



Lesson 3

Progress on the Journey Sanctification

We embark upon the Christian journey when we respond to God's offer of salvation in Christ. No change could be more momentous—we are "born again" (John 3:3), we are "made alive" (Eph 2:5), we are transferred from the "domain of darkness" into "the kingdom of his beloved son" (Col. 1:13), we are forgiven our sins (Eph. 1:7), we are delivered from wrath (Rom 5:9), we are reconciled to God (2 Cor. 5:18)—as Jesus put it, we pass "from death to life" (John 5:24).

As dramatic as this change is, this is only the beginning. God's purposes for us don't end when we become Christians. Rather, conversion sets us on a glorious path in which God will continue to work out His gracious purposes in our lives. What are those purposes? How are they worked out? In this lesson, we will explore what God has for us as we "continue the journey" of the Christian life.

I. The Goal of Our Salvation: Holiness

Salvation is much more than simply deliverance from the penalty of sin. When God saves us, He makes us His own, and begins a renovation program: the process of making us more and more like our Lord Jesus—the process of making us holy.

"In reality, holiness is the goal of our redemption. As Christ died in order that we may be justified, so we are justified in order that we may be sanctified and made holy." —J.I. Packer

A. The barrier to holiness: sin

Sin not only deserves God's punishment; it mars God's good creation and obscures the display of His glory. He therefore desires to eradicate sin and its corrupting effects from His creation. For the believer, salvation is the beginning of the process of removing sin and its effects from our lives.

- At regeneration, the power of sin is broken and we are made alive in Christ.
- In justification, the penalty of sin is removed as we are declared righteous in Christ.
- In sanctification, the pollution of sin is progressively removed as we are made holy in Christ.

To be holy means to be set apart to God. This includes being set apart from all that is sinful and opposed to God. Holiness is God's goal for His people, and the Christian life involves the process of reaching this goal. The New Testament is full of words that describe this process: transforming, renewing, conforming, maturing, and growing. Although we will never reach perfection in this life, we are called to make every effort to live a holy life for the glory of God.

1 Peter 1:15-16: "but as he who called you is holy, you also be holy in all your conduct, since it is written, 'You shall be holy, for I am holy.'"

1 Thessalonian. 4:7: "For God has not called us for impurity, but in holiness."

B. The model for holiness: Jesus Christ

1. Jesus is our Lord, Savior, and example. We are to follow Him in attitude and action. Paul called this being "imitators of God." John used the phrase, "we ought to walk as Jesus walked." Jesus said simply, "Follow me."
2. More remarkably, God Himself has committed to making us like Jesus. The ultimate goal in sanctification is conformity to the image of Christ.

Romans 8:29: "For those whom he foreknew he also predestined to be conformed to the image of his Son, in order that he might be the firstborn among many brothers."

C. The motive for holiness: Love for God

As we grow to know His love and appreciate what He has done for us, we will also grow in our desire to live a life that is pleasing to Him—as Paul says, "a manner worthy of the calling to which you have been called..." (Eph. 4:1).

1 John 5:3: "For this is the love of God, that we keep his commandments. And his commandments are not burdensome."

II. The Battle for Holiness

While holiness is God's will for us, this does not mean that the process of sanctification is easy. Given our own sinfulness and the sinful world in which we live, this process involves a battle—one that will require our energies for the rest of our lives.

A. The power of sin is broken

As unbelievers we were slaves to sin—we were unwilling and unable to resist sin. When we were regenerated, we were freed from the power of sin—its ruling force in our lives was broken. We became willing and able to resist sin.

Romans 6:2, 6, 11: "How can we who died to sin still live in it?... We know that our old self was crucified with him in order that the body of sin might be brought to nothing, so that we would no longer be enslaved to sin. So you also must consider yourselves dead to sin and alive to God in Christ Jesus."

Why then do we still sin?

B. The presence of sin remains

Although sin has been deposed as the ruler of our lives, it has not been removed as a factor in our lives. We are free from its dominion, but not its presence and influence—our quest for holiness is not unopposed. The remaining influence of sin is called different things: “the flesh,” “the sinful nature,” “indwelling sin”. The sinful world we live in and the devil who opposes us take advantage of this situation to tempt us into all manner of sin. Here is how Paul describes this battle:

Galatians 5:16-17: “But I say, walk by the Spirit, and you will not gratify the desires of the flesh. For the desires of the flesh are against the Spirit, and the desires of the Spirit are against the flesh, for these are opposed to each other, to keep you from doing the things you want to do.”

C. The heart is the battlefield.

“Regeneration makes man’s heart a battlefield where ‘the flesh’ tirelessly disputes the supremacy of ‘the Spirit’.”

—John Owen

1. Growth in holiness always comes through the pathway of the heart. The Holy Spirit doesn’t just change us outwardly by “dressing us up” with new behaviors; He transforms us from within.
2. The remaining sin in our hearts is deceptive, wicked, and in active rebellion against God.

Romans 7:8, 21: “But sin...produced in me all kinds of covetousness...when I want to do right, evil lies close at hand.”

Jeremiah 17:9: “The heart is deceitful above all things...who can understand it?”

3. The Bible teaches that our sinful behavior is not caused by other people or our circumstances, but by our own desires, cravings, longings, or lusts. Whatever rules our hearts determines what we do and say in response to people and situations.

James 1:14: “But each person is tempted when he lured and enticed by his own desire.”

James 4:1: “What causes quarrels and what causes fights among you? Is it not this, that your passions are at war within you?”

4. We do not sin because our hearts are empty, wounded, broken, or in need of love, self-esteem, or significance. We sin because of sinful desires that have not been recognized and put to death.

Romans 8:5, 8: “For those who live according to the flesh set their minds on the things of the flesh...Those who are in the flesh cannot please God.”

5. Indwelling sin inclines our hearts to forget the gospel and to seek happiness, joy, peace, rest, security, and satisfaction outside of Christ. The heart’s idolatrous pursuit of “life” outside of Christ leads to sinful behavior.

III. The Process of Holiness: Sanctification

A. Sanctification defined

Sanctification is the continuing work of God in the life of a believer. It is a progressive work in which we become more and more free from sin and like Christ. In short, our actual lives become increasingly conformed to our legal status before God.

1. *It is a process.* We don't become instantly perfect. Rather, we become progressively more holy as we cooperate with the work of the Holy Spirit in our lives.
2. *There is discernable progress.* We actually do become more and more holy, overcoming various manifestations of sin (lying, pride, selfishness, etc.) and becoming more like Jesus in our attitudes and actions.
3. *It is a work of grace.* Many make the mistake of thinking that we are saved by grace but that we then become holy by our own efforts. Nothing could be further from the truth. We are justified by grace and we are sanctified by grace as well. Grace is necessary in both cases, and it is unmerited in both cases. The key difference is that in justification we are passive but in sanctification we actively cooperate with the Holy Spirit in receiving and responding to God's grace.

This cooperative activity is vividly portrayed by the Apostle Paul:

Phil. 2:12-13: "Therefore, my beloved...work out your own salvation with fear and trembling, for it is God who works in you, both to will and to work for his good pleasure."

B. The Holy Spirit works

The activity of the Holy Spirit precedes any action towards holiness on our part and makes our actions possible. Although we aren't always aware of His activity, if we are becoming more holy it is because He is at work.

2 Corinthians 3:18: "And we all, with unveiled face, beholding the glory of the Lord, are being transformed into the same image, from one degree of glory to another. For this comes from the Lord who is the Spirit."

"The only good we do is what He does in us; it is not that we do nothing ourselves, but that we act only when we have been acted upon, in other words under the direction and influence of the Holy Spirit." —John Calvin

C. We work

Because the Holy Spirit is at work in us, we can therefore work; He makes it possible for us to live holy lives. However, we must never be passive in this process. We are responsible before God to "work out your own salvation with fear and trembling" (Phil. 2:12).

Colossians 1:29: "For this I toil, struggling with all his energy that he powerfully works within me."

Hebrews 12:14: "Strive...for the holiness."

"Sanctification...is a thing for which every believer is responsible... Whose fault is it if they are not holy, but their own? On whom can they throw the blame if they are not sanctified, but themselves? God, who has given them grace and a new heart, and a new nature, has deprived them of all excuse if they do not live for His praise." —J.C. Ryle

IV. Weapons for the Battle

God has equipped us with numerous aids for our battle with sin, and at Sovereign Grace Church we seek to equip every member to maximize the use and effectiveness of these aids.

- A. The *Bible* exposes and judges the motives, intents, and desires of the heart. It provides truth—God’s perspective on reality.

Hebrews 4:12: “For the word of God is living and active, sharper than any two-edged sword, piercing to the division of soul and of spirit, of joints and of marrow, and discerning the thoughts and intentions of the heart.”

- B. *Prayer* deepens our fellowship with God, and therefore brings a greater sensitivity to and conviction of sin. In prayer we can confess our sins, cultivate a hatred for sin and a love for godliness, and receive strength for our battle with sin.

1 John 1:9 “If we confess our sins, he is faithful and just to forgive us our sins and to cleanse us from all unrighteousness.”

- C. *The Holy Spirit* dwells in us so that we can say “no” to the passions and desires of our sinful nature. God has made us new creatures in Christ, and He is actively at work to transform our hearts.

Galatians 5:16: “But I say, walk by the Spirit, and you will not gratify the desires of the flesh.”

“Sanctification...is a thing for which every believer is responsible... Whose fault is it if they are not holy, but their own? On whom can they throw the blame if they are not sanctified, but themselves? God, who has given them grace and a new heart, and a new nature, has deprived them of all excuse if they do not live for His praise.”
—J.C. Ryle

Hebrews 10:24: “And let us consider how to stir up one another to love and good works...”

- D. *Other Christians* are a crucial part of this battle. We all battle sin and suffer from some degree of spiritual blindness due to the deceptive nature of sin. Therefore, each Christian should be committed to receiving help from others in this battle. This includes confessing our sin to each other and receiving observations from each other.

Hebrews 10:24: “And let us consider how to stir up one another to love and good works...”

At Sovereign Grace Church, the practice of sanctification is woven throughout all the facets of our church life. Each member is encouraged to practice the spiritual disciplines—especially Bible reading and prayer—and through them to “grow in the grace and knowledge of our Lord Jesus Christ” (2 Peter 3:18). An essential part of our community groups is the specific and personal application of God’s word to our lives. Our emphasis on relationships provide countless contexts in which we join arms and help each other grow in godliness. The weekly preaching of God’s word is a key means to our growth in godliness as a body. Through these avenues and more, we desire to live lives that increasingly reflect God’s character to a lost world.

V. The Heart of Sanctification

The intentional pursuit of godliness is a priority at Sovereign Grace Church because the Scriptures command it. In taking sanctification seriously, we are taking God's holiness seriously and the reality of our own sin seriously. It is not uncommon to find some Christians who downplay the role of sin in their lives—such talk seems negative or counter-productive. However, few endeavors could be more exciting than the glorious pursuit of becoming more like Jesus Christ by the power of the Holy Spirit. Far from making us self-centered or morbidly introspective, our pursuit of holiness intensifies our joy as we become more amazed at God's forgiveness, more free from the sin in our lives, and more intimately acquainted with our God. Ultimately, our holiness brings God glory as His character is increasingly displayed in our lives. Such mercy and grace provides powerful motivation to cooperate with God's sanctifying work in our lives and so to "continue the journey" of the Christian life in the context of the local church.