

FAITHFUL TO THE WORD

Systematic Theology Series

PNEUMATOLOGY

The Doctrine of the Holy Spirit

UNIT 7: THE SPIRIT AND SANCTIFICATION

Lesson 18

Progressive Sanctification

The Spirit's Lifelong Work

Being Conformed to the Image of Christ by the Power of the Spirit

Key Texts: John 17:17; 2 Corinthians 3:18; Philippians 1:6; 2:12–13; 1 Thessalonians 5:23–24

“We All... Are Being Transformed into the Same Image from Glory to Glory”

Dr. Joshua Nichols

Pastor, Theologian, Author
faithfultotheword.com

Series Verse

*“But when He, the Spirit of truth, comes,
He will guide you into all the truth;
for He will not speak on His own initiative,
but whatever He hears, He will speak;
and He will disclose to you what is to come.”*

John 16:13, NASB 1995

Introduction

Unit 6 examined the Spirit's foundational acts in relation to the believer's status: the indwelling (Lesson 15), the sealing (Lesson 16), and the baptism (Lesson 17). These are pneumatological realities that define what the believer is, Spirit-indwelt, Spirit-sealed, Spirit-incorporated. Unit 7 now turns to the Spirit's ongoing work in the believer's life: what the Spirit does, progressively and persistently, from the moment of conversion to the moment of glorification. And the first and most comprehensive of these ongoing works is sanctification.

Sanctification is the doctrine that answers the question every genuinely converted believer eventually asks: now what? The answer of the gospel is not merely that sin's guilt has been removed (justification) and that the sinner has been declared righteous before God (forensic acquittal). The gospel answers: the One who declared you righteous is also transforming you into what He has declared you to be. The Spirit who regenerated you, who indwells you, who has sealed you for the day of redemption, is not finished when He has placed you in Christ and secured your eternal standing. He has a lifelong program of transformation that He has undertaken in your soul, and He will not abandon it until the day of Christ's return brings it to its eschatological completion.

Progressive sanctification is the specific dimension of that transforming work that concerns this lesson. It is called "progressive" not because it always advances at a perceptible, steady, linear rate, it does not; the Christian life includes seasons of rapid growth and seasons of apparent stagnation, victories and failures, plateaus and breakthroughs. It is called progressive because the direction of the Spirit's transforming work is consistently forward: toward greater conformity to Christ, deeper mortification of sin, more genuine love for God and neighbor, more fruitful participation in the mission of the church. The progress may be halting, uneven, and often barely perceptible; but the direction is set by the Spirit who began the work and whose faithfulness to complete it (Philippians 1:6) is not contingent on the believer's consistency.

This lesson will establish the definition and the distinctions of sanctification, examine its two primary pneumatological texts (John 17:17 and 2 Corinthians 3:18), explore the divine-human cooperation that Philippians 2:12–13 describes, survey the means through which the Spirit sanctifies, address the already-not-yet tension that characterizes sanctification in the present age, and close with the pastoral encouragement that the slowness and incompleteness of sanctification demand, the encouragement grounded not in the believer's performance but in the faithfulness of the God who has undertaken the work.

I. Sanctification Defined and Distinguished

The Three Senses of Holiness in Reformed Theology

A. Definitive Sanctification: Positional Holiness in Christ

Sanctification is a word that the New Testament uses in more than one sense, and the failure to distinguish its senses has been the source of considerable confusion in the history of Christian theology and piety. The most fundamental distinction is between definitive sanctification (also called positional sanctification) and progressive sanctification (also called experiential or practical sanctification).

Definitive sanctification is the once-for-all act of God by which the believer is separated to God and declared holy in Christ at the moment of conversion. It is the positional reality of the believer's new standing before God, not what he is becoming but what he already is, by virtue of his union with Christ. Paul addresses the Corinthian believers as those who have been "sanctified in Christ Jesus" (1 Corinthians 1:2) and who have been "washed... sanctified... justified in the name of the Lord Jesus Christ and in the Spirit of our God" (1 Corinthians 6:11). These are past-tense, completed-action descriptions of what every believer already is. Hebrews 10:10 states it most explicitly: "By this will we have been sanctified through the offering of the body of Jesus Christ once for all." The sanctification of Hebrews 10:10 is as definitive and as irreversible as the offering that accomplished it: once for all, at the cross, completed.

Definitive sanctification matters enormously for the believer's assurance and for the proper motivation of progressive sanctification. The believer does not pursue holiness in order to achieve a sanctified status; he pursues holiness because he already is, in Christ, a sanctified person. The Pauline pattern is always "be what you are": be holy because you are holy (1 Corinthians 6:19–20), present your members to righteousness because you have been made righteous (Romans 6:13), put on the new self because you have put on the new self (Ephesians 4:24; Colossians 3:10). Progressive sanctification is the Spirit's work of making the believer's daily experience increasingly correspond to the positional reality that is already his in Christ.

B. Progressive Sanctification: The Spirit's Lifelong Transforming Work

Progressive sanctification is the continuous, Spirit-empowered process by which the believer is increasingly conformed to the image of Christ in thought, affection, desire, and conduct, the ongoing transformation of the inner life and the outer life that the Spirit accomplishes through the means of grace, producing genuine, growing, imperfect-but-real holiness of character. It is continuous (it never ceases in this life), Spirit-empowered (it is the Spirit's work, not self-improvement), and directional (it moves toward Christ-likeness, however unevenly).

Progressive sanctification is distinguished from justification not as an alternative ground of acceptance before God but as the necessary fruit of the same grace that justifies. The justified person is not left in his sin; the Spirit's sanctifying work is the divine guarantee that justification is not a legal fiction but a transforming reality. Calvin's classic formulation stands: Christ and all His benefits are received whole, we cannot have justification without sanctification, because we cannot have Christ-for-justification without Christ-for-sanctification. The two are distinguishable but inseparable benefits of the single grace of union with Christ. The Spirit who

applies justification by producing faith also applies sanctification by transforming the life of faith.

Progressive sanctification is also distinguished from glorification, which is its eschatological completion. Progressive sanctification is partial, incomplete, and always in process in this life; it contends with the remaining sin of the old nature and does not achieve perfect holiness before the day of Christ. Glorification, the resurrection and transformation of the body at Christ's return, is the moment at which sanctification is brought to its perfect completion. First Thessalonians 5:23–24 places the completion of sanctification at the eschatological horizon: "Now may the God of peace Himself sanctify you entirely; and may your spirit and soul and body be preserved complete, without blame at the coming of our Lord Jesus Christ. Faithful is He who calls you, and He also will bring it to pass." The entire person, spirit, soul, and body, will be completely sanctified at the coming of Christ. Until then, progressive sanctification moves toward what glorification will accomplish.

II. The Spirit as the Agent of Sanctification

Not Self-Improvement but Supernatural Transformation

The most fundamental characteristic of progressive sanctification is that it is the Spirit's work, not the believer's achievement. This is not a peripheral point; it is the center of gravity around which everything else in the doctrine of sanctification orbits. The believer who understands progressive sanctification as essentially a program of self-improvement, a disciplined, sustained effort to become better through moral resolve, spiritual discipline, and careful cultivation of virtuous habits, has fundamentally misunderstood what sanctification is. Self-improvement is the natural human capacity for moral development by which any sufficiently motivated person can become, to some degree, a more controlled, more socially productive, and more morally consistent version of themselves. This is admirable, and it is not nothing; but it is not sanctification.

Sanctification is the supernatural work of the Third Person of the Holy Trinity in the soul of a regenerate person, a work that goes to the root of the soul's orientation, transforming the desires that human moral effort cannot reach, renewing the affections that habituation and discipline cannot fundamentally alter, creating the genuine love for God and hatred of sin that the natural person cannot manufacture by will and practice. When Paul says in Philippians 2:13 that "it is God who is at work in you, both to will and to work for His good pleasure," he is locating the ultimate cause of sanctification in the divine rather than in the human: God works in the will (the deepest level of human motivation) and in the working (the consequent outward activity). The human effort is real and commanded ("work out your salvation with fear and trembling", v. 12); but the divine working is ultimate and enabling (v. 13).

This does not make sanctification passive. The Spirit's work does not bypass the believer's active engagement with the means of grace, the deliberate mortification of sin, or the disciplined pursuit of holiness. But it means that the ultimate power in sanctification, the power that reaches the will, transforms the desire, produces the genuine love for God that makes holiness not merely a moral achievement but a heartfelt orientation, is the Spirit's power, not

the believer's own. The believer who prays for sanctification is praying for the Spirit to do what he cannot do himself; the believer who disciplines himself in the pursuit of holiness is placing himself in the context where the Spirit works, not producing the holiness by the discipline itself. The means of grace are the Spirit's means, not the believer's techniques.

III. The Two Primary Sanctification Texts

John 17:17 and 2 Corinthians 3:18

A. John 17:17, Sanctify Them in the Truth

The first of the two primary texts for progressive sanctification is Jesus' High Priestly Prayer in John 17:17: "Sanctify them in the truth; Your word is truth" (NASB 1995). The prayer is Trinitarian in its structure: Jesus, the Son, prays to the Father for the sanctification of His disciples, and the instrument through which the sanctification is to be accomplished is identified as the truth, specifically the Father's word ("Your word is truth"). The pneumatological agent of the sanctification, the Spirit who applies the truth of the Word to the soul, is implicit in the background of the Farewell Discourse in which this prayer stands; John 14–16 has already established the Spirit as the one who guides into all truth (John 16:13) and who will bring to remembrance all that Jesus has said (John 14:26).

The instrument of sanctification is the truth, the word of God, and this is one of the most practically important assertions in the New Testament's sanctification teaching. The Spirit does not sanctify apart from the Word; He sanctifies through it. The Word of God is the Spirit's primary sanctifying instrument: it diagnoses sin by exposing the soul's condition to the light of divine revelation (Hebrews 4:12: "the word of God is living and active and sharper than any two-edged sword, and piercing as far as the division of soul and spirit"); it supplies the knowledge of Christ's character and conduct that is the Spirit's model for the believer's transformation; it provides the promises that nourish faith and the warnings that restrain sin; it renews the mind by confronting the fallen person's distorted patterns of thinking with the truth of God's own self-revelation.

The concursive relationship between the Spirit and the Word in sanctification is the same relationship we identified in regeneration (Lesson 12): the Spirit does not sanctify apart from the Word (the letter kills if the Spirit does not give life through it, 2 Corinthians 3:6), and the Word does not sanctify apart from the Spirit (it may inform without transforming if the Spirit does not apply it). But together, the Spirit working through the Word is the most powerful sanctifying force in the universe, more powerful than human will, more effective than behavioral modification, more transformative than any technique of personal development. The believer who wants to be sanctified must be in the Word, not merely intellectually engaged with its content but exposing himself to it in the expectation that the Spirit who inspired it will use it to transform him from within.

B. 2 Corinthians 3:18, Being Transformed from Glory to Glory

The second primary sanctification text is 2 Corinthians 3:18, which provides the most sustained pneumatological description of the progressive transformation process in the entire New Testament: “But we all, with unveiled face, beholding as in a mirror the glory of the Lord, are being transformed into the same image from glory to glory, just as from the Lord, the Spirit” (NASB 1995). The verse is the triumphant conclusion of Paul’s contrast between the veiled glory of the Old Covenant (the fading glory on Moses’ face, to which Israel could not look) and the unveiled glory of the New Covenant (the permanent, increasing glory of the Lord that New Covenant believers behold).

Four pneumatological details of the verse demand attention. First, the subject: “we all”, the same universality that appears in the Spirit-baptism text of 1 Corinthians 12:13. Transformation is not the privilege of a spiritual elite; it is the New Covenant destiny of every believer who stands in the unveiled, face-to-face relationship with the glory of the Lord that the Spirit’s ministry has opened. Second, the mechanism: “beholding as in a mirror the glory of the Lord.” The transformation comes through beholding, through the sustained, attentive, faith-filled contemplation of Christ as He is revealed in the Word and applied by the Spirit. The believer is not transformed by trying to become like Christ through moral effort; he is transformed by looking at Christ, by bringing his gaze to rest on the glory of the Lord as the Spirit reveals it, until the sustained beholding produces the gradual resemblance.

Third, the direction: “from glory to glory.” The transformation is progressive, directional, and cumulative: each level of transformation opens the capacity for the next, as the believer who has been transformed to some degree of Christ-likeness is equipped to behold and be transformed to a greater degree. There is no ceiling, no plateau, no point at which the Spirit declares the transformation complete this side of glorification. The sanctifying process moves from glory to glory until the final glory of the new creation. Fourth, the agent: “just as from the Lord, the Spirit” (*hōsper apo kyriou pneumatos*). The transformation is entirely the Spirit’s work: He is the agent of the beholding, the author of the resemblance, and the power of the progressive movement from glory to glory. The believer beholds; the Spirit transforms. The believer is active in the beholding; the Spirit is sovereign in the transforming.

“Sanctify them in the truth; Your word is truth” | “We all are being transformed into the same image from glory to glory” | “It is God who is at work in you, both to will and to work for His good pleasure”

John 17:17; 2 Corinthians 3:18; Philippians 2:13, NASB 1995

IV. The Divine-Human Cooperation: Philippians 2:12–13

Work Out What God Is Working In

Philippians 2:12–13 is the New Testament’s most precise statement of the divine-human relationship in sanctification: “So then, my beloved, just as you have always obeyed, not as in my presence only, but now much more in my absence, work out your salvation with fear and trembling; for it is God who is at work in you, both to will and to work for His good pleasure” (NASB 1995). The command of verse 12 is unambiguously demanding: work out, with fear and trembling. The explanation of verse 13 is unambiguously grounding: because it is God who is at

work in you. The relationship between the two verses is the relationship between Spirit-empowered human effort and divine sovereign enablement in sanctification.

The command “work out your salvation” does not mean “work for your salvation”, as if justification were being earned by the effort described. The Greek (*katergazesthe*, work out to completion, bring to full expression) describes the active human responsibility to bring to expression in daily life the salvation that has already been received. It is the ongoing, active, disciplined engagement with the pursuit of holiness, the deliberate, persistent, demanding effort that sanctification requires on the human side. The “fear and trembling” is not the anxiety of someone uncertain of their standing before God; it is the reverence and serious-mindedness of someone who recognizes the weight of the responsibility and the magnitude of what is at stake.

The grounding of verse 13 is the pneumatological foundation of the command: “it is God who is at work in you, both to will and to work for His good pleasure.” God works in the believer’s willing (the internal dimension of motivation) and in the believing’s working (the external dimension of activity). The Spirit’s work is not merely an encouragement alongside the believer’s effort; it is the ultimate enabling cause of the effort itself. The believer’s willingness to pursue holiness is itself the Spirit’s gift; the believer’s capacity to make progress in holiness is itself the Spirit’s work. The human activity is genuine and essential; the divine enabling is ultimate and determinative.

The Philippians 2:12–13 paradox, work, because God works, is the most succinct statement of what Reformed theology has always maintained about the relationship between divine sovereignty and human responsibility in sanctification. The sovereignty does not undermine the responsibility; it grounds and motivates it. The believer works out his salvation not in spite of God’s sovereign working but because of it. The Spirit who works in the willing and the working is the Spirit who calls the believer to work, and the Spirit’s call and the Spirit’s enablement together constitute the most compelling possible motivation for active, disciplined, persistent engagement with the pursuit of holiness.

V. The Means of Sanctification

The Spirit’s Instruments in the Transforming Work

The Spirit’s sanctifying work is not accomplished directly, bypassing the created means through which He ordinarily operates. The Spirit sanctifies through means, specific, Spirit-empowered, grace-carrying instruments through which He applies the transforming truth of Christ to the soul of the believer. Reformed theology has traditionally identified these means as the Word, prayer, and the sacraments, sometimes expanded to include fellowship, suffering, and the various disciplines of the Christian life. Each of these deserves attention.

The Word of God is the primary and most essential sanctifying means, as John 17:17 establishes: “Sanctify them in the truth; Your word is truth.” The Spirit does not sanctify apart from the specific content of divine self-revelation; He uses the Word’s diagnosis of sin, its presentation of Christ, its provision of promises and warnings, and its renewal of the mind

(Romans 12:2) as the primary instruments of progressive transformation. The believer who is not regularly, attentively, expectantly engaging with the Word is depriving himself of the Spirit's primary sanctifying instrument. This is why preaching, the sustained, expository proclamation of the Word in the gathered community, is not optional in the Christian life; it is the Spirit's primary means of corporate sanctification.

Prayer is the second great means of sanctification, not merely because prayer produces the spiritual dispositions of humility, dependence, and attentiveness that make the soul more receptive to the Spirit's work, but because prayer is itself a sanctifying act. The person who prays regularly and honestly, confessing sin, expressing gratitude, interceding for others, communing with the God who is present, is a person whose soul is being shaped by the practice of God-orientation. The person who neglects prayer is a person who is systematically starving the most God-ward dimension of his spiritual life. Jude 20–21 connects prayer to the maintaining of the love of God: "building yourselves up on your most holy faith, praying in the Holy Spirit, keep yourselves in the love of God." Prayer in the Spirit is the means by which the believer keeps himself in the environment of God's love, the environment in which sanctification flourishes.

The community of the church is a third essential means of sanctification, and one that is increasingly neglected in an era of individualistic spirituality and digital community substitutes. The body of Christ is the context in which the Spirit's sanctifying work is most comprehensively applied: through the mutual accountability of genuine Christian friendship; through the preaching and teaching that the gathered community receives together; through the exercise of spiritual gifts in service to one another; through the experience of conflict and reconciliation within the community of love; and through the witness to the world that the community's corporate holiness provides. Hebrews 10:24–25 makes the connection between the community and sanctification explicit: "let us consider how to stimulate one another to love and good deeds, not forsaking our own assembling together." The isolate Christian is a Christian who has cut himself off from a major instrument of the Spirit's sanctifying work.

Suffering is the sanctifying means that is least sought and most effective. Romans 5:3–5 traces the pneumatological fruit of suffering: tribulation produces perseverance, perseverance produces proven character, proven character produces hope, and hope does not disappoint because the love of God has been poured out in the believer's heart through the Holy Spirit. The Spirit uses suffering to accomplish what comfort and ease cannot: the progressive stripping away of self-reliance, the deepening of dependence on God, the maturing of faith through the testing that proves and purifies it (James 1:2–4; 1 Peter 1:6–7). The believer who has suffered well, who has received the Spirit's sanctifying work through the instrument of pain and loss, is a believer whose character has been shaped at depths that mere instruction and exhortation cannot reach.

VI. The Already-Not-Yet of Sanctification

The War Between the Flesh and the Spirit

The most practically important, and most practically difficult, feature of progressive sanctification is the tension between the “already” and the “not yet” that characterizes the believer’s experience in the present age. The believer is already holy in Christ (definitive sanctification); he is not yet perfectly holy in experience (progressive sanctification is incomplete). The believer already has the new nature (born of the Spirit); he not yet fully free from the old nature (the flesh continues to resist the Spirit’s work). The believer already possesses the Spirit’s firstfruits; he not yet possesses the full harvest of glorification. This tension is not a failure of the Spirit’s program; it is the pneumatological reality of the “in-between time” between the first and second advents of Christ.

Paul’s most extended description of this tension is Galatians 5:16–17: “But I say, walk by the Spirit, and you will not carry out the desire of the flesh. 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 warfare between flesh and Spirit is a permanent feature of the regenerate person’s existence in this life, not an aberration from the norm of Christian experience but the norm itself. The presence of the conflict is not evidence of spiritual failure; it is evidence of genuine regeneration. The unregenerate person does not experience the warfare of Galatians 5:17, because the flesh has no serious opponent within him. The regenerate person experiences it precisely because the Spirit is present and opposing the flesh.

Romans 7:14–25, the most personally honest and most pastorally realistic description of the believer’s ongoing struggle with remaining sin in the New Testament, presents the anguish of this tension from the inside. Whether Paul is describing his pre-conversion or post-conversion experience is a contested exegetical question; but the pattern he describes, the willing of what is good without the consistent doing of it, the doing of what is hated without the power to fully stop, resonates with the experience of every genuinely regenerate believer. The resolution is not in the self (v. 24: “Wretched man that I am! Who will set me free from the body of this death?”) but in Christ through the Spirit (v. 25: “Thanks be to God through Jesus Christ our Lord!”), the same resolution that Romans 8 develops at length as the Spirit’s life-giving, sin-mortifying, mind-setting work.

The already-not-yet tension of sanctification has a crucial pastoral implication: the appropriate response to the experience of ongoing struggle with sin is neither the despair of one who concludes that the Spirit’s work has failed nor the complacency of one who concludes that the struggle is normative and therefore to be accommodated. It is the humble, honest, Spirit-dependent perseverance of one who knows that the war is real and that the ultimate victory is secure. The flesh will resist; the Spirit will prevail. The progress will be uneven; the direction is set. The believer who sins will find the Spirit’s conviction; the believer who repents will find the Spirit’s restoration; and the whole arc of the Spirit’s sanctifying work, through sin and repentance, through failure and recovery, through the long and winding road of progressive conformity to Christ, will arrive at the eschatological completion that the Spirit has pledged.

VII. The Pastoral Encouragement: He Who Began Will Complete

Philippians 1:6 and the Faithfulness That Sustains Sanctification

No pastoral encouragement in all of Scripture is more needed or more frequently neglected in the context of progressive sanctification than the promise of Philippians 1:6: “For 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 encouragement is rooted not in the believer’s consistency but in God’s faithfulness: the One who began the good work is the One who will complete it. The beginning and the completion belong to the same divine Agent. The believer’s role is to pursue sanctification with the whole of his human effort; God’s role is to ensure that the pursuit arrives at its intended destination.

The encouragement of Philippians 1:6 is particularly precious for the believer who has been a Christian for years and who is discouraged by how little progress he seems to have made, who looks back over a decade or two of Christian life and sees the same patterns of sin, the same failures of character, the same distances between the person he is and the person he longs to be. This discouraged believer needs to hear two things simultaneously: first, that the Spirit’s work is slower and less visible than we typically expect, and that the most significant transformation often happens at depths that are not immediately visible to self-examination; and second, that the guarantee of completion is not his own progress to date but the faithfulness of the One who began. The same God who began the work in the moment of regeneration has pledged to perfect it at the day of Christ. The incompleteness of the present is not a refutation of that pledge; it is the condition of the intermediate state between the beginning and the end that the pledge addresses.

First Thessalonians 5:23–24 is the eschatological form of the same encouragement: “Now may the God of peace Himself sanctify you entirely; and may your spirit and soul and body be preserved complete, without blame at the coming of our Lord Jesus Christ. Faithful is He who calls you, and He also will bring it to pass.” The prayer is for entire and complete sanctification, not the Wesleyan doctrine of entire sanctification as a second-stage perfection achievable in this life, but the eschatological completion of sanctification at Christ’s coming. And the ground of confidence that the prayer will be answered is not the believer’s cooperativeness but the divine faithfulness: “Faithful is He who calls you, and He also will bring it to pass.” The call is irrevocable; the work is the Caller’s; the completion is certain because the God who undertook the work is faithful.

The pastoral encouragement of the Spirit’s sanctifying faithfulness does not produce complacency; it produces perseverance. The believer who knows that the Spirit will not abandon the work He has begun has every reason to cooperate actively with that work, to place himself in the means of grace, to pursue the mortification of sin, to cultivate the disciplines that make him receptive to the Spirit’s transforming work, because he knows that his cooperation with the work does not determine its completion but participates in the Spirit’s faithful execution of it. The encouragement of Philippians 1:6 and 1 Thessalonians 5:23–24 is not “relax,

God will take care of it without your effort” but “persevere, because the God who will complete it is faithful, and your perseverance is the human expression of His faithfulness at work in you.”

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

2 Corinthians 3:18, NASB 1995

Theological Terms and Definitions

Term	Definition
Progressive Sanctification	The continuous, Spirit-empowered process by which the believer is increasingly conformed to the image of Christ in thought, affection, desire, and conduct. Progressive in direction (moving toward Christ-likeness) but not necessarily linear in pace (it may advance unevenly, through seasons of growth and seasons of struggle). Distinguished from definitive sanctification (the once-for-all positional holiness of the believer in Christ at conversion) and from glorification (the eschatological completion of sanctification at Christ's return when the believer is entirely and perfectly conformed to Christ). The Spirit is the agent; the Word, prayer, community, and suffering are the means; and Christ-likeness is the goal.
Definitive Sanctification	The once-for-all act of God at conversion by which the believer is separated to God and positionally declared holy in Christ. Grounded in the believer's union with Christ, in whose holiness the believer participates: "you were sanctified in the name of the Lord Jesus Christ and in the Spirit of our God" (1 Corinthians 6:11). The positional reality that progressive sanctification works to bring into experiential correspondence: the believer already is, in Christ, what the Spirit is working to make him in daily experience. Motivation for progressive sanctification: "be what you are", pursue holiness because you are already holy in Christ.
Glorification	The eschatological completion of sanctification at Christ's return, when the believer's entire person, spirit, soul, and body, is made perfectly holy and conformed to the image of the glorified Christ (Romans 8:29–30; 1 Thessalonians 5:23–24; 1 John 3:2). Glorification is the final link in the golden chain of Romans 8:29–30 ("those whom He justified, He also glorified") and the eschatological fulfillment of the promise of Philippians 1:6 (He who began the good work will perfect it until the day of Christ Jesus). Progressive sanctification moves toward glorification; glorification is progressive sanctification's eschatological completion.
Sanctification by the Word	The principle established in John 17:17 ("Sanctify them in the truth; Your word is truth") that the Spirit's primary instrument of progressive sanctification is the Word of God. The Word sanctifies by diagnosing sin (Hebrews 4:12), presenting Christ as the Spirit's model for transformation (2 Corinthians 3:18), supplying promises that nourish faith and warnings that restrain sin, and renewing the mind (Romans 12:2) by confronting the believer's fallen thought-patterns with divine truth. The Spirit does not sanctify apart from the Word; the Word does not sanctify apart from the Spirit. Their concursive operation makes the Word the most powerful sanctifying force available to the believer.

Term	Definition
Katēgazesthe	Greek: to work out to completion, to bring to full expression. The imperative verb of Philippians 2:12 (“work out your salvation with fear and trembling”). Not “work for your salvation” (as if earning justification by effort) but the active, disciplined human responsibility to bring the salvation already received to its full expression in daily life. Grounded by verse 13’s divine working: God is at work in you to will and to work, therefore work out the salvation He is working in you. The human effort commanded in verse 12 and the divine working described in verse 13 together constitute the divine-human cooperation that progressive sanctification requires.
Flesh vs. Spirit	The anthropological and soteriological contrast in Paul’s letters (especially Galatians 5:16–25; Romans 8:1–17) between the fallen, sin-oriented, unregenerate aspect of human existence (the flesh, <i>sarx</i>) and the Spirit-renewed, God-oriented capacity of the regenerate believer (the Spirit). In the regenerate person, these two principles are in active conflict: “For the flesh sets its desire against the Spirit, and the Spirit against the flesh” (Galatians 5:17). The conflict is not evidence of spiritual failure but of genuine regeneration: the unregenerate person has no serious internal opposition to the flesh. Progressive sanctification is the Spirit’s ongoing work of winning the war against the flesh, which continues until glorification.
Means of Grace	The Spirit-ordained instruments through which the Spirit applies the transforming benefits of Christ to the believer’s life. The classical Reformed means of grace are the Word (preached, read, and meditated upon), prayer (individual and corporate), and the sacraments (baptism and the Lord’s Supper). Additional means that the Spirit uses include the community of the church (mutual edification, accountability, shared suffering), suffering (Romans 5:3–5; James 1:2–4), and the various spiritual disciplines that make the soul receptive to the Spirit’s transforming work. The means are the Spirit’s means, He works through them, not instead of them; and the believer who neglects them deprives himself of the Spirit’s primary sanctifying instruments.
Already-Not-Yet Tension	The eschatological tension in the believer’s present experience between what has already been accomplished in Christ (definitive sanctification, the new nature, the Spirit’s indwelling) and what has not yet been fully realized (perfect holiness, the complete mortification of the old nature, glorification). The tension is the permanent feature of the regenerate person’s life between the first and second advents of Christ: already holy in Christ, not yet perfectly holy in experience; already Spirit-indwelt, not yet free from the flesh’s opposition; already possessing the firstfruits, not yet receiving the full harvest. The already-not-yet is not a failure of the Spirit’s work but the condition of life in the overlap of the ages.
From Glory to Glory	The directional description of progressive sanctification in 2 Corinthians 3:18 (<i>apo doxēs eis doxan</i>): the Spirit’s transforming work moves the believer

Term	Definition
	from one level of conformity to Christ's glory to a greater level, progressively and cumulatively, as the sustained beholding of Christ through the Word produces the gradual resemblance that beholding creates. The phrase captures both the progressive character (from one level to the next) and the Christological goal (the image of the Lord is what is being reflected) and the Spirit's ultimate authorship (just as from the Lord, the Spirit). There is no ceiling, no plateau, no completion short of the eschatological glory of the new creation.
He Who Began Will Complete	The pastoral assurance of Philippians 1:6 ("He who began a good work in you will perfect it until the day of Christ Jesus"), grounding the believer's confidence in the completion of sanctification not in his own consistency but in God's faithfulness. The same divine Agent who began the work of regeneration and progressive sanctification has pledged to bring it to eschatological perfection at the day of Christ. The incompleteness of the believer's present sanctification is not a refutation of this pledge but the condition of the intermediate state between beginning and completion. The parallel promise of 1 Thessalonians 5:24: "Faithful is He who calls you, and He also will bring it to pass."

Practical Application

A. For the Mind: *What Must We Believe?*

We must believe that progressive sanctification is the Spirit's work, not primarily our achievement, not essentially a program of self-improvement, not ultimately dependent on our consistency and willpower. This does not make it passive; Philippians 2:12 commands vigorous human effort. But it locates the ultimate cause and the ultimate guarantee of sanctification in the Spirit's faithful work rather than in our reliable performance. The Christian who believes this will be protected from two common errors: the legalist's error of treating sanctification as essentially a matter of moral willpower and religious discipline, which produces either pride (when the performance is strong) or despair (when it fails); and the quietist's error of treating sanctification as essentially passive, waiting for God to sanctify without active human engagement with the means of grace.

We must also believe the already-not-yet tension honestly, not as a theological abstraction but as the realistic description of our own daily experience. The war between flesh and Spirit that Galatians 5:17 describes is not the experience of spiritually immature or uncommitted believers; it is the experience of every genuinely regenerate person who takes both the Spirit's work and the flesh's resistance seriously. The most mature Christian in the room is still fighting this war. The goal of progressive sanctification is not to escape the war but to win it, not all at once but progressively, through the Spirit's increasing victory over the flesh as the believer consistently yields to the Spirit's direction and consistently engages the means of grace through which the Spirit works.

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

Let the beholding language of 2 Corinthians 3:18 shape the basic orientation of your devotional life. Sanctification comes through beholding the glory of the Lord, through the sustained, attentive, faith-filled contemplation of Christ as He is revealed in the Word and applied by the Spirit. This means that the most important discipline of the Christian life is not a technique of sin-management or a program of virtue-cultivation but the consistent, expectant, Christ-focused engagement with the Word through which the Spirit produces, slowly and surely, the resemblance to Christ that beholding creates. Turn your face toward Christ. Look at His character, His compassion, His holiness, His love, His sacrifice. The Spirit will do the rest, from glory to glory.

Desire the patience with yourself and with others that the progressive character of sanctification demands. Sanctification is slow. It does not yield to urgency. It is not impressed by intensity of desire or sincerity of commitment, though both are necessary. It moves at the Spirit's pace, through the Spirit's means, toward the Spirit's goal, and the Spirit's pace is measured in years and decades, not days and weeks. The believer who has been a Christian for thirty years and who is still struggling with the same sins he struggled with at twenty-five is not a spiritual failure; he is a person in the middle of a lifelong work of transformation that the

Spirit began and that the Spirit will complete. Desire the perseverance of that person rather than the quick fix of one who wants transformation without the patient, Spirit-dependent engagement with the means through which it comes.

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

- Identify your primary engagement with each of the major means of sanctification: the Word, prayer, community, and suffering. For each one, assess the quality and consistency of your engagement: How regularly and attentively are you in the Word? How honest and specific is your prayer? How genuinely embedded are you in a community of mutual accountability and encouragement? And how have you received the trials and suffering of the past year, as the Spirit's sanctifying instrument or as a disruption to be minimized as quickly as possible? Where is the means-of-grace engagement weakest in your life, and what specific change would strengthen it?
- Memorize Philippians 2:12–13 and meditate on the relationship between the human command (work out your salvation with fear and trembling) and the divine ground (it is God who is at work in you, both to will and to work). Notice that the command does not say “try harder”; it says work out what God is working in. The direction of the command is outward expression of what is inwardly occurring, not the generation of something new by human effort. How does this framing change the way you approach the hard work of pursuing holiness?
- Read Romans 8:1–17 as Paul's comprehensive statement of the Spirit's role in the sanctified life, covering the contrast between life in the Spirit and life in the flesh (vv. 5–8), the Spirit's indwelling (v. 9–11), the Spirit's mortifying work (v. 13), the Spirit's leading (v. 14), and the Spirit's witness to adoption (vv. 15–17). As you read, trace the Spirit's active role in every dimension of the sanctified life. What is the Spirit doing in each of these verses? And what is the human role that corresponds to the Spirit's active work?
- Take a specific, named, persistent pattern of sin in your own life, a sin you have been fighting for years without decisive victory. Examine it through the lens of this lesson: What means of grace is the Spirit using (or not using) in relation to this sin? Is it being addressed in the Word you are reading? Is it being brought before God in honest, specific prayer? Is it being addressed in the context of genuine community accountability? And is it being approached as the Spirit's work or as your own project of self-improvement? What would a more Spirit-dependent, means-of-grace-engaged approach to this specific sin look like in practice?
- Spend time in prayer specifically for the sanctification of three other believers you know, not generically but with the specific pastoral care of one who knows them well enough to pray for the particular areas of their lives where the Spirit's transforming work is most needed. This intercessory practice is itself a means of sanctification, both for the one being prayed for and for the one praying: it cultivates the outward orientation toward others' spiritual growth that is itself a mark of the Spirit's transforming work in the life of the intercessor.

Study and Discussion Questions

Opening Question

1. How would you honestly describe your experience of progressive sanctification over the past year? Have you grown in Christ-likeness in specific, nameable ways? Or has the past year been more characterized by plateau, struggle, or regression? And how does the doctrine of this lesson, specifically the promise of Philippians 1:6 (“He who began will perfect it”) and the already-not-yet tension of Galatians 5:17, address the specific contours of your actual experience?

Observation Questions (What Do the Texts Say?)

2. Read John 17:14–19. Jesus’ prayer for His disciples’ sanctification is set in the context of their mission in the world (“I do not ask You to take them out of the world”, v. 15; “As You sent Me into the world, I also have sent them into the world”, v. 18). What is the relationship between sanctification and mission in this passage? Why does Jesus pray for His disciples’ sanctification specifically in the context of their being sent into the world? What does the connection between sanctification and mission suggest about the purpose of progressive holiness?
3. Read 2 Corinthians 3:7–18 and trace the contrast between the Old Covenant’s veiled glory and the New Covenant’s unveiled glory. What specifically was veiled in the Old Covenant (v. 13–15), and what has been unveiled in the New Covenant (v. 16–18)? How does the “unveiling” described in verse 16 (“whenever a person turns to the Lord, the veil is taken away”) relate to the “beholding” of verse 18? What is the connection between the removal of the veil and the capacity to behold Christ’s glory for the purposes of sanctifying transformation?
4. Read Philippians 2:12–13 carefully. Note that Paul says God works “to will and to work”, both the willing (the internal motivation) and the working (the external activity) are described as God’s work within the believer. Does this leave any room for genuinely human agency in sanctification, or does it make sanctification entirely God’s activity? How does verse 12’s command (“work out your salvation”) establish the reality of genuine human activity? And what does the word “for” at the beginning of verse 13 (“for it is God who is at work”) indicate about the relationship between verses 12 and 13?
5. Read 1 Thessalonians 5:23–24. Paul prays for sanctification “entire” and specifies “spirit and soul and body.” What does the tripartite (“spirit and soul and body”) description of the person suggest about the scope of progressive sanctification? Is the sanctification Paul prays for here (1) the Wesleyan doctrine of entire sanctification as a second-stage

perfection in this life, (2) the eschatological completion of sanctification at Christ's return, or (3) an aspiration for comprehensive present growth? What textual and contextual factors inform your answer? And how does verse 24 ("Faithful is He who calls you, and He also will bring it to pass") ground the confidence that the prayer will be answered?

6. Read Galatians 5:16–25. Paul presents the flesh and the Spirit as actively opposed to each other (v. 17) and describes the works of the flesh (vv. 19–21) and the fruit of the Spirit (vv. 22–23). Note that Paul does not say the war ceases at some level of spiritual maturity; he describes it as the permanent condition of the Christian life. But verse 16 promises that the one who walks by the Spirit "will not carry out the desire of the flesh". How is this promise consistent with the ongoing warfare described in verse 17? Is the warfare the evidence of failure to walk by the Spirit, or is it the context within which walking by the Spirit occurs?

Interpretation Questions (What Does It Mean?)

7. The lesson distinguishes definitive sanctification (positional holiness in Christ) from progressive sanctification (experiential growth in holiness). The Wesleyan tradition rejects this distinction and holds that there is only one sanctification, which is always experiential and can be entirely achieved in this life through a second-stage grace. The Reformed tradition holds that the distinction is exegetically warranted and pastorally essential. What specific New Testament texts support the distinction between definitive and progressive sanctification? And what are the pastoral consequences of holding the Wesleyan view of entire sanctification achievable in this life?
8. The lesson argues that sanctification is "the Spirit's work, not the believer's achievement" while also insisting that it is not passive. How does the lesson navigate the tension between divine sovereignty and human responsibility in sanctification? Is the lesson's resolution (the Spirit works; therefore the believer works, in a concursive relationship) philosophically coherent? And how does the distinction between the Spirit as the ultimate cause and the believer as the instrumental means of sanctification function in practice?
9. The lesson proposes that 2 Corinthians 3:18's "beholding produces transformation" is the core mechanism of sanctification. What does it mean to "behold the glory of the Lord" in practice? Is this mystical contemplation, or the disciplined study of Scripture, or something else? And how does the beholding mechanism relate to the other means of sanctification the lesson identifies (prayer, community, suffering)? Are they all different forms of beholding, or does beholding describe a specific means among others?
10. The lesson presents the already-not-yet tension of sanctification as permanent in this life: the flesh and Spirit are in active conflict until glorification. But some traditions teach that the flesh can be fully mortified before glorification through a second definitive work of grace (Wesleyan entire sanctification) or through the victory of the Spirit-filled life (Keswick theology's "abiding"). What is the exegetical case for the permanence of the

flesh-Spirit conflict until glorification? And what are the pastoral consequences, both positive and negative, of each position?

11. The lesson closes with the encouragement of Philippians 1:6 and 1 Thessalonians 5:23–24: God who began will complete. How does this promise guard against two opposite errors: the despair of the believer who feels his sanctification has failed, and the complacency of the believer who uses divine faithfulness as a reason to reduce personal effort? Can you identify specific spiritual situations in which each of these errors is most likely to manifest, and how the promise of Philippians 1:6 addresses each?

Application Questions (What Does It Demand of Us?)

12. The lesson proposes assessing your engagement with the primary means of sanctification: the Word, prayer, community, and suffering. Having done this assessment, identify the single means-of-grace area in which your engagement is weakest. What is one specific, concrete, sustainable change in your regular pattern of life that would strengthen your engagement with this means? And what would you pray for the Spirit to do through this means that He has not been able to do through it in its current form?
13. The lesson describes progressive sanctification as moving “from glory to glory” through the mechanism of “beholding” Christ in the Word. What does your current Bible reading and study practice look like? Is it primarily informational (gathering knowledge about the text), devotional (seeking emotional encouragement), or transformational (expecting the Spirit to use the truth to produce resemblance to Christ)? What would it look like for your engagement with the Word to be more consistently oriented toward the transformational beholding that 2 Corinthians 3:18 describes?
14. The lesson identifies suffering as one of the Spirit’s most effective sanctifying means (Romans 5:3–5; James 1:2–4). Identify a specific current or recent trial in your life. In what ways has the Spirit been using (or could be using) this trial as a sanctifying instrument? What specifically is being stripped away, deepened, or purified through this suffering? And what would it look like to receive this trial more consciously as the Spirit’s instrument of transformation rather than as a disruption to be survived?
15. The lesson’s pastoral encouragement is the promise of Philippians 1:6: He who began will complete. In your current season of spiritual life, do you need this encouragement more as a protection against despair (I feel like my sanctification has stalled) or as a protection against complacency (I feel like God will take care of it without my effort)? How would the specific application of Philippians 1:6 to your current season look different depending on which direction you most need the encouragement to point?

Prayer Focus

Open this lesson with a reading of 2 Corinthians 3:18 and a moment of corporate honesty: “We all, with unveiled face, beholding as in a mirror the glory of the Lord, are being transformed.” Pause on the present progressive: “are being transformed.” Not “will be transformed” at some future moment; not “were transformed” at a decisive past event; but “are being transformed”, now, in this room, in the ongoing process of the Spirit’s work that is never entirely absent and never entirely complete. The question to bring to prayer is not whether the transformation is happening but whether we are cooperating with it, whether we are turning our unveiled face toward the glory of the Lord in the expectation that the Spirit who transforms will do His work through the beholding.

Begin the prayer with an act of corporate confession of the ways in which the community’s sanctification has been hindered by the neglect of the means through which the Spirit works. Not a catalog of specific sins (which belong to private confession) but an honest, Spirit-led acknowledgment of the patterns: neglect of the Word (reading it without expecting the Spirit to transform through it), prayerlessness or prayer without honest engagement with God, isolation from the community of mutual edification and accountability, and resistance to the suffering that the Spirit would use as a sanctifying instrument. Ask the Spirit to renew the community’s engagement with His sanctifying means.

Pray then through the pastoral encouragement of Philippians 1:6 and 1 Thessalonians 5:23–24. Invite participants to bring to God the specific areas of their lives where the slowness of sanctification is most discouraging, where the gap between the person they are and the person they long to be is most painful. In those specific areas, pray the promise: “He who began a good work in you will perfect it until the day of Christ Jesus.” Not as a platitude but as a specific, personally addressed divine commitment, the God who began the work of transformation in this specific area of this specific person’s life will complete it, because He is faithful. Pray for the perseverance that this promise produces: the willingness to keep engaging the means of grace, to keep fighting the war against the flesh, to keep turning toward Christ in the expectation that the beholding will produce the transformation, even when the progress is invisible.

Close with an act of consecration to the means of sanctification, a specific, corporate commitment to the disciplines that make the soul receptive to the Spirit’s transforming work. Following the model of Romans 12:1–2 (“present your bodies a living and holy sacrifice” and “do not be conformed to this world, but be transformed by the renewing of your mind”), invite the gathered community to offer themselves to the Spirit as instruments of the transformation He is working. Close with 1 Thessalonians 5:23–24 read as both a prayer and a promise: “May the God of peace Himself sanctify you entirely... Faithful is He who calls you, and He also will bring it to pass.” The prayer and the promise belong together: ask God to do what He has already pledged to do, in the confidence that His faithfulness is the guarantee that the asking will be answered.

*“He who began a good work in you
will perfect it
until the day of Christ Jesus.”*

Philippians 1:6, NASB 1995

Key Texts: John 17:14–19; 2 Corinthians 3:7–18; Philippians 1:6; 2:12–13; 1 Thessalonians 5:23–24; Galatians 5:16–25; Romans 8:1–17; 5:3–5; Hebrews 4:12; 10:10, 24–25; Romans 12:1–2; 1 Corinthians 1:2; 6:11; Jude 20–21

Soli Deo Gloria

To God Alone Be the Glory

FAITHFUL TO THE WORD

Dr. Joshua Nichols

josh@faithfultotheword.com | faithfultotheword.com