. The lesson follows the Reformed tradition in reading it as the experience of the genuinely regenerate. Evaluate the exegetical support for this reading. What specific features of the passage support the regenerate reading (the “I joyfully concur with the law of God in the inner man” of v. 22, the “delight in the law of God” language)? What features might support the unregenerate reading (the “I am carnal, sold into bondage to sin” of v. 14)? And what are the pastoral consequences of each reading, how does the interpretation of who is speaking in Romans 7 affect the pastoral response to the believer who is experiencing the conflict described?
- The lesson addresses the perfectionist claim by citing Philippians 3:12 (Paul’s disavowal of having “already become perfect”), 1 John 1:8 (“If we say that we have no sin, we are deceiving ourselves”), and Romans 7:14–25 (the persistent warfare). Evaluate the adequacy of these refutations for the Wesleyan perfectionist’s account of entire sanctification. Does the Wesleyan qualifier, that entire sanctification means freedom from deliberate sin rather than absolute sinlessness, adequately answer the 1 John 1:8 refutation? And does Philippians 3:12’s “not yet perfect” specifically address the Wesleyan’s more qualified claim, or only the more absolute forms of perfectionism?
- Hebrews 12:14’s “sanctification without which no one will see the Lord” is the lesson’s most challenging statement about the relationship between sanctification and salvation. The lesson offers the Reformed reading: the verse establishes the inseparability of justification and sanctification (genuine justification is always accompanied by genuine sanctification) without making sanctification a condition of the justified standing. Evaluate the adequacy of this reading. Does it do justice to the urgency of the warning (“without which no one will see the Lord”)? Or does the strength of the warning suggest that more than inseparability is implied, that the absence of the sanctification-pursuit is evidence that the justification has not been genuinely received?

- The lesson presents Philippians 3:12–14’s “forgetting what lies behind” as the gospel-grounded, forward-directed refusal to be defined by past failures. Evaluate the psychological and spiritual adequacy of this account of how the believer relates to past failures. Is the “forgetting” of verse 13 a literal cognitive act (actually not remembering) or a motivational act (not allowing the memory to define the current direction)? And how does the “forgetting” of past failures relate to the importance of learning from them, is there a tension between the Pauline “forgetting” and the wisdom-tradition’s insistence on learning from past experience?

Application Questions (What Does It Demand of Us?)

- The lesson identifies the most pastorally urgent move of the lesson as the specific, named, Spirit-dependent engagement with the specific sins of the specific life, the mortification that is genuinely—killing rather than merely managing or coexisting with the specific sins. Name the two or three specific sins in your own life that are most actively present and most consistently resisted with least effectiveness. For each: (a) Is the resistance genuinely Spirit-dependent (prayer for the Spirit’s enabling, engagement with the Word’s specific instruction, confessional honesty, community accountability) or primarily willpower-dependent (human effort without the Spirit’s specific enabling)? (b) Is the mortification addressing the sin’s root (the underlying desire, the habitual pattern, the occasion of temptation) or merely suppressing its surface expression? And (c) What specific change in approach would most move the mortification from the inadequate to the Owen-level serious?
- The lesson identifies the Colossians-3 vivification list (compassion, kindness, humility, gentleness, patience, bearing with, forgiving, love) as the positive content of the double movement. Evaluate your current spiritual life against the list honestly. Which of the specific virtues is most visibly present in your relationships? Which is most visibly absent? And for the most absent: is its absence connected to the inadequate mortification of the corresponding vice (lack of kindness connected to inadequately mortified anger; lack of patience connected to inadequately mortified self-assertion)? What specific, double-movement engagement, mortifying the specific vice and simultaneously cultivating the specific virtue, would most directly address the most visible gap?
- The lesson argues that the pastoral culture that avoids the specific naming of specific sins is a pastoral culture that has substituted the comfort of vagueness for the costly precision that genuine pastoral care requires. Evaluate your own pastoral or teaching practice. Do you regularly preach or teach the mortification of specific sins with the Romans-8:13 urgency, or do you tend to address holiness in general terms without the specific, named engagement with specific sins? What prevents the specific naming, the fear of offending, the desire to avoid controversy, the impression that specificity is inappropriate for public preaching? And what specific change in your preaching or teaching practice would move it toward the Owen-level, Colossians-3-level specificity that the double movement of sanctification requires?
- The lesson closes with the Philippians-1:6 encouragement that the divine faithfulness will complete the sanctifying work. Think of a specific person in your pastoral care who is most discouraged in the progressive sanctification, whose specific sins persist despite genuine effort, whose progress is slowest, and whose discouragement about the gap between the present state and the Christlike destination is greatest. What is the specific pastoral word that Philippians 1:6 provides for that person’s specific discouragement? How would you communicate the certainty of the completion without dismissing the reality of the struggle? And what specific practical encouragement, the evidence of genuine progress in a specific area, the specific community support for the specific warfare, the specific means of grace for the specific sin, would complement the theological encouragement of the divine faithfulness?

Prayer Focus

Open this lesson's prayer time by reading Colossians 3:1–17 slowly, as the comprehensive vision of the sanctified life that this lesson has been developing. Let the indicative foundation of verses 1–4 land first: you have been raised with Christ; you have died; your life is hidden with Christ in God; when He is revealed, you will be revealed with Him in glory. Receive these four indicatives not as general theological truths about “believers” but as the specific, personal, identity-establishing truths about you, your resurrection-union with Christ, your death to the old self, your hidden life in the divine reality, your eschatological destiny in the glory-revelation. Then move to the imperatives with the specific weight that the indicatives give them: the mortification lists and the vivification list are not demands issued to you by a Judge who is assessing your compliance; they are the specific expressions of the life that the indicatives have already made possible and toward which the Spirit is already consistently working. Pray the imperatives as the expression of what you want, because the Spirit has given you the new heart that wants them.

Pray with specific, named, honest engagement with the mortification imperatives. Not the general confession of general sinfulness that protects the pride from the specific humiliation of named failure, but the specific, Colossians-3-level, nekrosate-intensity engagement with the specific sins that most need the Spirit-dependent mortification in your current life. Name them to the Father. Ask the Spirit for the specific, root-level weakening of the specific desire that the surface-level behavior modification cannot reach. Ask for the Word's specific truth to be applied to the specific sin's hold on your heart, the specific promise, the specific warning, the specific portrayal of Christ's character that most directly displaces the specific sin's attraction. And ask for the community's specific accountability and prayer for the specific mortification effort you are now naming before the Father and before the community.

Pray with equal specificity for the vivification imperatives. Read the Colossians 3:12–14 virtue list as a personal prayer: “Father, put on me a heart of compassion in the specific relationship where I have been least compassionate. Clothe me with kindness toward the specific person toward whom I have been least kind. Form in me the humility that does not assess the worth of others by their usefulness or their status. Give me the gentleness that does not overwhelm the vulnerable with the full weight of what I have the power to say. Grant me the patience that does not demand the resolution of ambiguity on my timeline. Teach me the bearing-with that continues to carry the weight of the other's difficulty rather than putting it down when the difficulty becomes inconvenient. And above all, put on me love, the bond that holds all the other virtues together and that the new nature in me is designed to express.”

Pray Philippians 1:6 over the members of your community whose progressive sanctification is most discouraged and whose progress is most imperceptible. Name them. Pray for them with the specific confidence that the verse warrants: not the wishful optimism of one who hopes that things will work out, but the faith-grounded, divine-faithfulness-grounded confidence of one who knows the character of the God who began the work. Ask the Father to make the certainty of the completion real to them in a way that sustains the forward-leaning posture through the season of slow or invisible progress. Ask the Spirit to produce in them the Philippians-3:12–14 posture: forgetting what lies behind, reaching forward to what lies ahead, pressing on toward the prize. And ask for the wisdom to be the specific, practically supportive, theologically grounded pastoral presence that the discouraged believer needs from a fellow pilgrim who is running the same race.

Close with the Hebrews-12:14 pursuit as the corporate declaration of the community's commitment to the non-optional holiness-pursuit that this unit has been establishing: "Pursue... the sanctification without which no one will see the Lord." Speak it not as a threat but as a declaration of the specific, urgent, relentless running-after that the new nature's genuine desire for holiness motivates and the Spirit's sanctifying work empowers. The goal is the Lord's face: the full, unmediated, glorifying vision of the One whose image the whole progressive sanctification has been conforming us to. The pursuit is the present-age dimension of the eschatological arrival. The warfare is real, the progress is genuine, the setbacks are honest, the divine faithfulness is certain, and the destination is the face of the One who is himself our life, the Christ in whom we are hidden and with whom we will be revealed.

"Not that I have already obtained it or have already become perfect, but I press on so that I may lay hold of that for which also I was laid hold of by Christ Jesus... I press on toward the goal for the prize of the upward call of God in Christ Jesus."

Philippians 3:12, 14, NASB 1995

Key Texts: Romans 8:13; Colossians 3:1–17; Hebrews 12:1–14; 1 Peter 1:15–16; Philippians 1:6; 3:12–14; 2 Corinthians 7:1; 1 John 1:8–2:2; Galatians 5:16–17; Romans 7:14–25

Soli Deo Gloria
To God Alone Be the Glory

FAITHFUL TO THE WORD

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