

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 25

The Means of Grace in Sanctification

The Ordinary Instruments God Uses to Make His People Holy

The Spirit Is the Agent; the Means Are the Channels Through Which He Works

“Sanctify them in the truth; Your word is truth”

Key Texts: John 17:17; Romans 5:3–5; 6:3–4; 1 Corinthians 11:23–26; Proverbs 27:17; Hebrews 10:24–25; 12:1–2

“Sanctify them in the truth; Your word is truth.”

John 17:17, NASB 1995

Dr. Joshua Nichols

Pastor, Theologian, Author

faithfultotheword.com

Introduction

The progressive sanctification that Lesson 23 defined and Lesson 24 grounded in the law's third use does not occur in a vacuum. It is accomplished by the Holy Spirit, but the Spirit, in the consistency of His ordinary working, does not typically accomplish it through immediate, unmediated, spectacular interventions that bypass the creature's natural faculties and the community's ordinary life. He accomplishes it through means: the ordinary, Word-saturated, prayer-shaped, community-embedded, suffering-employing, discipline-structured instruments through which He consistently and sovereignly applies the grace of God to the hearts and lives of the people He is sanctifying. These instruments are what the Reformed tradition has called the means of grace, the ordinary channels through which the extraordinary grace of the Spirit consistently flows.

The means of grace doctrine is grounded in a specific and important theological principle: the Spirit's sovereignty does not exclude the instrumentality of creaturely means but operates through it. God could have sanctified His people directly and immediately, bypassing all creaturely instrumentality. In His sovereign wisdom He chose instead to work through the preached Word, through the fellowship of the body, through the ordinances of baptism and the Lord's Supper, through prayer, through suffering, through the structured practices of the disciplined life. This choice is not a concession to creaturely limitations but the expression of the Creator's delight in working through the world He made and the creatures He redeemed, employing the ordinary structures of human life (language, community, memory, habit, narrative, suffering) as the instruments of the extraordinary supernatural work of conforming sinful human beings to the image of the eternal Son.

The critical principle that governs the entire doctrine of the means of grace is the one the lesson's outline names explicitly: the means of grace are channels, not causes. The Spirit is the effective agent; the means are the instruments He uses. This principle guards against two opposite errors that consistently arise in the church's theology and practice. The first is the error of sacramentalism: the belief that the means of grace (particularly the sacraments) operate automatically and inherently to produce the saving or sanctifying grace, independent of the Spirit's sovereign application. This error treats the means as causes, as if the administration of the sacrament or the hearing of the Word were themselves the producers of the grace rather than the channels through which the Spirit's sovereign grace flows. The second is the error of enthusiasm (in the theological sense): the belief that the Spirit works entirely independently of creaturely means, that the Spirit's sovereign freedom means He bypasses the means rather than working through them. This error treats the means as unnecessary or even as obstacles to the Spirit's direct working. The means-of-grace doctrine steers between both errors: the means are genuinely necessary (the Spirit consistently works through them) and genuinely instrumental (they are channels, not causes; the Spirit is the effective agent, not the means themselves).

This lesson will address each of the means of grace enumerated in the outline: the Word of God as the primary instrument of sanctification; prayer as the expression of dependence and the channel of communion; the Lord's Supper as the ordinance through which believers feed upon Christ spiritually; baptism as the sign and seal of union with Christ in His death and resurrection; Christian fellowship as the mutual-sharpening, burden-bearing community of the body; suffering as the refining fire that purifies faith and produces Christlike character; and the spiritual disciplines as the structured practices that position the believer to receive the Spirit's sanctifying work. The lesson concludes by returning to the governing principle: the Spirit is sovereign; the means are His instruments; and the believer's part is to use them faithfully, trusting the Spirit to make them effectual.

I. The Word of God

The Primary Instrument of Sanctification

A. *John 17:17 and the Sanctifying Truth*

Jesus' great high priestly prayer in John 17 contains what may be the most direct and the most authoritative statement of the relationship between the Word of God and the sanctification of the believer in the entire New Testament: "Sanctify them in the truth; Your word is truth" (v. 17, NASB 1995). The prayer is addressed to the Father, and its subject is the disciples whom Jesus is about to leave behind in the world, the disciples who will need to be sustained, protected, and progressively conformed to the character of Christ in His absence. And the specific instrument that Jesus requests for their sanctification is the truth of the Father's Word. Not a spectacular spiritual experience, not the direct unmediated operation of the divine power bypassing human faculties, not the accumulation of religious activities, but the truth, the specific, propositionally-expressible, text-embodied, Spirit-applied truth of the Father's Word.

The sanctifying power of the Word operates through the Spirit's application of its content to the believer's understanding, conscience, affections, and will. The Word itself, without the Spirit's application, does not sanctify; it may inform, convict, or merely entertain, but it does not transform. And the Spirit, in His ordinary working, does not sanctify apart from the Word; the Spirit's sanctifying work is consistently Word-shaped, truth-mediated, and propositionally grounded. The Spirit illumines the mind to understand the Word's truth; He applies the truth to the conscience to produce conviction; He moves the affections to respond to the truth with the appropriate emotions (grief over sin, joy in the gospel, love for God and neighbor); and He moves the will to act in accordance with the truth's instructions. The transformation of 2 Corinthians 3:18, "beholding as in a mirror the glory of the Lord, are being transformed into the same image", is the transformation that happens when the Spirit illumines the Word to produce the sustained, attentive beholding that issues in the progressive conformity to Christ.

The Word sanctifies through multiple modes of engagement: the public preaching of the Word (the primary means by which the Spirit's sanctifying truth reaches the gathered community), the private reading of the Word (the individual engagement with the Scripture that sustains the daily life of the sanctified), the teaching of the Word in smaller community settings (the disciplined, discussion-based, mutual-learning engagement that the body of Christ is uniquely equipped for), the memorization of the Word (the hiding of the Word in the heart that produces the continuous, throughout-the-day, Psalm-119-style meditation that shapes the mind from the inside), and the meditation on the Word (the sustained, reflective, Spirit-invited dwelling on specific passages that allows the truth to press into the specific resistances and needs of the particular life the believer is living). Each of these modes is genuinely a means of grace; each is genuinely the Spirit's instrument; and the believer who engages them faithfully and consistently is the believer who is placing herself in the path of the Spirit's consistent sanctifying work.

B. *The Word and the Other Means*

The Word's primacy among the means of grace is not the claim that the other means are not genuinely means, or that the Word operates in isolation from the rest of the Spirit's sanctifying instruments. It is the claim that the Word is the norming and defining means, the one through which all the others receive their interpretation, their

validity, and their proper use. Prayer is the Spirit-enabled engagement with the God who has spoken in the Word; the ordinances are the enacted Word, the visible Word in which the gospel's content is dramatized and sealed to the senses; the fellowship is the community of those who have been constituted by the Word and who shape one another through the mutual exchange of the Word's truth; suffering is interpreted and navigated through the Word's promise and wisdom; and the spiritual disciplines are practices that structure the believer's engagement with the God who has revealed Himself and His will in the Word. The Word is primary not because it is the only means but because it is the means that defines and interprets all the others.

II. Prayer

The Expression of Dependence and the Channel of Communion

A. *Prayer as Sanctifying Dependence*

Prayer is the second great means of grace in sanctification, and its specific character as a means is distinct from the Word's in an important way: while the Word flows from God to the believer (God speaks; the believer receives and responds), prayer flows from the believer to God (the believer speaks; God receives and responds). The relationship between the two is the relationship of a genuine conversation: the Word is the Father speaking to the child; prayer is the child speaking to the Father. Both are essential to the sanctifying relationship; the absence of either produces a distortion, the one who receives the Word but does not respond in prayer has received the Father's word without engaging the Father as a person; the one who prays without receiving the Word has a conversation with a God she does not adequately know.

Prayer functions as a means of sanctification in several distinct ways. First, it is the expression of the dependence that the Spirit's sanctifying work requires: the believer who prays for the Spirit's transforming work in the specific areas of her sanctification is the believer who has understood that the progressive conformity to Christ is not the product of her own will and effort alone but of the Spirit's sovereign enabling of her willing and working (Philippians 2:12–13). The prayer for specific sanctifying grace is both an expression of genuine dependence on the Spirit's work and an invitation to His specific engagement with the specific resistances of the specific life being sanctified. Second, prayer is the channel of the communion with God that is the relational context within which the sanctification occurs: the believer who spends consistent time in the Father's presence through prayer is the believer whose affections toward the Father are being consistently formed and deepened by the intimacy of the relationship, and whose obedience flows increasingly from the love of the familiar rather than the compliance of the distant.

Ephesians 6:18's "with all prayer and petition pray at all times in the Spirit, and with this in view, be on the alert with all perseverance and petition for all the saints" (NASB 1995) establishes the character of the sanctifying prayer life: "all prayer" (every form and mode of prayer, praise, confession, petition, intercession, thanksgiving), "at all times" (the continuous, throughout-the-day, conversational prayer of the one who lives in the Father's presence), "in the Spirit" (the Spirit's enabling and direction of the prayer, producing the specific content and the specific intercessions that the Spirit intends), and "with all perseverance" (the patient, persistent, long-term character of the prayer that does not give up when the answer is delayed or the prayer voice is quiet). The prayer life that sanctification requires is not the punctuated religious performance of the dutiful but the continuous,

conversational, Spirit-enabled address of the child to the Father who is consistently present and consistently responsive.

B. Confession as Sanctifying Honesty

Among the forms of prayer, confession deserves specific attention as a means of sanctification because of its particular role in maintaining the honest self-knowledge and the ongoing dependence on grace that the progressive sanctification requires. First John 1:9, “If we confess our sins, He is faithful and righteous to forgive us our sins and to cleanse us from all unrighteousness” (NASB 1995), establishes the pattern: the confession of sin is not the re-earning of the justified standing (which has been permanently established by Christ’s imputed righteousness) but the honest acknowledgment before the Father of the specific failures that have occurred in the progressive sanctification, leading to the fresh reception of the forgiveness that justification has permanently secured and the renewal of the Spirit’s sanctifying engagement in the specific area that the confession has named. The confession does not restore a lost justified standing; it restores the quality of the relational communion with the Father that the unacknowledged sin has disrupted.

III. The Ordinances

The Lord’s Supper and Baptism as Enacted Gospel

A. The Lord’s Supper as Spiritual Nourishment

The Lord’s Supper (also called the Eucharist or the Communion) is the ordinance instituted by Jesus on the night of His betrayal (Luke 22:19–20; 1 Corinthians 11:23–26) as the ongoing enacted memorial and proclamation of His atoning death. In the Reformed tradition’s account, the Lord’s Supper is a genuine means of grace, a channel through which the Spirit applies the benefits of the atonement to the believing participant in a specific, sacramentally-sealed, physically-expressed form that complements and confirms what the Word proclaims to the ear. The Supper is not merely a memorial act (in the Zwinglian sense of a purely subjective remembering); nor is it the physical presence of Christ’s body and blood under the physical elements (in the Roman Catholic or Lutheran sense). It is the means by which the believing participant feeds spiritually upon Christ, by which the Spirit applies the reality of union with Christ and the benefits of His atonement to the heart of the one who receives the bread and the cup in genuine faith.

First Corinthians 11:23–26 establishes the three dimensions of the Lord’s Supper that the Reformed account preserves. First, it is a proclamation: “you proclaim the Lord’s death until He comes” (v. 26, NASB 1995), the Supper is the enacted preaching of the gospel, the visible Word that declares the same saving reality that the preached Word declares to the ear. Second, it is a remembrance: “Do this in remembrance of Me” (v. 24, 25), not merely a cognitive recalling of historical facts but the active, Spirit-aided, covenantally-structured engagement with the memory of the death of Christ that renews the believer’s connection to the event on which her salvation rests. Third, it is a participation: “the cup of blessing which we bless, is it not a sharing in the blood of Christ? The bread which we break, is it not a sharing in the body of Christ?” (1 Corinthians 10:16, NASB 1995), the Supper is a genuine participation in the benefits of Christ’s body and blood, a means by which the Spirit deepens and renews the believer’s union with Christ and strengthens the faith through which that union is received and maintained.

The Lord's Supper's role in sanctification is the specific, regularly-renewed, sense-engaging encounter with the grace of the atonement that reinforces the truth the Word has proclaimed and the prayer has expressed. The person who hears the gospel in the preached Word and receives the gospel in the Supper has the same saving reality communicated to two different faculties, the understanding through the Word, the senses and the body through the enacted signs, and the double communication reinforces the reality of the grace in a way that either alone cannot fully achieve. The Supper also serves as a communal means of grace: the gathered community's participation in the one bread and the one cup (1 Corinthians 10:17) is both the expression of the unity of the body of Christ and the means by which that unity is renewed and deepened, as the members of the body are collectively brought before the death of Christ that constitutes their shared life.

B. Baptism as the Sign and Seal of Union with Christ

Baptism, in the Reformed account, is not a means of regeneration (as the Roman Catholic and some Lutheran traditions teach) but the sign and seal of the covenant of grace, the ordinance that marks the believer's entry into the covenant community and that dramatizes and seals the grace of union with Christ in His death and resurrection. Romans 6:3–4 provides the most theologically rich account of baptism's meaning in the New Testament: "Or do you not know that all of us who have been baptized into Christ Jesus have been baptized into His death? Therefore we have been buried with Him through baptism into death, so that as Christ was raised from the dead through the glory of the Father, so we too might walk in newness of life" (NASB 1995). The baptism into Christ's death and resurrection is the sacramental dramatization of the union with Christ that the Spirit effects through faith, the dying to the old life and the rising to the new that is the essence of the regenerating, justifying, adopting, and sanctifying work.

Baptism's role in sanctification is primarily a memorial and identity-forming function: the baptized believer carries through her entire Christian life the specific, concrete, physically-enacted reminder that she has died to sin and has been raised with Christ, and the call to holiness that Paul draws from the baptismal reality in Romans 6:11–14 ("consider yourselves to be dead to sin, but alive to God in Christ Jesus") is a call to inhabit the identity that the baptism has enacted and sealed. The progressive sanctification is the living out of what the baptism has declared: the daily actualization of the death-and-resurrection reality that the baptism has sealed to the believer's identity. In this sense, baptism is a once-for-all means of grace whose sanctifying function is a lifetime-long recollection and inhabited identity.

IV. Christian Fellowship

The Mutual Sharpening of the Body

A. The Body as the Context of Sanctification

One of the most practically neglected means of sanctification in individualistic evangelical culture is the specific, community-embedded, mutually-accountable fellowship of the local church. The New Testament's consistent account of the Christian life is not the isolated individual and her personal relationship with God, mediated by her own Bible reading and prayer in a purely private spiritual transaction. It is the corporate life of the body of Christ, in which the individual members are mutually dependent on one another for the specific encouragement,

accountability, correction, and love that the progressive sanctification requires and that no individual can provide for herself. Hebrews 10:24–25 establishes both the practice and the necessity of the corporate means of grace: “and let us consider how to stimulate one another to love and good deeds, not forsaking our own assembling together, as is the habit of some, but encouraging one another; and all the more as you see the day drawing near” (NASB 1995).

The specific verbs of Hebrews 10:24–25 describe the distinctly active, intentional, other-focused character of the sanctifying fellowship: “stimulate one another to love and good deeds”, not merely to receive encouragement passively but to actively consider how to provoke (Greek: *paroxysmos*, the same word for the sharp disagreement of Acts 15:39, now redirected from contention to the productive provocation of love) the other members of the community toward the specific expressions of love and good deeds that the sanctified life requires. “Not forsaking our own assembling together”, the regular gathering is not optional for the one who is serious about the progressive sanctification; it is the specific, irreplaceable context in which the mutual-stimulation and the communal-encouragement that the verse describes occur. The fellowship is a means of grace precisely because it provides what the isolated individual cannot provide for herself: the correction that self-deception resists, the encouragement that discouragement withholds from itself, and the accountability that self-indulgence avoids.

Proverbs 27:17’s “Iron sharpens iron, so one man sharpens another” (NASB 1995) is the Old Testament’s wisdom formulation of the sanctifying dynamic of genuine community. The sharpening of iron by iron is not a comfortable process; it involves friction, resistance, and the removal of material that has become blunt or damaged. The sanctifying fellowship is not the fellowship of comfortable mutual affirmation that avoids the friction of honest correction; it is the fellowship that is willing to speak the truth in love (Ephesians 4:15), to bear one another’s burdens (Galatians 6:2), to confess sins to one another (James 5:16), and to pray for one another with the specific, named, personally-informed prayer of those who know each other’s actual spiritual condition. The community in which this kind of fellowship is practiced is a community in which the means of grace is functioning as the Spirit intends, the iron of the one member’s honest, loving engagement sharpening the spiritual character of the other toward the Christlikeness that neither could achieve in isolation.

B. The “One Another” Commands as Sanctifying Means

The New Testament’s extensive collection of “one another” commands, love one another (John 13:34–35), pray for one another (James 5:16), bear one another’s burdens (Galatians 6:2), confess your sins to one another (James 5:16), encourage one another (1 Thessalonians 5:11), admonish one another (Colossians 3:16), forgive one another (Ephesians 4:32), serve one another (Galatians 5:13), constitutes a comprehensive description of the community practices through which the sanctifying fellowship operates. These commands are not secondary to the individual’s private spiritual disciplines; they are the community-embedded dimensions of the progressive sanctification that can only be fulfilled in the context of genuine, committed, long-term, honest Christian community. The believer who has no genuine community in which these commands can be practiced has cut herself off from a set of sanctifying means that are irreplaceable, because the sanctification of the individual person requires the specific gifts, challenges, and mirrors that only the other members of the body can provide.

V. Suffering as a Means of Grace

The Refining Fire That Purifies Faith

A. *Romans 5:3–5 and the Productive Suffering*

Suffering occupies a unique position among the means of grace because it is the only one that is not chosen but received, not a practice that the believer engages voluntarily but a providential circumstance that the Father administers according to His sovereign and loving purposes. Yet suffering is among the most effective of the means of sanctification, because it accomplishes what no voluntary practice can: it reaches into the specific depths of the believer's self-reliance, her false sources of security, her residual pride and comfort-seeking, and her untested faith, and it tests, exposes, and either purifies or destroys what it finds there. The suffering that the Father administers through the progressive sanctification is not punishment (the atonement has permanently discharged the retributive penalty); it is the formative fire of a Father who loves too much to leave His children in the comfortable complacency that prosperity tends to produce.

Romans 5:3–5 provides the most concentrated account of the productive logic of suffering in the Christian life: “And not only this, but we also exult in our tribulations, knowing that tribulation brings about perseverance; and perseverance, proven character; and proven character, hope; and hope does not disappoint, because the love of God has been poured out within our hearts through the Holy Spirit who was given to us” (NASB 1995). The productive chain, tribulation → perseverance → proven character → hope → the love of God poured out, establishes the specific mechanism by which the means of suffering accomplishes its sanctifying work. The tribulations produce perseverance (hypomonin, the patient, load-bearing endurance of the long-distance runner rather than the spectacular bravado of the short-term volunteer): the character quality that only the sustained experience of difficulty can forge. The perseverance produces proven character (dokimin, the character that has been tested and found genuine, like metal that has been assayed and found to be the real thing): the spiritual integrity that the testing of real suffering reveals and confirms. And the proven character produces hope: the specific, tested, suffering-confirmed hope that does not disappoint, because it is grounded not in the prosperity that suffering has removed but in the love of God that the Spirit pours out within the heart precisely in the midst of the suffering.

The “exulting in tribulations” (Greek: kauchometha, present active, an ongoing boast or exultation) is not the stoic suppression of the pain's reality or the performed cheerfulness of one who has learned to say the correct things about suffering. It is the specific, theologically-grounded, Spirit-enabled recognition of the sanctifying process at work in the specific experience of the specific suffering: the ability to see, in the tribulation itself, the chain that leads through perseverance and proven character to the hope that does not disappoint. The exultation is not the feeling of happiness about the suffering but the Spirit-produced conviction that the suffering is accomplishing something, that the Father's hand is in it, that His purposes are being served by it, and that the outcome on the other side of it will be the specific, tested, hope-grounded character that the suffering has been forging.

B. *Hebrews 12 and the Discipline Revisited*

The connection between the Father's discipline (developed in Lesson 22's treatment of adoption's privileges) and the means of grace doctrine is direct and mutually illuminating. Hebrews 12:5–11's account of the paideia, the formative training of the Father who disciplines every son He receives, for the purpose of their sharing in His holiness, is the adoption doctrine's account of the same reality that Romans 5:3–5's means-of-grace account describes from the sanctification angle. The suffering is simultaneously the Father's familial discipline (the

expression of the paternal love that will not leave the adopted child as she is) and the Spirit's sanctifying means (the instrument through which the progressive conformity to Christ is accomplished in ways that no other means can reach). The two angles of vision, familial and sanctifying, are not competing accounts but complementary descriptions of the same reality from the perspectives of two different doctrines that the lesson's full scope encompasses.

James 1:2–4 provides the third major New Testament account of the productive suffering: “Consider it all joy, my brethren, when you encounter various trials, knowing that the testing of your faith produces endurance. And let endurance have its perfect result, so that you may be perfect and complete, lacking in nothing” (NASB 1995). The “testing of your faith” (dokimion pisteios, the trial of the faith, using the same metallurgical assay vocabulary as Romans 5:4's dokimin) establishes that the function of the suffering is not the destruction of the faith but its purification and confirmation: the specific impurities of self-reliance, false confidence, and untested presumption are burned away, leaving the genuine article, the faith that has been tested and has held. The “lacking in nothing” (v. 4) is the eschatological completeness toward which the whole progressive sanctification is moving, and it is a completeness that the comfortable, untested, undisciplined spiritual life cannot produce.

VI. The Spiritual Disciplines

Positioning the Believer to Receive the Spirit's Work

A. *What the Disciplines Are and Are Not*

The spiritual disciplines are the structured practices by which the believer intentionally positions herself to receive the grace of God through the other means of grace and to remove the specific obstacles that sin and worldliness erect against the Spirit's sanctifying work. The classic spiritual disciplines include fasting, solitude, silence, meditation, study, service, confession, worship, celebration, and submission, each addressing a specific dimension of the soul's disorder and providing a specific context in which the Spirit's renewing work can be more fully received. The most important thing to understand about the spiritual disciplines is what they are not: they are not the practices by which the believer earns or merits the sanctifying grace. They are the practices by which she clears the ground, removes the obstacles, and quiets the distractions that prevent her from fully receiving the grace that the Spirit is consistently offering through the other means. The disciplines are preparatory, not meritorious.

Richard Foster, in his influential book *Celebration of Discipline*, describes the disciplines as the “means of receiving God's grace” and insists that “the Disciplines allow us to place ourselves before God so that He can transform us.” The spatial metaphor is illuminating: the disciplines are not the transformation itself; they are the act of placing oneself where the transformation happens. The sun transforms the garden, but the gardener who clears the weeds and removes the shade is placing the garden in the path of the sun's light. The discipline is the clearing; the Spirit's transforming work is the light. Without the clearing, the light is still available and still sovereign; but the obstacles the clearing removes prevent the plant from receiving the light it needs to grow. The disciplines remove the obstacles.

B. *Fasting and Solitude as Illustrative Examples*

Among the spiritual disciplines, fasting and solitude deserve specific attention as the two that most directly address the specific distortions of the soul that modern evangelical culture most consistently produces and most consistently neglects to address. Fasting is the intentional abstention from food (or, in a broader sense, from any legitimate pleasure or comfort) for the purpose of intensified prayer, heightened spiritual sensitivity, and the training of the soul's appetite toward the things of God rather than the things of the body. Jesus' teaching on fasting in Matthew 6:16–18 assumes that His disciples will fast ("When you fast", not "If you fast") and instructs them in the private, Father-oriented character that distinguishes the genuine fast from the performed fast. The sanctifying function of fasting is the specific training of the will to say no to legitimate physical desire in the service of a higher spiritual priority, a training that builds the specific muscle of self-denial that the progressive mortification of sinful desire (Lesson 26's subject) requires.

Solitude is the intentional withdrawal from the noise, the stimulation, and the social performance of ordinary life for the purpose of attending to the soul's actual condition before God and receiving the Spirit's specific, personal, conviction-and-renewal work in the specific areas of the life that the busyness of ordinary engagement prevents from being genuinely examined. Jesus regularly withdrew to desolate places to pray (Luke 5:16), and the pattern of His withdrawals established the specific priority of the soul's renewal in solitude as the ground from which the public ministry's demands could be met. The modern believer's chronic busyness, social media saturation, and perpetual noise-exposure are among the most effective obstacles to the Spirit's sanctifying work, not because the Spirit cannot work through noise and activity, but because the specific, interior, self-examining, soul-attending work of the solitude's withdrawal enables dimensions of the Spirit's sanctifying engagement that the busyness consistently prevents.

C. *Hebrews 12:1–2 and the Disciplined Race*

Hebrews 12:1–2 provides the New Testament's most comprehensive and most practically suggestive account of the disciplined, intentional character of the sanctified life as a whole: "Therefore, since we have so great a cloud of witnesses surrounding us, let us also lay aside every encumbrance and the sin which so easily entangles us, and let us run with endurance the race that is set before us, fixing our eyes on Jesus, the author and perfecter of faith, who for the joy set before Him endured the cross, despising the shame, and has sat down at the right hand of the throne of God" (NASB 1995). The passage establishes three specific elements of the disciplined spiritual life that correspond directly to the disciplines' function. First, "lay aside every encumbrance": the active, intentional removal of the weights that slow the race, not necessarily sinful things (the word is *onkon*, a weight or burden, not specifically a sin) but things that, while not inherently wrong, reduce the effectiveness of the spiritual race. The disciplines are the practices of laying aside.

Second, "lay aside the sin which so easily entangles": the specific, mortifying, Spirit-empowered work of removing the specific sin-patterns that most effectively trap and disable the spiritual runner. This is the mortification of Lesson 26's specific subject, anticipated here as the necessary companion of the laying-aside of mere weights. Third, "fixing our eyes on Jesus": the specific, continuous, attention-directing practice of keeping the gaze of faith on the One whose faithful endurance of the cross is both the ground of the runner's hope and the model of the runner's perseverance. The spiritual disciplines, taken together, are the structured practices by which the runner lays aside the encumbrances, addresses the entangling sins, and maintains the sustained gaze on Jesus that Hebrews 12:1–2 describes as the essence of the disciplined spiritual life.

VII. The Governing Principle

Channels, Not Causes, The Spirit Is the Agent

A. *The Spirit's Sovereignty Over the Means*

The governing principle of the entire means-of-grace doctrine is the one that the lesson's outline names with admirable precision: the means of grace are channels, not causes. The Spirit is the effective agent; the means are the instruments He uses. This principle is not a subtle theological nicety; it is the decisive clarification that prevents the entire doctrine from collapsing into either the sacramentalism that treats the means as automatic causes of grace or the spiritual passivism that abandons the means on the grounds that the Spirit can work wherever He will. Both errors misunderstand the relationship between the Spirit's sovereignty and the ordinary instrumentality of the means.

The sacramentalist error treats the means as causes: if the right sacramental act is performed in the right way with the right intention, the grace is produced, not because the Spirit has sovereignly applied it but because the sacramental mechanism has been correctly operated. This is the error that the Reformers identified in the Roman Catholic doctrine of the sacraments operating *ex opere operato* (by the work performed): the grace is produced by the act itself, independent of the Spirit's specific, sovereign, personal application to the faith of the recipient. The means-as-channels doctrine insists that the means do not produce the grace; the Spirit does, through the means, by His sovereign application, to the believing recipient. The same sermon can be heard by two people and leave one transformed and the other untouched; the same sacrament can be received by two people and strengthen one's faith while leaving the other indifferent. The difference is not in the means themselves but in the Spirit's sovereign application, and the Spirit's application is not produced by the correct performance of the means but by His own free, personal, electing grace.

The enthusiast error (in the theological sense) treats the Spirit as working apart from and without the means: since the Spirit is sovereign, He does not need the ordinary instruments; the believer who is truly spiritual will be transformed by the Spirit's direct working without the mediation of the Word, the fellowship, the ordinances, or the disciplines. The means-as-channels doctrine insists that the Spirit's sovereignty does not exclude the instrumentality of the means but operates through it, that the Spirit has chosen, in His sovereign freedom, to work through the ordinary, Word-saturated, community-embedded, discipline-structured instruments that He has provided for this purpose. The believer who abandons the means on the grounds that the Spirit can work without them has substituted her own theological theory about how the Spirit ought to work for the specific, observable, historically-consistent pattern of how the Spirit actually does work.

B. *Faithful Use of the Means*

The practical implication of the channels-not-causes principle is the specific posture of faithful, expectant, non-mechanical engagement with the means of grace. The believer uses the means faithfully because the Spirit works through them, not because the means automatically produce the grace (which would make the engagement mechanical and self-relying) and not because they are optional (which would make the engagement sporadic and undisciplined). She engages the Word with the expectation that the Spirit will illuminate it and apply it to her specific life; she prays with the expectation that the Spirit will move the Father to respond according to His good

will; she receives the Lord's Supper with the expectation that the Spirit will feed her soul with the reality of Christ through the sign; she participates in the fellowship with the expectation that the Spirit will use the other members to speak to her specific needs; she endures suffering with the expectation that the Spirit will use the affliction to forge the specific character that the affliction is designed to produce; and she practices the disciplines with the expectation that they are clearing the ground for the Spirit's work rather than producing the work themselves.

The expectant, non-mechanical engagement with the means of grace is the specific posture of 2 Corinthians 3:18's "beholding as in a mirror the glory of the Lord, are being transformed": the beholding is the believer's activity (faithful, attentive, sustained engagement with the means through which the glory is revealed); the transforming is the Spirit's work (the sovereign, gracious, progressive conforming of the believer to the image she is beholding). The believer does not produce the transformation by the quality of the beholding; she receives it through the beholding as the Spirit applies what is seen to the depth of the heart and life. And the Spirit does not transform without the beholding; His consistent pattern is to work through the attentive, expectant, faithfully-engaged means to accomplish the transformation that the believer's own effort and engagement cannot produce but without which it does not consistently occur.

"And not only this, but we also exult in our tribulations, knowing that tribulation brings about perseverance; and perseverance, proven character; and proven character, hope; and hope does not disappoint, because the love of God has been poured out within our hearts through the Holy Spirit who was given to us."

Romans 5:3–5, NASB 1995

Theological Terms and Definitions

Means of Grace	The ordinary, God-appointed instruments through which the Holy Spirit consistently applies the sanctifying grace of God to the hearts and lives of the people He is conforming to the image of Christ. The means of grace include the Word of God (the primary means), prayer, the ordinances (baptism and the Lord's Supper), Christian fellowship, suffering, and the spiritual disciplines. The critical principle: the means are channels, not causes, the Spirit is the effective agent; the means are the instruments He uses. The means do not automatically or inherently produce the grace; the Spirit sovereignly applies the grace through them, to the believing, expectant, faithfully-engaging recipient. Using the means is necessary (the Spirit works through them); using the means is not sufficient (the Spirit's sovereign application is the essential element that the means themselves cannot guarantee).
Word of God	The primary and norming means of sanctifying grace, named explicitly in Jesus' high priestly prayer: "Sanctify them in the truth; Your word is truth" (John 17:17). The Word sanctifies through multiple modes of engagement: public preaching, private reading, teaching in community, memorization, and meditation, all of which are means through which the Spirit illumines the mind, applies the truth to the conscience, moves the affections, and directs the will toward the conformity to Christ that the progressive sanctification aims at. The Word is primary (the norming and defining means) not because it is the only means but because it is the means that defines, interprets, and validates all the others, and because the Spirit's sanctifying work is consistently Word-shaped and truth-mediated.
Lord's Supper	The ordinance instituted by Jesus at the Last Supper (Matthew 26:26–29; Luke 22:19–20; 1 Corinthians 11:23–26) as the ongoing enacted memorial, proclamation, and participation in the benefits of His atoning death. In the Reformed account, the Lord's Supper is a genuine means of grace through which the Spirit applies the benefits of Christ's atonement to the believing participant, not the physical presence of Christ's body and blood under the elements (transubstantiation or consubstantiation) nor a purely subjective memorial (Zwinglianism) but a genuine spiritual feeding on Christ in which the Spirit deepens and renews the believer's union with Christ and strengthens the faith through which that union is received. The Supper sanctifies through its function as proclaimed gospel (visible Word), renewed remembrance (covenant memorial), and genuine participation (spiritual feeding on Christ).
Baptism	The ordinance of water administered in the name of the Triune God (Matthew 28:19) that marks the believer's entry into the covenant community and dramatizes the grace of union with Christ in His death and resurrection. In the Reformed account, baptism is not a means of regeneration (the Spirit regenerates through the Word, not through water) but the sign and seal of the covenant of grace, the sacramental enactment and certification of the union with Christ that the Spirit effects through faith. Romans 6:3–4's account of baptism into Christ's death and resurrection provides the theological content: the baptism dramatizes the dying-and-rising with Christ that is the essence of the Christian's identity. Baptism's sanctifying function is the lifetime-long identity-forming recollection of that union: the daily inhabiting of what the baptism has enacted.
Christian Fellowship	The mutual encouragement, accountability, correction, and love of the body of Christ as a means of sanctifying grace, the community-embedded dimension of the progressive sanctification that cannot be replaced by any purely individual practice. Grounded in Hebrews 10:24–25 ("stimulate one another to love and good deeds"), Proverbs 27:17 ("Iron sharpens iron"), and the New Testament's extensive collection of "one another" commands. The fellowship sanctifies through the specific gifts that only genuine community can provide: the correction that self-deception resists, the encouragement that discouragement withholds from itself, and the accountability that self-indulgence avoids. The person who has no genuine Christian community has cut herself off from a set of sanctifying means that are irreplaceable.

	because the sanctification of the individual person requires what only other persons can provide.
Suffering as Means of Grace	The providential experience of tribulation, loss, difficulty, and pain through which the Father accomplishes specific dimensions of the progressive sanctification that no voluntary practice can reach. Grounded in Romans 5:3–5 (tribulation → perseverance → proven character → hope) and James 1:2–4 (the testing of faith produces endurance, leading to completeness). Suffering is unique among the means of grace because it is received rather than chosen, administered by the Father’s sovereign, loving providence rather than engaged by the believer’s voluntary initiative. Its sanctifying function is the exposure and purification of the false sources of security, the untested faith, and the comfortable self-reliance that prosperity consistently preserves and suffering consistently dismantles. The productive suffering of the adopted child is the Father’s formative discipline (Hebrews 12:5–11), administered for the sharing of His holiness and the yielding of the peaceful fruit of righteousness.
Spiritual Disciplines	The structured practices by which the believer intentionally positions herself to receive the Spirit’s sanctifying grace through the other means and to remove the obstacles that sin, worldliness, and distraction erect against that work. Classic spiritual disciplines include fasting, solitude, silence, meditation, study, service, confession, worship, celebration, and submission. The critical characterization: the disciplines are preparatory, not meritorious, they do not earn or produce the sanctifying grace but clear the ground, remove the obstacles, and quiet the distractions that prevent the believer from fully receiving the grace that the Spirit is consistently offering. Following Foster: “The Disciplines allow us to place ourselves before God so that He can transform us.” The transformation is the Spirit’s work; the disciplines are the placing.
Sacramentalism	The theological error that treats the sacraments (ordinances) as automatic causes of grace, operating <i>ex opere operato</i> (by the work performed), as if the correct administration of the sacramental act inherently produces the grace, independent of the Spirit’s sovereign, personal application to the faith of the recipient. The means-of-grace doctrine’s critical principle (channels, not causes) directly opposes sacramentalism: the sacraments do not produce grace; the Spirit applies grace through the sacraments, to the believing, expectantly-receiving participant. The same sacrament received by two people may sanctify one and leave the other unchanged, because the difference is not in the sacramental mechanism but in the Spirit’s sovereign, discriminating application.
Hypomonin	Greek: “perseverance,” “patient endurance,” “steadfastness under load.” The specific character quality that Romans 5:3 names as the first fruit of the sanctifying suffering: tribulation “brings about” (<i>katergazetai</i>) perseverance. Hypomonin is not the spectacular heroism of the moment of crisis but the sustained, patient, load-bearing endurance of the person who has been under pressure long enough for the endurance itself to have become a stable character quality. Distinguished from passive resignation (which accepts the suffering without being formed by it) and from stoic suppression (which endures without the Spirit’s specific engagement with the suffering’s meaning). The hypomonin that suffering produces is specifically the character quality that trials test, expose as genuine, and forge in the believer who engages them with the expectant, Spirit-dependent, means-of-grace posture.
Dokimin	Greek: “proven character,” “approved quality,” the character that has been tested and found genuine, like metal that has been assayed and found to be the real article. Used in Romans 5:4 as the fruit of the perseverance that the suffering produces: perseverance produces dokimin. The metallurgical metaphor captures the specific function of the testing in relation to the character: the testing does not create the quality (the gold was always gold); it reveals, confirms, and in the process of the testing, also purifies (the impurities are burned away, leaving the genuine article). The dokimin of the sanctified believer is the specific, tested, suffering-confirmed spiritual integrity whose authenticity the testing has demonstrated and

whose purity the testing has refined. It is the character that only the real experience of real difficulty can forge and confirm.

Practical Application

A. For the Mind: What Must We Believe?

We must believe that the Spirit works through ordinary means and not typically through immediate, spectacular, bypass-the-creaturely-instruments interventions. This conviction has enormous practical consequence: it means that the believer who neglects the ordinary means of grace (the Word, prayer, fellowship, the ordinances) and waits for a spectacular spiritual experience to produce the sanctifying transformation is waiting for something the Spirit has not promised. The Spirit has promised to work through the Word, the prayer, the fellowship, the ordinances, the suffering, and the disciplines, and the believer who uses these faithfully, with the expectant non-mechanical posture that the channels-not-causes principle describes, is the believer who is consistently in the path of the Spirit's consistent sanctifying work.

We must believe the channels-not-causes principle with the specific precision it requires: the means do not automatically produce the grace (which would make engagement mechanical and self-relying), but the Spirit works through the means consistently (which makes engagement genuinely necessary). The practical posture this produces is faithful engagement with the means, consistent, expectant, non-perfunctory, Spirit-trusting, combined with the humble recognition that the transformation is the Spirit's work, not the believer's achievement. The person who reads the Bible every day but is not being transformed is either reading without the Spirit's illuminating engagement (which calls for prayer and honest self-examination) or is not actually receiving what she reads (which calls for the attentive, meditative, beholding-quality engagement that 2 Corinthians 3:18 describes). The means are necessary; the Spirit's application through the means is what produces the fruit.

We must believe that suffering is a genuine means of grace, not an interruption of the Spirit's sanctifying work but one of its most effective instruments. This means receiving the specific, painful providences of the Christian life not with the resentment of someone whose expectations have been violated but with the Romans 5:3–5 "knowing", the specific, theologically-grounded understanding of what the tribulation is producing. The knowing is not the feeling of happiness about the suffering; it is the Spirit-produced conviction that the Father's hand is in the suffering, His purposes are being served by it, and the perseverance, proven character, and hope that are on the other side of it are worth the cost.

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

Desire the specific quality of engagement with the Word of God that 2 Corinthians 3:18 describes as the means of transformation, the "beholding as in a mirror the glory of the Lord" that produces the being-transformed into the same image. This is not the dutiful, obligation-fulfilling reading of the Christian who checks off the daily Bible-reading box; it is the attentive, glory-perceiving, Spirit-invited dwelling on the Word that allows what is there, the character of God, the person of Christ, the promises of the gospel, the demands of the law, the narrative of redemption, to press into the specific resistances and needs of the specific life the believer is living. Desire to read the Word with the expectation that the Spirit is there, in the text, with something specific to say to the specific person you are this specific day.

Desire the specific community that Hebrews 10:24–25's "stimulate one another to love and good deeds" describes, not the comfortable, non-confrontational, mutual-affirmation fellowship that avoids the friction of

honest correction, but the genuine, iron-sharpens-iron community of those who are willing to speak the truth in love, bear one another's burdens, and pray for one another with the specific, named, personally-informed prayer of those who actually know each other's spiritual condition. The superficial fellowship of the church that meets on Sunday and disperses without any ongoing commitment to the mutual sanctification of its members is missing the means of grace that the corporate life of the body of Christ was specifically designed to provide.

Desire the Romans 5:3–5 posture toward the specific sufferings of your current season of life: not the stoic suppression of the pain, not the performed cheerfulness of the one who has learned to say the correct things about trials, but the specific, Spirit-enabled, theologically-grounded “knowing” that the tribulation is producing perseverance, the perseverance is producing proven character, and the proven character is producing the hope that does not disappoint. Ask the Spirit to give you the specific eyes to see what He is forging in you through the specific suffering you are currently experiencing, and the patience to trust that the production chain is operating even when the product is not yet visible.

C. For the Hands: What Must We Do?

- Audit your current use of the means of grace across all seven categories enumerated in this lesson: the Word (reading, preaching, teaching, memorization, meditation), prayer (regular, specific, confessional, intercessory), the Lord's Supper (frequency, quality of preparation and reception), baptism (active recollection of its meaning and identity-forming function), fellowship (genuine, ongoing, honest, mutually-sanctifying community), suffering (conscious, Spirit-dependent engagement with the current painful providences), and spiritual disciplines (fasting, solitude, silence, and the other structured practices). For each category, assess honestly: is this means being used faithfully, expectantly, and with the non-mechanical Spirit-trusting posture that the channels-not-causes principle requires? Identify the two or three most neglected or most mechanically-used means and name the specific changes in practice that would address the neglect or the mechanism.
- Read Hebrews 10:19–25 as the passage that holds together the full array of the means of grace in a single sustained paragraph. Note the specific means named or implied: the blood of Jesus opening the way (the atonement as the basis of all the means), drawing near with a sincere heart (prayer), holding fast to the confession without wavering (the Word and its confession), considering how to stimulate one another (fellowship), not forsaking the assembling (the gathered community, the ordinances). Ask: what is the specific connection between the “confidence to enter the holy place by the blood of Jesus” (v. 19) and the call to “not forsake our own assembling together” (v. 25)? Does the justified standing that grounds the access to God also ground the obligation to the means through which the Spirit deepens and maintains that standing's experiential reality?
- Study Romans 5:3–5 as the biblical account of the productive logic of suffering. Identify a specific current tribulation in your life. Then trace the production chain: what specific quality of perseverance (patient, load-bearing, sustained endurance) is this specific tribulation designed to produce? What specific impurity of self-reliance, false confidence, or untested faith is the testing of this specific tribulation designed to expose and refine? What specific proven character, the dokimin of the tested and confirmed faith, is on the other side of this specific suffering's formative work? And what specific hope does the production chain end with, what specific confidence in the love of God that the Spirit is pouring out through this specific trial? Bring your answers to your study group for prayer.
- Establish or deepen one spiritual discipline this month that you have been neglecting or practicing mechanically. Options: fasting (one day per week, for the specific purpose of prayer for sanctifying grace in

the specific areas of your life most actively contested); solitude (one extended period per week of deliberate withdrawal from noise, screens, and social performance, for the specific purpose of attending to the soul's actual condition before God); Scripture memorization (one extended passage, Romans 8, Colossians 3, Ephesians 1, memorized across the month as the specific content of the throughout-the-day meditation that Psalm 119:97 describes). Choose the discipline that addresses the specific obstacle most active in your sanctification, and engage it with the specific expectation that you are placing yourself in the path of the Spirit's work rather than producing the work yourself.

- Read John 17:1–26 (the entire high priestly prayer) as the context for the sanctifying prayer of verse 17. Note the three groups for whom Jesus prays: the Eleven (vv. 6–19), those who believe through their word (v. 20, the whole church to the end of the age, including this congregation), and the eschatological unity of the whole redeemed community (vv. 21–26). In the prayer for the Eleven and for the church, what is the specific relationship between the Word, the world's opposition, the protection of the Father, and the sanctification of verse 17? How does the prayer's structure establish the means of grace (the Word) within the larger context of the community's mission (sent into the world) and the Father's protection (keeping them from the evil one)? And what does it mean for your own engagement with the Word that Jesus Himself has prayed for your sanctification through it?

Key Texts: *John 17:17; Romans 5:3–5; 6:3–4; 1 Corinthians 10:16; 11:23–26; Proverbs 27:17; Hebrews 10:19–25; 12:1–2; James 1:2–4; Matthew 6:16–18; Luke 5:16; 2 Corinthians 3:18; Ephesians 6:18*

Study and Discussion Questions

Opening Question

- The lesson opens with the governing principle that the Spirit works through ordinary means rather than typically through immediate, spectacular, bypass-the-creaturely-instruments interventions. Before studying the lesson, which of the two opposite errors, sacramentalism (the means automatically produce the grace) or enthusiasm (the Spirit works without the means), is more prevalent in the evangelical culture you inhabit? And how does the channels-not-causes principle address both errors simultaneously? In your own spiritual experience, where are you most prone to engaging the means mechanically (as if the engagement itself produced the transformation) or neglecting the means (as if the Spirit should work without requiring your faithful engagement with them)?

Observation Questions (What Do the Texts Say?)

- Read John 17:13–19. In verse 15, what does Jesus explicitly not ask the Father to do for His disciples, and what does He ask instead? In verse 16, what is the description of the disciples' relationship to the world? In verse 17, what is the specific instrument Jesus requests for the disciples' sanctification, and what is the identification he makes ("Your word is...")? In verse 18, what is the parallel between the Son's mission and the disciples' mission? And how does the context of verses 15–18 (in the world but not of it, sent into the world) establish the specific role of the Word as the means of sustaining the disciples' sanctifying mission in a hostile environment?
- Read Romans 5:1–5. In verse 1, what is the established peace that grounds the exultation of verses 2–5? In verse 2, what is the standing in which the believers live ("this grace in which we...")? In verse 3, what does Paul say the believers exult in ("not only this, but also..."), and what does the present-active "kauchōmetha" (we exult) suggest about the ongoing, practiced character of this response to tribulations? In verses 3–4, what is the complete production chain (tribulation → ... → ... → ...)? In verse 5, what is the ground of the hope that does not disappoint, and through whom is that ground communicated?
- Read Hebrews 10:19–25. In verses 19–21, what three grounds for drawing near are named (since we have... since we have... our hearts sprinkled...)? In verse 22, what is the character of the approach described ("with a sincere heart in full...")? In verse 23, what is the call and its basis ("let us hold fast... for He who promised is...")? In verse 24, what is the active, other-directed call ("let us consider how to..."), and what does the word "consider" (Greek: *katanoomen*, deliberate, careful, attentive thought) suggest about the intentional character of the fellowship's sanctifying function? In verse 25, what practice is to be maintained, and with what urgency ("all the more as you see...")?
- Read 1 Corinthians 11:23–26 and 10:14–17. In 11:24–25, what two actions does the eating of the bread and the drinking of the cup constitute ("do this in...")? In 11:26, what does the eating and drinking proclaim? In 10:16, what does Paul call the cup and the bread ("a sharing in..."), and what does the Greek *koinonia* (sharing, participation, communion) suggest about the character of the spiritual engagement the Supper enables? In 10:17, what community reality does the one bread establish ("since there is one bread, we who are many are...")? And how do the three dimensions of the Supper identified in these passages (remembrance, proclamation, and participation) together establish its character as a genuine means of sanctifying grace?

- Read James 1:2–8. In verse 2, what attitude does James command toward various trials, and what is the basis for that attitude (“knowing that...”)? In verse 3, what is the specific causal mechanism (“the testing of your faith produces...”), and what word is used for “testing” (dokimion, the assay)? In verse 4, what is the goal of the endurance’s completion (“that you may be... lacking in...”)? In verses 5–6, what additional means does James commend alongside the endurance of trials (ask God who gives generously)? And how does the specific pairing of enduring trials (v. 3–4) with asking God in faith (v. 5–6) establish the relationship between the means of suffering and the means of prayer in the sanctified life?

Interpretation Questions (What Does It Mean?)

- The lesson presents the channels-not-causes principle as the governing principle of the means-of-grace doctrine, arguing that it guards against both sacramentalism (the means automatically produce the grace) and enthusiasm (the Spirit works without the means). Evaluate the adequacy of this principle for addressing both errors. Does it adequately account for the Reformed tradition’s account of the sacraments as genuine means of grace (not merely memorials or symbolic actions) without conceding too much to the sacramentalist position? And does it adequately account for the Spirit’s genuine sovereign freedom (He is not bound to the means in every case) without conceding too much to the enthusiast position?
- The lesson argues that suffering is a genuine means of sanctifying grace, and that the Romans 5:3–5 production chain (tribulation → perseverance → proven character → hope) establishes the specific mechanism by which the means of suffering accomplishes its sanctifying work. Evaluate the pastoral adequacy of this account for the person who is experiencing severe, prolonged, or apparently purposeless suffering. Does the production chain of Romans 5:3–5 provide adequate pastoral comfort for every form of suffering, or are there forms of suffering (the loss of a child, severe mental illness, the suffering of the innocent) that the production chain does not adequately address? What additional biblical resources, the lament psalms, the book of Job, Romans 8:18–28, complement the Romans 5:3–5 account?
- The lesson presents the spiritual disciplines as “preparatory, not meritorious”, the practices that position the believer to receive the Spirit’s sanctifying work rather than produce it. This language comes from Richard Foster’s *Celebration of Discipline*, a book that is broadly evangelical but not specifically Reformed. Evaluate the adequacy of the “positioning” language for the Reformed account of the disciplines. Does it adequately account for the genuine effort and genuine discipline that the practices require? And does it adequately guard against the passivism that might interpret “positioning” as essentially passive, just getting oneself into the right location rather than actively engaging the practices with the synergistic effort that Philippians 2:12–13 describes?
- The lesson places the Lord’s Supper and baptism in the category of “ordinances” rather than “sacraments”, the language of enacted signs and seals rather than the language of instruments of saving grace. Evaluate the theological adequacy of the ordinance language. Does it preserve the genuine means-of-grace character of the Lord’s Supper (not merely a memorial but a genuine spiritual feeding on Christ through the Spirit’s application) while guarding against the sacramentalist error (the physical act automatically produces the grace)? And does the Reformed distinction between the sign and the grace signified, the sacrament is genuinely connected to the grace but does not mechanically produce it, adequately describe the relationship between the ordinances and the Spirit’s sanctifying work?
- The lesson emphasizes the community dimension of sanctification through the means of Christian fellowship, arguing that the sanctification of the individual requires “what only other persons can provide.” Evaluate this claim. Does the New Testament’s account of sanctification genuinely require community as an

irreplaceable means, or could a theologically informed, disciplined individual believer in genuine isolation (a desert hermit, a prisoner in solitary confinement) be fully sanctified through the other individual means (Word, prayer, suffering, disciplines)? And what is the specific dimension of the sanctification that community provides that the individual means cannot, is it primarily the honest correction that self-deception resists, the encouragement that discouragement withholds, or something more fundamental about the corporate character of the image of God?

Application Questions (What Does It Demand of Us?)

- The lesson identifies seven means of sanctifying grace: the Word, prayer, the Lord's Supper, baptism, fellowship, suffering, and the spiritual disciplines. Which of these seven is most actively functioning in your current spiritual life, and which is most neglected? For the most neglected: what specific theological misunderstanding (sacramentalism or enthusiasm in relation to that specific means), practical obstacle (time, community, willingness to suffer), or relational barrier (isolated from genuine community, avoiding specific forms of accountability) is most responsible for the neglect? And what one specific, concrete, measurable change in practice this week would most directly address the most significant neglect?
- The lesson's account of Christian fellowship emphasizes the active, intentional, other-directed character of the sanctifying community: "consider how to stimulate one another to love and good deeds" (Hebrews 10:24). Are you actively considering how to stimulate the specific other members of your community toward love and good deeds? Or is your fellowship primarily passive (receiving the community's ministry to you, attending the gathering, benefiting from the fellowship without intentionally contributing to others' sanctification)? Name one specific person in your community whose sanctification you are currently, actively, intentionally stimulating, and if you cannot name one, identify the one person whose sanctification would most benefit from your specific active engagement, and name the specific way you would stimulate them.
- The lesson presents James' "consider it all joy" in the midst of various trials (James 1:2) as the Spirit-enabled, theologically-grounded recognition of the sanctifying process at work in the suffering. Does the "consider it all joy" characterize your current engagement with the specific trials you are facing? If not, if the trials are producing resentment, discouragement, confusion, or the loss of the eschatological perspective that the production chain of Romans 5:3–5 and James 1:2–4 requires, what specific theological truth most needs to be applied to the specific form of suffering you are experiencing? And what specific means of grace (the Word, prayer, fellowship, the disciplines) would most help you to receive the specific suffering as the sanctifying means the Spirit is using?
- The lesson closes with the faithful, expectant, non-mechanical engagement with the means as the believer's appropriate posture in relation to the Spirit's sovereign sanctifying work. Examine your own engagement with the primary means of the Word: is it faithful (consistent, disciplined, regular), expectant (genuinely anticipating the Spirit's illumination and application to your specific life), and non-mechanical (attentive, meditative, Spirit-trusting rather than obligation-fulfilling and distracted)? What specific change in the how of your engagement with the Word, the pace of reading, the quality of attention, the practice of prayerful reception before and meditation after, the willingness to dwell on a single passage rather than covering the daily quota, would most significantly increase the quality of the beholding that 2 Corinthians 3:18 identifies as the means of transformation?

Prayer Focus

Open this lesson's prayer time by praying John 17:17 as your own request to the Father for yourself and for every member of your community: "Sanctify them in the truth; Your word is truth." Let the prayer carry the full theological weight of the means-of-grace doctrine: you are asking the Father to do through the truth of His Word what only the Spirit can accomplish, the progressive conformity of real people to the image of the real Christ, through the real content of the revealed Word, by the sovereign application of the Spirit who inspired it. Name the specific people for whom you are praying. Ask the Father to sanctify them specifically, in the areas of their lives where the Spirit's work is most actively needed, through the means of the Word that Jesus has specifically requested for them. This prayer is not a formula; it is the specific, faith-grounded, theologically-grounded request of those who know that the Word is truth and that the Father sanctifies through it.

Pray through the means of grace as the specific instruments of the Spirit's work for which you are asking in this prayer time. For the Word: ask the Spirit to illuminate your mind to understand the truth it contains, to apply the truth to your conscience and your specific failures, to move your affections to respond to the truth with the appropriate emotions, and to direct your will to act in accordance with the truth's instruction. For prayer: ask the Spirit to produce within you the ongoing, conversational, throughout-the-day, "all prayer at all times in the Spirit" of Ephesians 6:18, the prayer that is continuous, specific, confessional, and persistently expectant. For fellowship: ask the Spirit to give you the specific community that Hebrews 10:24–25 describes, the people who will stimulate you to love and good deeds with the specific, honest, sharpening engagement that genuine sanctification requires.

Pray with the Romans 5:3–5 production chain as the specific lens through which you receive the current tribulations in your life. Name the specific tribulations honestly, not with the performed cheerfulness of the one who has learned to say the correct things about suffering, but with the honest, named, specific acknowledgment of what is actually difficult. Then, over each named tribulation, pray the production chain: "This tribulation is producing perseverance, the patient, load-bearing endurance that only this kind of difficulty can forge. The perseverance is producing proven character, the testing is revealing and refining what is genuine. The proven character is producing hope, the specific, tested, suffering-confirmed confidence in the love of God. And the hope does not disappoint, because the love of God has been poured out within my heart through the Holy Spirit who was given to me." Let the production chain become the specific prayer for the specific suffering.

Pray for the gathered community's engagement with the means of grace, for the quality of the preaching and the hearing of the Word, for the prayer life of the congregation both corporate and individual, for the reception of the Lord's Supper as the genuine spiritual feeding on Christ that the Reformed account describes, for the genuine fellowship that Hebrews 10:24–25 requires, and for the willingness to endure the specific sufferings that the Father administers as the means of the congregation's progressive conformity to Christ. Ask the Spirit to guard the congregation from both the sacramentalism that treats the means as automatic producers of grace and the enthusiasm that abandons the means as unnecessary. Ask for the faithful, expectant, non-mechanical engagement with the ordinary instruments that the Spirit has consistently used and will continue to use to accomplish the extraordinary work of sanctification in ordinary people.

Close with Hebrews 12:1–2 as the corporate declaration of the disciplined, attentive, Christ-fixed posture that the sanctified community's engagement with the means of grace produces: "Let us also lay aside every encumbrance and the sin which so easily entangles us, and let us run with endurance the race that is set before us, fixing our

eyes on Jesus, the author and perfecter of faith.” The laying aside is the spiritual disciplines’ work: the intentional removal of the weights and the sins that slow the race. The running with endurance is the Romans 5:3–5 hypomonin: the patient, sustained, Spirit-enabled perseverance through the tribulations of the present age. And the fixing of the eyes on Jesus is the 2 Corinthians 3:18 beholding: the sustained, attentive, glory-perceiving engagement with the One whose image the whole progressive sanctification is aimed at conforming us to. This is the means-of-grace life. This is the Spirit’s workshop. And this is the ordinary, faithful, expectant, non-spectacular path by which the extraordinary conformity to Christ is accomplished in the lives of those who will one day see Him as He is.

“Therefore, since we have so great a cloud of witnesses surrounding us, let us also lay aside every encumbrance and the sin which so easily entangles us, and let us run with endurance the race that is set before us, fixing our eyes on Jesus, the author and perfecter of faith.”

Hebrews 12:1–2, NASB 1995

Key Texts: John 17:17; Romans 5:3–5; 6:3–4; 1 Corinthians 10:16; 11:23–26; Proverbs 27:17; Hebrews 10:19–25; 12:1–2; James 1:2–4; Matthew 6:16–18; 2 Corinthians 3:18; Ephesians 6:18

Soli Deo Gloria
To God Alone Be the Glory

FAITHFUL TO THE WORD

Dr. Joshua Nichols

josh@faithfultotheword.com | faithfultotheword.com