

**BEING CONFORMED TO THE
IMAGE OF CHRIST**



UNLEASHED

ERIC MASON

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ABOUT THE AUTHOR



Eric Mason is the founder and lead pastor of Epiphany Fellowship in Philadelphia, Pennsylvania. He lives in the heart of Philadelphia with his wife, Yvette; sons Immanuel, Nehemiah, and Ephraim; and daughter Amalyah. Pastor Mason is the founder and president of Thriving, an urban resource collaborative committed to developing leaders for ministry in an inner-city context. Pastor Mason has written three books: *Manhood Restored*, *Beat God to the Punch*, and *Unleashed*.

Pastor Mason has been graced by God to preach and teach at churches and conferences in the United States and abroad. He received a bachelor's degree in psychology from Bowie State University, a master of theology from Dallas Theological Seminary, and a doctoral degree from Gordon-Conwell Theological Seminary. Pastor Mason was first burdened as an undergraduate to go into full-time vocational service after trusting Christ.

Pastor Mason was then called to serve as the regional director of the Urban Schools Alternative at Oak Cliff Bible Fellowship. When he received the call to Philadelphia, Fellowship Bible Church in Little Rock, Arkansas, offered to train him in leadership and church planting. After his commissioning, Pastor Mason moved with his family to Philadelphia to plant Epiphany Fellowship.



HOW TO USE THIS STUDY

This Bible study provides a guided process for individuals and small groups to explore Scriptures that shape a Christian's view of spiritual growth, or sanctification. This study is divided into six key areas:

1. Grown by God Through the Gospel
2. Faith and Repentance
3. The Role of Suffering in Sanctification
4. Grown by the Word of God
5. Grown Through Prayer
6. Overcoming Strongholds

One week of Bible study is devoted to each of these topics, and each week is divided into three sections of personal study:

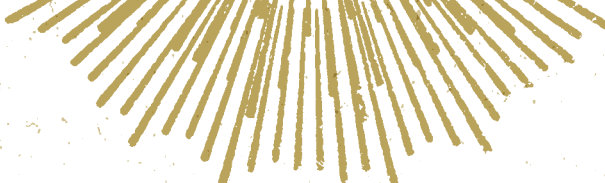
1. The Big Idea
2. Digging Deeper
3. Gospel Application

In these sections you'll find biblical teaching and interactive questions that will help you understand and apply the teaching.

In addition to the personal study, six group sessions are provided that are designed to spark gospel conversations around brief video teachings. Each group session is divided into three sections:

1. "Start" focuses participants on the topic of the session's video teaching.
2. "Watch" provides key Scriptures presented in the video and space to take notes.
3. "Respond" guides the group in a discussion of the video teaching.

If you want to go deeper in your study, you may want to read the book on which this Bible study is based. *Unleashed* (B&H Publishing) is ISBN 978-1-4336-8747-1.



TIPS FOR LEADING A SMALL GROUP

PRAYERFULLY PREPARE

Prepare for each group session with prayer. Ask the Holy Spirit to work through you and the group discussion as you point to Jesus each week through God's Word.

REVIEW the weekly material and group questions ahead of time.

PRAY for each person in the group.

MINIMIZE DISTRACTIONS

Do everything in your ability to help people focus on what's most important: connecting with God, with the Bible, and with one another.

CREATE A COMFORTABLE ENVIRONMENT. If group members are uncomfortable, they'll be distracted and therefore not engaged in the group experience.

TAKE INTO CONSIDERATION seating, temperature, lighting, refreshments, surrounding noise, and general cleanliness.

At best, thoughtfulness and hospitality show guests and group members they're welcome and valued in whatever environment you choose to gather. At worst, people may never notice your effort, but they're also not distracted.

INCLUDE OTHERS

Your goal is to foster a community in which people are welcome just as they are but encouraged to grow spiritually. Always be aware of opportunities to include and invite.

INCLUDE anyone who visits the group.

INVITE new people to join your group.

ENCOURAGE DISCUSSION

A good small-group experience has the following characteristics.

EVERYONE PARTICIPATES. Encourage everyone to ask questions, share responses, or read aloud.

NO ONE DOMINATES—NOT EVEN THE LEADER. Be sure your time speaking as a leader takes up less than half your time together as a group. Politely guide discussion if anyone dominates.

NOBODY IS RUSHED THROUGH QUESTIONS. Don't feel that a moment of silence is a bad thing. People often need time to think about their responses to questions they've just heard or to gain courage to share what God is stirring in their hearts.

INPUT IS AFFIRMED AND FOLLOWED UP. Make sure you point out something true or helpful in a response. Don't just move on. Build community with follow-up questions, asking how other people have experienced similar things or how a truth has shaped their understanding of God and the Scripture you're studying. People are less likely to speak up if they fear that you don't actually want to hear their answers or that you're looking for only a certain answer.

GOD AND HIS WORD ARE CENTRAL. Opinions and experiences can be helpful, but God has given us the truth. Trust Scripture to be the authority and God's Spirit to work in people's lives. You can't change anyone, but God can. Continually point people to the Word and to active steps of faith.

KEEP CONNECTING

Think of ways to connect with group members during the week. Participation during the group session is always improved when members spend time connecting with one another outside the group sessions. The more people are comfortable with and involved in one another's lives, the more they'll look forward to being together. When people move beyond being friendly to truly being friends who form a community, they come to each session eager to engage instead of merely attending.

ENCOURAGE GROUP MEMBERS with thoughts, commitments, or questions from the session by connecting through emails, texts, and social media.

BUILD DEEPER FRIENDSHIPS by planning or spontaneously inviting group members to join you outside your regularly scheduled group time for meals; fun activities; and projects around your home, church, or community.

WEEK 1



**GROWN BY
GOD THROUGH
THE GOSPEL**

START

Welcome to session I of *Unleashed*. Open the group session by asking participants to introduce themselves with quick answers to the following questions.

What's one thing you're looking forward to about this study or this time together as a group?

If someone asked you about the role of the gospel in your life, what would you say?

How often do you specifically think about the Holy Spirit? What questions do you have about His role in your life?

If you're a follower of Christ, you've had an encounter with the gospel. Most of us think of the gospel as the good news that saved us—and that's true—but that's not the whole story. We mustn't see our journey with Jesus as beginning and ending with a past moment. Rather, it's a continuous journey begun by God in the gospel, sustained by God in the gospel, and completed by God in the gospel. The gospel both begins and continues our journey with God.

Over the next six weeks we'll explore what it looks like to live lives that are both defined and propelled by the gospel. We'll discover how God uses the gospel to unleash His sanctifying power in our lives and to conform us to the image of Christ.

Read Romans 8:28-30 together as a group. Then watch video session I, in which Pastor Mason starts us on our journey by helping us understand how the gospel grows us in Christlikeness through the power of the Holy Spirit.

WATCH

If you abide in me, and my words abide in you, ask whatever you wish, and it will be done for you. By this my Father is glorified, that you bear much fruit and so prove to be my disciples.

JOHN 15:7-8

My beloved, as you have always obeyed, so now, not only as in my presence but much more in my absence, 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.

PHILIPPIANS 2:12-13

O foolish Galatians! Who has bewitched you? It was before your eyes that Jesus Christ was publicly portrayed as crucified. Let me ask you only this: Did you receive the Spirit by works of the law or by hearing with faith? Are you so foolish? Having begun by the Spirit, are you now being perfected by the flesh?

GALATIANS 3:1-3

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.

ROMANS 8:29

RESPOND

Pastor Mason covered a lot of ground as we began our study together. Let's begin with a simple question:

What stood out to you about Pastor Mason's teaching? How did the Lord speak to you?

We all have our view of salvation and its role in our lives. Pastor Mason helped us expand that view by explaining that the gospel speaks into every aspect of our lives throughout our lifetimes.

**Why do you think it's so easy to view salvation as simply fire insurance from hell?
What's the danger of this perspective?**

Why do we so often view the fundamentals of our faith as something we leave behind?

One of the most important points Pastor Mason made in this video was that God is the One who grows us. Sanctification is primarily His work.

How does it affect your faith to know that God is the One who drives your spiritual growth?

**Read John 15:7-8. In what ways can you more consistently abide in Christ?
What does abiding look like for you?**

What was the most challenging truth you heard Pastor Mason say?

In closing, pray and thank God not only for saving you but also for providing the means and the power to continue growing closer to Him and more like Him.

Complete the following three personal-study sections before the next group session. One section will focus on this week's big idea, the next section will dig deeper into Scripture, and the final section will focus on application.

THE BIG IDEA

Have you ever had that feeling you're just not growing spiritually? You're doing all the right things—attending church, reading your Bible, participating in a small group, and praying. Maybe you even attend extra Bible studies or conferences to help you grow. But you still find that overall, you feel spiritually stagnant. As a pastor, I can't tell you how many times I've heard people say some version of "I don't feel I'm growing." Many Christians wrestle with this issue, and the cause of this common feeling is a fundamental misunderstanding of what it takes to grow.

A young high-school basketball player was hungry to join the NBA. You could find him practicing to overcome his weaknesses, both before and after practice. His passion propelled him into a full scholarship at a major university. The stats he was putting on the board were unheard of for a freshman athlete at a school of that magnitude. Soon NBA scouts began to circle like hawks to get him. After arriving in the NBA, however, the young man seemed to lose his passion for the game. A large contract with guaranteed money had become an enabler for laziness. He could have been one of the top three players in the league if he'd retained his high-school work ethic. He needed to remember that the same practices that got him to the NBA were the same practices that would keep him there.

Many of us wonder why we're not growing in our spiritual lives. A lot of times it's because we think our growth depends only on us—that we have to work to achieve it all on our own. But it's the work of Jesus on the cross that brings us into a relationship with God, keeps us in a relationship with God, and grows us in our fellowship with God. Unlike the basketball player who had to rely on his own work ethic, not only to get him to the NBA but also to keep him there, the gospel functions in the spiritual life on our behalf. Now we still have skin in the game, as we'll talk about later, but it's the gospel and the work of the Holy Spirit in our lives that propel us to grow closer to the image of Christ.

That brings us to the big idea of this week's Bible study: God saves us and grows us through the gospel.

How would you describe the role of the gospel in your life? Record a few thoughts.

The purpose of this Bible study is to help you understand spiritual growth, or sanctification. The simplest way to view your sanctification is to see it as a constant process of being conformed to the image of Christ—growing more and more like Jesus.

Read Romans 8:28-30. What stands out to you about these verses?

What do these verses tell you about the relationship of your initial salvation (justification) to the actions that follow it?

It's essential that we view our spiritual lives as a process of being conformed to Jesus Christ, because whether or not we realize it, we're being conformed to something. Paul said it this way:

Do not be conformed to this world, but be transformed by the renewal of your mind, that by testing you may discern what is the will of God, what is good and acceptable and perfect.

ROMANS 12:2

In other words, if we aren't being conformed to the image of Christ, we're being conformed to the pattern of this world. There's no neutral option.

In what ways do you need to break your conformity to the world? List some.

What's one way the gospel—the saving message of Christ—could help you renew your mind?

If you had to assign a percentage that expresses the degree to which your heart is conformed to Christ, what would it be? Why did you choose that number?

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A continuous return to the gospel will help us move our hearts and lives toward greater conformity to Christ. God begins this ongoing process when we're saved, and He completes it by the same means it began—through the gospel.

One of the most profound verses in the Bible on this subject is Romans 1:15: "I am eager to preach the gospel to you also who are in Rome." Paul's eagerness to preach the gospel to the believers in Rome wasn't because he thought they hadn't accepted the gospel but because he knew they needed to hear the gospel over and over. The same is true of believers today. We never graduate from our need to hear the gospel.

Paul wrote many letters to churches in the first century, mentioning the gospel more than 60 times in the letters of the New Testament. This fact is notable because Paul wrote these letters to groups of people who were already believers, as we saw in the previous example. Paul was constantly speaking about the gospel to believers. For example, Paul wrote this to the Philippian believers:

³I thank my God in all my remembrance of you, ⁴always in every prayer of mine for you all making my prayer with joy, ⁵because of your partnership in the gospel from the first day until now. ⁶And I am sure of this, that he who began a good work in you will bring it to completion at the day of Jesus Christ.

PHILIPPIANS 1:3-6

Paul spoke of the Philippians as having partnered with him in the gospel from "the first day until now" (v. 5). What does this tell you about the role of the gospel in the lives of believers?

What does verse 6 tell you about the process of sanctification?

God justifies us through the gospel, and He sanctifies us with the gospel. Many of us adhere to faith-based justification (the idea that we're saved through faith), but we cling to a works-based notion of sanctification instead. In effect, we believe God saves us through the power of the gospel, but from that point forward we have to grow ourselves through our own power.

Read Ephesians 2:8. Briefly describe the gift of God referred to in this verse.

Hebrews 10:10 says, “By [God’s] will we have been sanctified through the offering of the body of Jesus Christ once for all.” The word *sanctified* in this verse is a perfect passive participle. Perfect tense means our sanctification is a completed work in the past. Consequently, our being set aside as holy by God has been done. A portion of our sanctification is already complete. The passive voice of the word *sanctified* points to the fact that it was done to us, not by us. Finally, the fact that the word *sanctified* is a participle means this state of sanctification describes our identity. We’re continually being sanctified by God. Continual spiritual growth is part of what it means to be a Christian.

Scripture is clear that the gospel not only saves us but also grows us. It’s also clear that the Holy Spirit plays a central role in our sanctification. We can’t lose sight of that fact. If our theology is to be gospel-centered, we mustn’t forget the Holy Spirit. He’s the One who applies to us every component of the gospel. We don’t grow and conform to the image of Christ in our own strength.

Sanctification mustn’t be seen as separate from the gospel but as a part of it. It’s an extension of the gospel. Read Paul’s explanation:

When the goodness and loving kindness of God our Savior appeared, he saved us, not because of works done by us in righteousness, but according to his own mercy, by the washing of regeneration and renewal of the Holy Spirit, whom he poured out on us richly through Jesus Christ our Savior, so that being justified by his grace we might become heirs according to the hope of eternal life.

TITUS 3:4-7

According to this passage, what’s the role of the Holy Spirit in our salvation?

Why do you think it’s easy to forget about the Holy Spirit’s role in our spiritual lives?

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For too long the church (in some sectors) has had a reductionistic view of the Holy Spirit. In many cases He's understood simply as an idea from the Bible. We've ignored and therefore disconnected ourselves from the power of the Holy Spirit and His role in our sanctification.

Here are a few ways the Holy Spirit works in our lives to grow us closer to God.

1. THE SPIRIT CONVICTS US OF SIN, RIGHTEOUSNESS, AND JUDGMENT.

When he comes, he will convict the world concerning sin and righteousness and judgment: concerning sin, because they do not believe in me; concerning righteousness, because I go to the Father, and you will see me no longer; concerning judgment, because the ruler of this world is judged.

JOHN 16:8-11

2. THE SPIRIT OPENS OUR HEARTS TO THE GOSPEL TO CONFESS JESUS.

I want you to understand that no one speaking in the Spirit of God ever says "Jesus is accursed!" and no one can say "Jesus is Lord" except in the Holy Spirit.

I CORINTHIANS 12:3

3. THE SPIRIT REGENERATES AND RENEWS US THROUGH THE GOSPEL.

He saved us, not because of works done by us in righteousness, but according to his own mercy, by the washing of regeneration and renewal of the Holy Spirit.

TITUS 3:5

4. THE SPIRIT SEALS AND SECURES US IN THE FAITH.

You also ... were sealed with the promised Holy Spirit, who is the guarantee of our inheritance until we acquire possession of it, to the praise of his glory.

EPHESIANS 1:13-14

... who by God's power are being guarded through faith
for a salvation ready to be revealed in the last time.

I PETER 1:5

From leading us to faith in Jesus Christ, to initially saving us, to maintaining our faith in Jesus Christ as He sanctifies us, to preserving our faith in the blessed hope that He will glorify us, we need the power of the Holy Spirit. He's the wind that turns the turbines of our souls, lives, and ministries. And of course, as we'll see throughout this study, He causes us to grow into conformity to the image of Christ.

In your own words, record your best understanding of the word *sanctification*.

The Holy Spirit sanctified us at salvation, yet He continues to work to conform us to Christ's image. Holiness isn't something we have to work for or achieve on our own. The Holy Spirit draws us to Christ through the gospel in the first place, and the Spirit grows us toward spiritual maturity through that same gospel as we follow Christ.

Finish this section of your study by praying the following prayer.

Holy Spirit, I thank You that You know me. I thank You that You love me in spite of the many times I overlook Your role in my life. I thank You that You see me for who I am and seek me in spite of my many sins and failures. Holy Spirit, I thank You that You're the one who drew me to Christ through the gospel and brought me into a relationship with Him. I thank You that You're constantly preaching the gospel to me again and again so that I can be transformed by it and become more and more like Jesus. Holy Spirit, I pray that You'll refine me, smooth out my rough edges, and mold and shape me into Christ's image. I ask You to work through the details of my daily life to make me the person God intends for me to be. I submit myself to You and Your sanctifying work. Amen.

*God saves us and grows
us through the GOSPEL.*

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DIGGING DEEPER

When we're drawn toward God and place our faith in the work of His Son, Paul tells us we become new creations:

**If anyone is in Christ, he is a new creation.
The old has passed away; behold, the new has come.**

2 CORINTHIANS 5:17

As new creations, we have a new identity. The old is dead, and the new has come. We have new desires and new natures. And it's this new identity, through the gospel, that's continually being shaped in greater likeness to the image of Christ.

Colossians 3:1-17 describes this new nature and our response to it. Read this passage and notice the progression of sanctification that Paul described. How does each section speak to being shaped in the likeness of Christ?

Verses 1-4

Verses 5-11

Verses 12-17

Throughout the New Testament Paul distinguished between a believer's old and new identities. Read the following verses and record your answers to these questions: What's the common thread? What's the Spirit's role? What's our role?

**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.**

ROMANS 6:6

**Put off your old self, which belongs to your former manner of
life and is corrupt through deceitful desires, and to be renewed
in the spirit of your minds, and to put on the new self, created
after the likeness of God in true righteousness and holiness.**

EPHESIANS 4:22-24

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. But if you are led by the Spirit, you are not under the law.

GALATIANS 5:16-18

Record your thoughts below.

SPIRITUAL MILK VS. SOLID FOOD

When we place our trust in Christ for the first time, we take a step onto a lifelong path of spiritual growth and maturity. At that moment we're spiritual babies. When children are born, they're born fully human—as human as they're ever going to be. On the other hand, being newborn humans, babies are unable to maximize their full potential. Walking, talking, eating on their own—all the potential for these activities exist in the child, but development is necessary for that potential to be realized.

The same thing is true of our sanctification as believers. We're fully justified when we respond to the gospel and place our trust in Christ, but we're unable to maximize our full spiritual potential. We have to be sanctified and grow up in our faith in order to be mature believers. God has to continuously shape and mold us into the image of Christ throughout our lives. Peter talked about this idea in one of his letters, encouraging his readers to grow from spiritual infants into spiritual adults:

**Like newborn infants, long for the pure spiritual milk,
that by it you may grow up into salvation.**

1 PETER 2:2

The apostle Paul also spoke of spiritual infancy in his first letter to the Corinthians, stating that it was necessary for him to begin his teaching ministry in Corinth with spiritual milk rather than spiritual solid food. He also lamented that the Corinthian Christians were still dependent on that spiritual milk when they should have long moved on to solid food:

**I, brothers, could not address you as spiritual people,
but as people of the flesh, as infants in Christ. I fed you
with milk, not solid food, for you were not ready for it. And
even now you are not yet ready, for you are still of the flesh.**

1 CORINTHIANS 3:1-3

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In what areas of your life are you still feeding on spiritual milk (more elementary teachings from Scripture)?

What practical steps can you take to move on to solid spiritual food (a deeper understanding of the Christian life)?

The writer of Hebrews also reprimanded his readers for not having matured beyond their spiritual infancy. Notice the similarities between this text and Paul's words to the Corinthians:

Though by this time you ought to be teachers, you need someone to teach you again the basic principles of the oracles of God. You need milk, not solid food, for everyone who lives on milk is unskilled in the word of righteousness, since he is a child. But solid food is for the mature, for those who have their powers of discernment trained by constant practice to distinguish good from evil. Therefore let us leave the elementary doctrine of Christ and go on to maturity.

HEBREWS 5:12-6:1

When you think about your past spiritual journey, what kinds of beliefs, attitudes, or behaviors represented spiritual milk for you? What did you need to fully grasp in the early days of your faith in Christ?

How has the gospel propelled you forward from your spiritual infancy?
According to the writer of Hebrews, how can we continue to eat spiritual solid food and not revert to the milk of our spiritual infancy?

God has a dynamic process in place by which He ushers the redeemed from spiritual infancy to spiritual maturity. God's work in us is always in motion, but the question is, Are we submissive to the process of His sanctifying work in our lives?

Paul described this process in his letter to the Corinthians:

We do not lose heart. Though our outer self is wasting away, our inner self is being renewed day by day.

I CORINTHIANS 4:16

The process of sanctification is often referred to as progressive sanctification because it's an ongoing effort. We don't cause our own growth, but the Spirit grows us as we pursue the holiness of Christ and access the means God makes available for us to grow. Therefore, God is sanctifying us, but our role is to submit to His sanctifying work. Look at Paul's words to the Philippians on this subject:

My beloved, as you have always obeyed, so now, not only as in my presence but much more in my absence, 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.

PHILIPPIANS 2:12-13

What's our role in our own sanctification, according to these verses?

What's God's role?

What we're discussing is of utmost importance for the believer. It's important because God's sanctifying work in us extends to every aspect of our lives. Every aspect of our lives means conformity to Christ in every way. That's why Paul could say, "All things work together for good" (Rom. 8:28) in the context of God's predestined work of conforming us to the divine image. It isn't something we as humans begin or sustain.

Jesus is the goal of the Christian life. Every sector of our lives is a harvest field for the work of God to make us holy in Jesus. Just as a gardener uses rakes, shovels, plows, fertilizer, and pruning devices, every aspect of this world is a means of grace for God to make us look like the Lord Jesus Christ. The circumstances and experiences of our lives are tools for conforming us to His image.

In John 15:1 Jesus called God the Father "the vinedresser," or the gardener. The Father as our gardener is the visionary leader of our sanctification. In the same passage Jesus called Himself the vine, the source of all the ways we grow. And the Spirit was introduced as the leader who harvests our sanctification (see John 14–17). The Spirit guides us into the means of conformity to Christ, making sure the life of Jesus and the direction of the Father are connected and applied to our lives. The Spirit applies the gospel to every area of our lives. Therefore, the triune God works in concert together for our growth.

PAST, PRESENT, AND FUTURE SANCTIFICATION

Scripture is clear that those who've repented and believed in the good news of Jesus Christ have been sanctified, are being sanctified, and will be sanctified. This is a past, present, and future process. All this is done by a believer's faith in the gospel and by the activity of the Holy Spirit.

PAST: WE'VE BEEN SANCTIFIED

You were washed, you were sanctified, you were justified in the name of the Lord Jesus Christ and by the Spirit of our God.

I CORINTHIANS 6:11

Circle the three things the Holy Spirit does for us, according to this verse.
What does it mean to you to know God did this for you?

PRESENT: WE'RE BEING SANCTIFIED

Are you so foolish? Having begun by the Spirit, are you now being perfected by the flesh?

GALATIANS 3:3

Paul asked this pointed rhetorical question of the Galatian believers, implying they'd been trying to achieve their spiritual growth on their own without the power of the Spirit.

List a few ways you've tried to sanctify yourself, as well as the results.

FUTURE: WE'LL BE SANCTIFIED

May the God of peace himself sanctify you completely, and may your whole spirit and soul and body be kept blameless at the coming of our Lord Jesus Christ.

I THESSALONIANS 5:23

When Christ had offered for all time a single sacrifice for sins, he sat down at the right hand of God, waiting from that time until his enemies should be made a footstool for his feet. For by a single offering he has perfected for all time those who are being sanctified.

HEBREWS 10:12-14

Why does God sanctify us in the present and future? Why do you think sanctification is an ongoing process instead of a one-time action at the moment we're justified?

Take a few moments and reflect on your past, present, and future sanctification—things God has done, is doing, and will do in your life to make you holier. First list a few things God has done in your life in the past to sanctify you.

List a few things God is currently doing in your life to make you more like Christ.

Finally, record some things you hope God does to sanctify you in the future.

Close this section by asking yourself some honest questions:

- How much do I care about God's sanctifying me?
- How often have I asked God to make me look more like Jesus?
- What's at stake if I don't fully seek the Lord for my sanctification?

Now pray the prayer below, inserting into the blanks the things God has done in your life, is doing in your life, and you hope He will do in your life.

Holy Spirit, I'm depending on You to conform me to the image of Christ. I thank You for the sanctifying work You've done in my life in the past. I thank You specifically for the ways You _____. I also thank You for the ways You're working in my life right now. Help me be submissive to that process and trust that You're molding and shaping me into the image of Christ. Thank You for currently leading me through _____. Holy Spirit, I also ask that You'll continue to sanctify me in the future. Make me holier throughout my life by _____. I pray that You'll apply the gospel to every area of my life and prepare my heart to fully cooperate with that process. In Christ's name, amen.

*God has a dynamic process in place
by which He ushers the redeemed from
spiritual infancy to spiritual maturity.*

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GOSPEL APPLICATION

Up to this point we've focused primarily on God's role in our sanctification, specifically the way the Holy Spirit applies the gospel to our lives and conforms us to the image of Christ. However, that's not the whole story. It's vitally important that we also see ourselves as active participants in desiring God and growing in Christlikeness. And it's not an easy task. Sanctification is a victorious struggle—victorious in that Jesus has secured our sanctification but a struggle in that we're called to actively pursue holiness.

Indicate on the scale the degree to which you actively pursue holiness.

1	2	3	4	5
Never				Daily

What does that pursuit look like for you? How are you actively participating in the Holy Spirit's work in your life?

When we address this topic, we tend to fall on one of two opposite poles on a spectrum. Some believers talk about holiness being rooted in the character and action of God, but they never speak of how we pursue holiness in our daily lives. This way of thinking can lead us to become spiritually stagnant because we're always waiting for God to act.

At the other end of the scale are people who do pragmatic works that seek to grow themselves, but they don't root their actions in what God has done for them in the Lord Jesus Christ and through the Holy Spirit. This kind of thinking can lead to a brand of self-help Christianity or a theology of works righteousness in which people put forth a lot of self-effort to be better Christians.

Do you tend to rely on God for your spiritual growth or to make proactive choices to change your life? How has this approach affected your spiritual life?

What are the dangers of not having a balanced perspective—of either trying to achieve sanctification through our own efforts or not doing enough?

How can you have a more balanced perspective of relying on God’s sovereignty over your spiritual growth while still taking responsibility for your part in the process?

Let’s look at Philippians 2:12-13 again, this time from the vantage point of applying the gospel to our lives. These verses make a paradoxical statement about spiritual growth:

My beloved, as you have always obeyed, so now, not only as in my presence but much more in my absence, 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.

PHILIPPIANS 2:12-13

Paul called the Philippian church to obedience motivated by God’s work in them, not by Paul’s presence with them. Paul wanted these Christians to know that he didn’t work in them, but God did. In their pursuit of holiness, he called them to work *out* their salvation, not *for* their salvation. This is the paradox: we work out our salvation even though God is the One who ultimately sanctifies us. In other words, we’re to be diligent in pursuing the means to look more and more like Christ while doing so with fear and trembling—that is, reverence for God and trust in the fact that He’s supervising and directing the process.

In what way do you see the gospel in these verses from Philippians?

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Notice Paul's words about obedience. How do you think most people view obedience—as positive or negative? What role does obedience to God play in our sanctification?

If you had to sum up the process of sanctification in one sentence based on these verses alone, what would it be? Record that sentence here.

The paradox of sanctification—that it's primarily God's work but also includes our active participation—means one way we can make an effort in our sanctification is to more fully and consistently yield to the Holy Spirit's work in our lives. We need to get out of the way of what He wants to do through us, at the same time working to become a more and more useful vessel for His purposes.

Ultimately, we want to be so yielded to the Lord and so open to be used by Him that we're filled with the Holy Spirit, as the apostle Paul wrote about in Ephesians 5. There Paul was encouraging the Ephesian Christians to behave in a certain way and not to fall back into their old way of life before they knew Christ. He wrote:

**Do not be foolish, but understand what the will
of the Lord is. And do not get drunk with wine,
for that is debauchery, but be filled with the Spirit.**

EPHESIANS 5:17-18

The remarkable thing about this text is that the phrase “Be filled with the Spirit” (v. 18) is a command. It's something God instructs us to do. We don't have a choice about it. That means we're supposed to actively seek being filled with the Spirit. However, the verb “be filled” is in the passive voice, which means it's something that happens to us, not by us. God is the One filling us with the Spirit. The verb is also present tense, which in Greek, the original language of the New Testament, indicated that we should be filled with the Spirit in a continual, ongoing way. Being filled with the Holy Spirit should be a constant pursuit by any believer.

If God commands you to be filled with the Holy Spirit, yet it's something only He can do for you, how can you obey that commandment? What practical step(s) can you take to be filled with the Spirit?

In Romans 5:5 Paul elaborated by saying our ability to be filled with the Holy Spirit derives from a deliberate act of love on God's part: "God's love has been poured into our hearts through the Holy Spirit who has been given to us."

Have you ever thought about the Holy Spirit as a gift of God's love to us? What does this truth tell you about God?

As we seek to live out the gospel in our lives, the Holy Spirit makes that possible. We're justified in the first place through the power of the Spirit, and we're made to look more and more like Christ through the ongoing, active, sanctifying work of the Spirit. The Holy Spirit applies the gospel to every aspect of our lives, and He teaches us what that application looks like in our lives day to day.

We're not smart enough, insightful enough, observant enough, godly enough, wise enough, or self-aware enough to fully grasp the power of the gospel every day and to know how to apply it to our lives. We need the Holy Spirit to guide us through the process of spiritual growth. But this means we need to work to give ourselves every opportunity for the Spirit to speak. We can't possibly hear from God if we aren't exhausting the tools we've been given like prayer and the study and memorization of His Word, thus allowing the Spirit to speak through those means.

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In Romans 8:26-28 Paul wrote about this process and the way the Holy Spirit guides us:

The Spirit helps us in our weakness. For we do not know what to pray for as we ought, but the Spirit himself intercedes for us with groanings too deep for words. And he who searches hearts knows what is the mind of the Spirit, because the Spirit intercedes for the saints according to the will of God. And we know that for those who love God all things work together for good, for those who are called according to his purpose.

ROMANS 8:26-28

Carefully read this passage one more time and record what the Holy Spirit does that helps conform you to the image of Christ.

How would the actions of the Holy Spirit, as described in this passage, help you better apply the gospel in your life?

What's the role of God's will in our sanctification?

We never get beyond the gospel in our Christian life. We never graduate to something more “advanced.” The gospel isn’t the first step in a “stairway of truths”; rather, it’s more like the hub in a wheel of truth. The gospel isn’t just the ABCs of Christianity but also the A–Z. The gospel isn’t just the minimum required doctrine necessary to enter the Kingdom but also the way we make all progress in the Kingdom.¹

We could never grasp and apply the gospel to our lives without the power of the Holy Spirit. So we never graduate from the gospel, and we make no progress without the Spirit's presence and guidance in our lives.

If we're to be sanctified—conformed to the image of Christ—then we always need to hold the gospel high in our lives. We need to understand that it's not only the power that justifies us in the first place but also God's tool to grow us toward spiritual maturity from that point forward. And the best part about it is that God Himself—God the Holy Spirit—does the heavy lifting in that process. We just need to submit ourselves to His will and find ways to actively participate in what the Holy Spirit is doing to make us look more and more like Jesus in our words, our attitudes, and our actions.

Finish this week's study with this prayer.

God, I know sometimes I don't view the gospel with the right lenses. I confess that I've regularly relegated it to a dusty corner of my faith. Sometimes I think of the gospel as simply something that saved me and that I need to tell other people. Help me, Lord, by the power of Your indwelling Holy Spirit, to grasp Your majesty and the life-changing power of the gospel: both the power to justify and the power to sanctify. Lord, help me be sensitive to ways You're moving in my life and ways Your Spirit is leading me to apply the gospel in my daily life. Help me be a joyful, active participant in that process, even if it requires pain or sacrifice. Help me view Your Spirit's role in my life as a gift of love from You. Father, help me never lose sight of the ongoing work of Your love, Your gospel, and Your Spirit to make me like Jesus. Grow me, Lord, through Your gospel and by the power of Your Spirit. Amen.

1. Timothy Keller, "The Centrality of the Gospel," *The Movement Newsletter*, Redeemer Presbyterian Church.

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