



The Holy Spirit

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Unit 6. The Sanctifying Spirit

Exercise

Choose an area where you would like to grow in holiness. As you read through this unit, apply what you are learning to this specific area through prayer, repentance, and gospel homework.

Sanctification

Sanctification is something for which believers in Christ have been chosen according to God's glorious purpose and for our very real good (Ephesians 1:4). It is God's specific will for us (1 Thessalonians 4:3) without which no one will see the Lord (Hebrews 12:14). Sanctification is the continued application of the gospel to our everyday temptations, sins, trials, challenges and opportunities. It is an opportunity for true joy, intimacy with Christ and God-glorifying living as we are progressively conformed to the image of Jesus (Romans 8:29).

Reflecting Jesus

The goal of sanctification is to glorify God by reflecting the image of Jesus. In a sense, it is about recovering our humanity in Christ. Humanity was made in the image of God, but in our fall from God's grace, we marred the image of God. As a result, all of our desires are bent away from God and so we fail to reflect the beauty, truth and goodness of Jesus. The good news is that God wants to restore our image in Christ (2 Corinthians 3:18; Colossians 3:10). He promises a restored image in Jesus who is the image of the invisible God (Colossians 1:15). He holds up the image of Jesus as most glorious and, through the gospel, opens our eyes to his never-ending beauty (2 Corinthians 4:6). Only by looking to Jesus can our disfigured image be restored. When we look away from ourselves and into the face of Christ we behold, "the light of the knowledge of the glory of God in the face of Jesus Christ" (2 Corinthians 4:6). Therefore, our knowledge of the gospel can correct our vision so that we not only behold, but also become the image of Christ. In short, sanctification happens by looking at Jesus.

It is a fundamental truth that we become what we behold.³² Children become like their parents; interns become like their mentors. If we behold the beauty of Christ, we become beautiful like Christ. So the gospel calls us back to look at Jesus over and over again. A disciple of Jesus is a person who so looks at Jesus that he or she actually begins to reflect his beauty in everyday life. The gospel gives us the eyes to see Jesus as well as the power to look like him. It changes us into the image of his glory:

³² For an insightful, biblical examination of this theme see: Beale, G., *We Become What We Worship* (Downers Grove, MI: IVP, 2008).

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. (2 Corinthians 3:18)

This transformative vision comes from the presence and power of the Holy Spirit (2 Corinthians 3:17-18), to be discussed at length below.

Already/ Not-Yet sanctification

Becoming like Jesus can be hard. We daily encounter temptation, deceit and the desires of the old man. This is why Paul continually reminds the churches to “put off the old man” and to “put on the new man” (Colossians 3:5-10; Ephesians 4:22-24). Both of these ‘put’ verbs are in the past tense, indicating that, upon our initial faith in the past, we experienced a decisive putting off of the old man and putting on of the new humanity. In other words, upon repentance and faith in Jesus, we immediately become a new creation: “Therefore, if anyone is in Christ, he is a new creation. The old has passed away; behold, the new has come.” (2 Corinthians 5:17). Yet we continue to experience the ‘pull’ of the old way of living. This creates a tension that is best explained by a concept called the ‘already/ not-yet.’ In Christ we are already new creations and yet we continue to face the pull of the old creation. I prefer the term ‘already/ not-fully’ as it captures our experience more fully. You might say we are already new creations (in Christ), but not fully experiencing it (on earth). This is why Paul can say we are already sanctified (1 Corinthians 1:30) and also charge us to be sanctified (1 Thessalonians 4:3). Living in the already/ not-fully is filled with difficulty and hope. It can be difficult to fight off the old desires, which is why it is so important that we invite others into our struggle. Yet, in our shared struggle, we also have a shared hope—sanctification is ultimately a work of the Holy Spirit. It is not a matter of trying harder, though it requires effort. It is about depending more upon the Holy Spirit and the promises of God. In the words of Paul, sanctification is “By the Spirit and belief in truth” (2 Thessalonians 2:13). Spirit and truth are at our disposal for the joy-promoting journey of becoming like Jesus. Christ-reflecting sanctification occurs throughout our entire life, but the gospel offers us hope of final transformation. One day our dusty image of Adam will be transformed entirely into the heavenly image of Christ: “Just as we have borne the image of the man of dust, we shall also bear the image of the man of heaven” (1 Corinthians 15:49). When we see him, we will become just as he is. (1 John 3:2)

In summary, through sanctification we recover our humanity by being conformed to the image of Jesus by the power of the Spirit. Simply, sanctification is just being yourself in Jesus. Working out our new identity in the already/ not-fully, however, does not come without a struggle.

Gospel holiness

In his vast theological writings, Puritan theologian and pastor, John Owen, frequently refers to a disciple’s sanctification as the pursuit of “gospel holiness.”³³ Gospel holiness is

³³ All references to Owen’s writings are from *The Works of John Owen ed.* Goold, W, H., (Bath, England: Johnstone and Hunter, 1850-53; rep., Carlisle, Penn: Banner of Truth, 2000).

obedience to Christ motivated by belief in the gospel, not by one's moral effort. It is a view of sanctification, the gradual process of being conformed to the image of Christ that recognises the essential, on-going role of repentance and faith in Jesus. To clarify the difference between self-made "sanctification" and gospel-motivated sanctification, John Owen labours to differentiate between gospel holiness and morality. In his distinction, the latter is the product of human effort, not of grace. Although morality and holiness may, at times, look similar on the outside, they are altogether different on the inside. Morality is self-centred; gospel holiness is Christ-centred. Morality holds self up high in reaching for moral virtues, but gospel holiness holds Christ up high in virtuous failure and success. Gospel holiness requires the truth of God's Word and his grace to believe and obey the truth. This truth and grace, which comes to us in Jesus (John 1:17), is central to holiness. Owen describes gospel holiness as: "peculiarly joined with and limited unto the doctrine, truth, and grace of the gospel; for holiness is nothing but the implanting, writing, and realising of the gospel in our souls."

Gospel holiness requires both truth and grace. How do we receive grace to believe truth? How is the gospel implanted, written, and realised in us to produce holiness?

The necessity of the Spirit

Owen takes up gospel holiness in his two volumes on the person and work of the Holy Spirit. He maintains that gospel holiness is impossible apart from the Holy Spirit. In fact, his principal reason for writing the first six hundred pages on the Holy Spirit is to show that holiness is "the dispensation and work of the Holy Spirit with respect to the gospel."³⁴ And again, "There neither is, nor ever was, in the world, nor ever shall be, the least dram of holiness, but what, flowing from Jesus Christ, is communicated by the Spirit, according to the truth and promise of the gospel."³⁵ To bluntly summarise Owen, it is impossible to have gospel holiness apart from the Holy Spirit. No Spirit, no gospel holiness. You might get morality, even a veneer of Christianity, but no gospel holiness. True joy will escape you. Discipleship devoid of the Spirit's power is no discipleship at all. Apart from the presence and power of the Spirit, our attempt to desire God, believe his promises, fear his warnings and walk in his ways is absolutely futile. Disciples need more than resolve to believe the gospel; they need the Holy Ghost.

The presence and power of the Spirit

How does the Spirit produce gospel holiness? Through his presence and power in disciples of Jesus. The presence of the Spirit is necessary because we are natural born enemies of God (Romans 5:10), who are spiritually dead in our sin (Ephesians 2:5) and darkened in our hearts (Romans 1:21; Ephesians 4:18). It is impossible to express genuine faith in God apart from the Spirit's wooing and life-giving work. The good news, of course, is that by faith in Jesus we can receive new hearts which are able to trust God. These new, lifeless hearts, however, require the animating presence of the Spirit: "And I will give you a new heart, and a new spirit I will put within you. And I will remove the heart

³⁴ Owen, J., *The Holy Spirit*, 152.

³⁵ Owen, J., *The Holy Spirit*, 371.

of stone from your flesh and give you a heart of flesh. And I will put my Spirit within you, and cause you to walk in my statutes and be careful to obey my rules.” (Ezekiel 36:26–27). The repeated phrase “put the Spirit” emphasises the central role of the Holy Spirit in making us new. The newness generated by the Spirit’s presence is called regeneration (Titus 3:5; Galatians 6:15).

We also need the power of the Spirit. The Spirit not only regenerates, but also motivates us to obey the Lord. Apart from the presence of Spirit, our new hearts do not beat for God. But when they beat, they generate religious affection and faith in God. Calling upon Ezekiel 36, Paul explains that the regenerating work of the Spirit inevitably motivates good deeds (Titus 3:5–8). These deeds are the natural fruit of newly born sons of God, also called the “fruit of the Spirit” (Galatians 5:22–23). This Christ-like fruit is the result of our new lives in the Spirit: “If we live by Spirit, let us also walk by the Spirit” (Galatians 5:25). As soon as we have the Spirit’s presence, we have the Spirit’s power to live as new creations (Galatians 6:15). The Spirit regenerates us so that our lifeless hearts can beat for God in lives of obedient worship and adoration of the Lord Jesus Christ.

In summary, Scripture shows us a clear connection between the Spirit’s regenerating presence and his motivating power. Disciples possess gospel holiness through the power and presence of the Spirit. How does this work practically? What does reliance on the Spirit look like?

Mortification of sin

John Owen’s books *Of the Mortification of Sin* and *On Temptation* are classics on the subject of fighting sin. In his preface to *Of the Mortification of Sin* (mortification is an old word meaning ‘to put to death’), Owen articulates his purpose for writing on the subject: “That mortification and universal holiness may be promoted in my own and in the hearts and ways of others, to the glory of God; so that the gospel of our Lord and Saviour Jesus Christ may be adorned in all things.” Mortification is that tenacious disposition of the heart that longs to defeat sin out of love for Jesus. Notice that Owen sets mortification of sin in its rightful place, not as an end in itself, but as a means to making much of the gospel of Christ. Owen keeps the gospel, not fighting, central to discipleship, while retaining an appropriate tenacity in fighting our relentless foe. He writes: “Be killing sin lest it be killing you.” Paul issues similar injunctions:

- “Put to death therefore what is earthly in you: sexual immorality, impurity, passion, evil desire, and covetousness, which is idolatry. On account of these the wrath of God is coming.” (Colossians 3:5–6)
- “For if you live according to the flesh you will die, but if by the Spirit you put to death the deeds of the body, you will live.” (Romans 8:13)
- “Take care, brothers, lest there be in any of you an evil, unbelieving heart, leading you to fall away from the living God. But exhort one another every day, as long as it is called “today”, that none of you may be hardened by the deceitfulness of sin.” (Hebrews 3:12–13)

Sin is no light-hearted matter. It is crouching at our door and we must master it (Genesis 4:7). It is dangerous not to fight sin. It is a sobering fight that must not cease. Fighting your sin means a habitual weakening of the flesh through constant fighting and contending in the Spirit for sweet victory over sin. It should be regular and progressive, not occasional and instant. Fighting is not an end in itself or a way to make us more presentable to God. We fight because we have been made presentable in Christ. We fight to believe the gospel – the good news that Jesus has defeated our sin, death and evil through his death and resurrection, and that he is making all things new, even us. Until all things are new, we will continue to fight the good fight of faith.

Fight for gospel holiness is ultimately about life, not death; about joy, not sorrow. It is about the gospel, not good works. We do not fight for acceptance. We fight from our acceptance. We do not contend against sin to forge an identity, but because we have received a new identity in Christ. Perfection is not the goal; persevering faith is. As New Testament professor Scott Hafemann often says: “It’s not perfection overnight but perseverance over a lifetime.”

Cultivating fresh faith in the gospel

If the Spirit empowers us to put sin to death by trusting in God’s promises, how can we cultivate fresh faith in the gospel? Why is that sometimes memorised Bible promises do not seem to help?

The problem is not that Jesus only occasionally makes good on his promises. Jesus is always trustworthy and his promises are always good. The reason we fail to experience the Spirit’s power through God’s word is our fault. Our hearts become indifferent to God’s promises. How, then, can we revive our hearts to take interest in God’s promises?

Spirit-led Bible reading

John Owen recommends that we return to prayer, but perhaps not as we usually pray. In order to have fresh faith in the gospel, we ought to pray to the Spirit for three things:

1. Insight into his promises
2. Experience of our need
3. The creation of desire³⁶

When reading God’s word, all too often we assume insight, neglect to experience our need and are too proud to ask for desire. What if, whenever we read the Bible, we begin to talk to the Holy Spirit? What if we ask for help from the divine Helper who is meant to guide us into truth?

³⁶ Owen, J., *The Holy Spirit*, 363.

The Spirit wants to help us in our reading, experiencing and desiring before the face of God. He hovers over the deep, ready to disclose the will and presence of God to us. He loves to rivet our affection upon the risen Christ. So whenever you are reading the Bible and feel like you are not getting anything out of it, pause to ask the Spirit for insight into God's promises. Pause and ask him: 'Lord, you have been given to us so that we can understand all the things freely given to us by God. Will you give me insight into God's word right now?' Have you ever gained an insight in to Scripture, but not known how to respond? What if, instead of trying to 'figure out application' on our own, we asked the Spirit to give us an experience of our need? Pause to ask him: 'Lord, who knows the heart of people like the Spirit of God? Please help me experience my specific need for God right now.' Perhaps the Spirit will lead you to respond by rejoicing, repenting or obeying. Finally, have you ever read with insight, known your need, but felt no desire to respond to God? Do not move on or assume you will have the proper response. Pause and ask the Spirit: 'Lord, forgive me for my lack of desire. Please create a fresh, new desire in me to respond to Jesus.' Ask the Spirit to give you: insight into his promises, an experience of your need, a desire to respond. Approach God's word with God's Spirit. Plead for the lightning while carrying the rod.

Doing gospel homework

As you read God's word, take confidence that the Spirit longs to give you fresh faith in God's promises. Now take that faith in a particular promise and consider how the gospel promises something better than whatever temptation is promising. Prepare for moments of temptation by doing gospel homework. Gospel homework is a lot more fun than it sounds! When reading the Bible, look for promises of grace to rebuff the promises of the sins you find so enticing. Look for the Lord's instruction regarding a particular temptation. Develop a practice of identifying the promises of sin and line them up against the promises of Christ. Here are a few examples:

Sexual lust: the fight for true intimacy

Instead of trusting sexual lust for intimacy, trust God for true intimacy: "Blessed are the pure in heart, for they shall see God" (Matthew 5:8). When you are tempted to lust, turn to God's promise for true intimacy, to see God and be ravished with him in Jesus.

- Lust says: 'Long for what you cannot have and you will be happy.'
- The Gospel says: 'Rejoice in what you do have, in Jesus, and you will be truly happy.'

Vanity: the fight for true worth

Instead of relying on vanity for worth, consider the beauty of God: "Beloved, we are God's children now, and what we will be has not yet appeared; but we know that when he appears we shall be like him, because we shall see him as he is." (1 John 3:2). When you are tempted to find your worth in your appearance, turn to God's beauty and rest in the beauty you have in him.

- Vanity says: 'Perform beautifully and you will have worth.'
- The Gospel says: 'Jesus performed beautifully for you; therefore, you have never-ending worth.'

Pride: the fight for true confidence

Instead of trusting in compliments for confidence, believe that your sufficiency comes from God: "Such is the confidence that we have through Christ towards God. Not that we are sufficient in ourselves to claim anything as coming from us, but our sufficiency is from God, who has made us competent to be ministers of a new covenant, not of the letter but of the Spirit. For the letter kills, but the spirit gives life." (2 Corinthians 3:4-6).

- Pride says: 'Find and cherish compliments, and then you will be confident.'
- The Gospel says: 'Your confidence comes not from your sufficiency, but from God who has made you sufficient in Jesus.'

Get in the habit of comparing the promises of sin to the promises of the gospel. I have found it incredibly helpful to write down a sin promise next to a gospel promise in order to see the staggering difference between the two. When you identify the sin promise, it forces you to search the Scriptures for how the gospel offers a better promise. There is something about seeing the futility of sin next to the beauty of Christ. Make a habit of doing gospel homework and looking for grace in God's promises. Memorise the answers. Quote them to temptation. Write them on your heart. Most importantly, plead with the Spirit for fresh faith in gospel promises.

The mortification commands come with a promise. If we "put to death the deeds of the body" then we will live (Romans 8:13). This promised life is eternal life, life that begins with faith in Christ and endures for eternity (Romans 8:10–11). Everywhere we look, sanctification is baited with unblushing promises of reward. Those who trust in the resurrected Christ for eternal life will ultimately receive immortal bodies in which they will enjoy God and his renewed creation forever with no more sin, suffering or struggle. There will be no more already/ not-fully as we fully enjoy our consummated new humanity before the presence and glory of Jesus. Until then, keep looking at Jesus!