

# Pursuing Holiness

Adult Discipleship Electives  
Inter-City Baptist Church

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## Course Introduction

- I. Is *holiness* a bad word?
  - A. Why do we sometimes react negatively to the concept of holiness?  
(List taken from *Pursuit of Holiness* by Jerry Bridges)
    1. We equate holiness with a series of specific prohibitions.
    2. We equate holiness with a particular style of dress and mannerisms.
    3. We equate holiness with unattainable perfection, an idea that fosters either delusion or discouragement about one's sin.
  - B. How should we think of the concept of holiness (1 Pet 1:13–16)?
    1. We should think of holiness as the pursuit of an eternal prize.
    2. We should think of holiness as leaving behind the worthless pursuits of ignorance in favor of pursuing God.
- II. What does *Pursuing Holiness* mean?
  - A. New Testament holiness is predominantly moral or ethical purity. It involves upright behavior (1 Pet 1:15–16), pure thoughts and actions (Eph 5:27; Heb 3:1), sexual purity (1 Thess 4:3–4), and concern for the good of others (Col 3:12–14).
  - B. *Holiness* and *sanctification* come from the same family of Greek terms; therefore, *holiness*, *sanctification*, and *spiritual maturity* are basically synonymous.
  - C. In conclusion, *pursuing holiness* is synonymous with pursuing spiritual maturity or Christlikeness. This class is a study of how Christians grow into spiritual maturity.

## Lesson One: The Big Picture

*Theme: We must view the pursuit of holiness in the context of God's overall work of salvation.*

- I. A Common Misconception
  - A. We tend to think of salvation, spiritual growth, and glorification as unrelated events; however, our present pursuit of holiness is necessarily tied to God's past and future work. The Bible speaks of salvation as a past act, a present process, and a future hope which are all tightly connected.  
  
"For by grace you **have been saved** through faith; and that not of yourselves, *it is the gift of God*" (Eph 2:8).  
  
"For the word of the cross is foolishness to those who are perishing, but to us who

**are being saved** it is the power of God” (1 Cor 1:18).

“Much more then, having now been justified by His blood, we **shall be saved** from the wrath of God through Him” (Rom 5:9).

“Salvation includes that which is given, freely and finally, by God’s grace (forgiveness—called in one epistle justification...); that which is continually imparted (sanctification—growing emancipation from all evil...); and that still to be attained (redemption of the body, perfect Christlikeness, final glory)” (*Evangelical Dictionary of Theology*, p. 968).

- B. Salvation is not solely a past legal declaration; instead, salvation is God’s complete work in which he declares the sinner righteous (justification) and then makes him righteous (sanctification).
- C. To properly appreciate what is happening in our pursuit of holiness, we must see it in this overall context.

## II. God’s Original Purpose

### A. God made mankind in his image.

“Then God said, ‘Let Us make man in Our image, according to Our likeness.’...God created man in His own image, in the image of God He created him; male and female He created them” (Gen 1:26–27).

### B. God intended for man to reflect his glory.

“Everyone who is called by My name, and whom I have created for My glory, whom I have formed, even whom I have made” (Is 43:7).

## III. The Fall of Mankind

### A. As a result, of Adam and Eve’s sin, all people are born sinners.

“Therefore, just as through one man sin entered into the world, and death through sin, and so death spread to all men, because all sinned” (Rom 5:12).

### B. Because of our sin, the image of God is distorted, and we fall short of his glory.

“For all have sinned and fall short of the glory of God” (Rom 3:23).

## IV. The Beginning of Salvation

### A. Justification

1. At the moment of salvation, the believer is legally declared righteous as a result of being credited with the righteousness of Christ.

“Being justified as a gift by His grace through the redemption which is in Christ Jesus” (Rom 3:24).

2. Despite being declared righteous, the believer is still a sinner who falls short of God’s glory.

“But to the one who does not work, but believes in Him who justifies the

ungodly, his faith is credited as righteousness” (Rom 4:5).

B. Regeneration/New Birth

1. At the moment of salvation, the believer receives new life.

“God has given us eternal life, and this life is in His Son. He who has the Son has the life; he who does not have the Son of God does not have the life” (1 John 5:11–12).

2. This new life is experiential. It changes our nature.

“Therefore if anyone is in Christ, *he is* a new creature; the old things passed away; behold, new things have come” (2 Cor 5:17).

V. The Continuation of Salvation

- A. The change which occurs in regeneration begins the process of spiritual growth.

“No one who is born of God practices sin, because His seed abides in him; and he cannot sin, because he is born of God” (1 John 3:9).

- B. The purpose of spiritual growth is that the believer would become practically what he already is legally. The specific goal is to restore the image of God in man so that he can properly glorify God.

“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 Cor 3:18).

- C. The NT narrows the goal as being that the believer would become like Christ who is the image of the Father in human form (Col 3:9–10).

“For those whom He foreknew, He also predestined *to become* conformed to the image of His Son” (Rom 8:29).

- D. The goal of spiritual growth is transformation. The goal is not merely that the believer would stop doing bad things and do more good things; the goal is that his actual nature would be changed. Through pursuing holiness, believers are made righteous (2 Cor 3:18).

“He has granted to us His precious and magnificent promises, so that by them you may become partakers of *the* divine nature, having escaped the corruption that is in the world by lust” (2 Pet 1:4).

- E. This transformation cannot be completed in this life. Believers cannot achieve perfect holiness in this life.

“If we say that we have no sin, we are deceiving ourselves and the truth is not in us” (1 John 1:8).

VI. Salvation ***will be completed*** at death or(and) the rapture (Rom 8:28–30).

- A. At death, believers are freed from sin.

Hebrews 12:23 speaks of dead believers who have not yet received their glorified bodies as, “spirits of the righteous made perfect.”

- B. At the rapture, Christians will receive their glorified bodies. At this point they will perfectly reflect Christ, the perfect God-man.

Behold, I tell you a mystery; we will not all sleep, but we will all be changed, in a moment, in the twinkling of an eye, at the last trumpet; for the trumpet will sound, and the dead will be raised imperishable, and we will be changed. For this perishable must put on the imperishable, and this mortal must put on immortality” (1 Cor 15:51–53).

- C. Glorification will complete our present pursuit of holiness.

“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” (Phil 1:6).

## VII. Definitions

- A. “In the practical Christian experience sanctification is the progressive outworking of the spiritual life received in regeneration as it transforms the believer into the image of Christ” (McCune, 3:122).
- B. Sanctification is “how the Spirit makes those who are holy in *principle* (i.e., positionally sanctified by grace) holy and godly in *practice* (i.e., experientially sanctified in word and deed)” (Demarest, p. 385).

## VIII. Conclusions/Applications

- A. We must see clearly what we are pursuing, what the goal of spiritual growth is. We are seeking to become holy like God is holy. He is the standard.

“My observation is that most of us who are believers practice what I call a ‘cruise control’ approach to obedience...When you are driving on the highway you can accelerate to your desired speed, push the cruise-control button, and take your foot from the accelerator pedal...You don’t have to watch your speedometer to make sure you’re not going to get a ticket for speeding, and you no longer have to experience the fatigue that comes with constant foot pressure on the accelerator...However, we tend to obey God in the same way. To continue the driving analogy, we press the accelerator pedal of obedience until we have brought our behavior up to a certain level or ‘speed.’ The level of obedience is most often determined by the behavior standard of other Christians around us. We don’t want to lag behind them because we want to be as spiritual as they are. At the same time, we’re not eager to forge ahead of them because we wouldn’t want to be different. We want to just comfortably blend in with the level of obedience of those around us. Once we have arrived at this comfortable level of obedience, we push the ‘cruise control’ button in our hearts, ease back, and relax. Our particular Christian culture then takes over and keeps us going at the accepted level of conduct. We don’t have

to watch the speed limit signs in God’s Word, and we certainly don’t have to experience the fatigue that comes with seeking to obey Him with all our heart, soul, and mind...By contrast...race-car drivers are totally focused on their driving. Their foot is always on the accelerator as they try to push their car to the outer limits of its mechanical ability and endurance...They are driving with all their heart, soul, and mind” (Bridges, *Transforming Grace*, p. 116–117).

- B. We must pursue actual change. God has not simply asked us to conform to a standard, he has commanded us to become like him.
- C. We must pursue holiness in dependence on the power God has provided. The pursuit of holiness is not primarily moral reformation. It is a part of God’s overall work of salvation which begins with regeneration and ends with glorification. We must always see it in this context and intentionally draw on God’s strength for the pursuit.
- D. We must remain encouraged in the pursuit of holiness knowing that God will complete the work he has begun.

#### IX. Going Deeper

- A. What are some misconceptions about spiritual growth that you have heard or believed?
- B. What are some practical ramifications of viewing spiritual growth as a part of God’s overall work of salvation?
- C. List a couple of areas where you have developed a “cruise control” mentality.
- D. Read 2 Peter 1:1–11.
  1. According to v. 3, what is the source of spiritual life and the strength for spiritual growth?
  2. According to v. 4, what is the goal of spiritual growth? Why can we be confident that we will make progress toward this goal?
  3. What does Peter mean when he says we have already “escaped the corruption that is in the world”? How does this fact relate to vv. 5–7?
  4. What does Peter mean in v. 8 when he says the virtues of vv. 5–7 should be “yours and are increasing”?

## **Lesson Two: God's Role and My Role**

“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” (Phil 2:12–13).

*Philippians 2:12–13 commands believers to work at spiritual growth while also promising that God is producing spiritual fruit in his children. It's essential that we understand both roles and how they intersect. This is because if we focus solely on our role of working hard and neglect God's role, we will be weighed down by discouragement or self-righteousness. But if we focus solely on God's role, we will be characterized by laziness, disillusionment, or stunted growth.*

### I. God's Role in the Pursuit of Holiness

#### A. Spiritual growth is primarily a work of God.

“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” (1 Thess 5:23).

#### B. The Father's Role

1. The Father appoints the Son and the Spirit to fulfill their roles in spiritual growth.

“Now the God of peace...equip you in every good thing to do His will, working in us that which is pleasing in His sight, through Jesus Christ, to whom be the glory forever and ever. Amen” (Heb 13:20–21).

2. The Father works providentially through the circumstances of life to correct our faults and move us to greater godliness (Rom 8:28–29).

“MY SON, DO NOT REGARD LIGHTLY THE DISCIPLINE OF THE LORD, NOR FAINT WHEN YOU ARE REPROVED BY HIM; FOR THOSE WHOM THE LORD LOVES HE DISCIPLINES, AND HE SCOURGES EVERY SON WHOM HE RECEIVES” (Heb 12:5–6).

#### C. The Son's Role

1. Through his death and resurrection, Christ not only paid the penalty for our sin but also secured our victory over sin.
2. At salvation the believer is united with Christ.

“And the testimony is this, that God has given us eternal life, and this life is in His Son. He who has the Son has the life; he who does not have the Son of God does not have the life” (1 John 5:11–12).

“I have been crucified with Christ; and it is no longer I who live, but Christ lives in me; and the *life* which I now live in the flesh I live by faith in the Son of God, who loved me and gave Himself up for me” (Gal 2:20).

- a. Believers are no longer enslaved to sin because they have been united with the death of Christ, which defeated the power of sin.

“Our old self was crucified with Him, in order that our body of sin might be done away with, so that we would no longer be slaves to sin” (Rom 6:6).

- b. Believers are able to live righteous lives because they have been united with the resurrected Christ, who has enabled us to live for his eternal purpose.

“So that as Christ was raised from the dead through the glory of the Father, so we too might walk in newness of life” (Rom 6:4).

3. The practical effects of union with Christ are real whether we feel them or not. All believers have been freed from the enslaving power of sin and have the ability to pursue holiness.

#### D. The Holy Spirit’s Role

1. The Holy Spirit is the primary agent of spiritual growth.

“Who are chosen according to the foreknowledge of God the Father, by the sanctifying work of the Spirit, to obey Jesus Christ and be sprinkled with His blood” (1 Pet 1:1b–2a; see also 2 Cor 3:18; 2 Thess 2:13).

2. Among other things, the Holy Spirit provides assurance of salvation (Rom 8:15–16), gives spiritual understanding (John 14:26), provides power for spiritual growth (Eph 3:16), enables victory over the flesh (Rom 8:13; Gal 5:16), and produces spiritual fruit (Gal 5:22–23).

#### E. Certainty of God’s Role

1. The NT stakes the certainty of spiritual growth upon the faithfulness of God.

“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” (Phil 1:6).

“We know that no one who is born of God sins; but He who was born of God keeps him, and the evil one does not touch him” (1 John 5:18).

2. The fact that God will accomplish his work of sanctification is as certain as every other aspect of salvation.

“For those whom He foreknew, He also predestined *to become* conformed to the image of His Son, so that He would be the firstborn among many brethren; and these whom He predestined, He also called; and these whom He called, He also justified; and these whom He justified, He also glorified” (Rom 8:29–30).

#### F. Depending on God’s Role

1. Believe that holiness is possible.
  - a. Sometimes we don’t try to be holy because we don’t think holiness is possible. In contrast, the NT assumes that we can achieve a level of holiness when it commands us to “walk in a manner worthy of the calling with which you have been called” (Eph 4:1) or to “like the Holy One who

called you, be holy yourselves also in all your behavior” (1 Pet 1:15).

- b. Sometimes we wrongly apply statements like “all our righteous deeds are like a filthy garment” (Is 64:6) to believers and think that we can never please God; therefore, we don’t try. But the NT teaches that we can “keep His commandments and do the things that are pleasing in His sight” (1 John 3:22).

2. Remain hopeful when you fail.

“Wretched man that I am! Who will set me free from the body of this death? Thanks be to God through Jesus Christ our Lord!” (Rom 7:24–25).

3. Depend on God all of the time no matter how you feel.

"Your worst days are never so bad that you are beyond the reach of God's grace. And your best days are never so good that you are beyond the need of God's grace" (Bridges, *Transforming Grace*, p. 18).

- a. We are still sinners on our best days; therefore, we must guard against thinking that we are sufficient for the battle or that we have achieved something on our own.
- b. God’s grace is still sufficient on our worst days.

“Who will bring a charge against God’s elect? God is the one who justifies; who is the one who condemns? Christ Jesus is He who died, yes, rather who was raised, who is at the right hand of God, who also intercedes for us” (Rom 8:33–34).

4. Rehearse the gospel daily.

- a. Know the gospel well.
- b. Be attentive to the gospel and make personal application of its truth when you read the Bible, sing songs, and hear preaching and teaching.

G. Significance of Depending on God’s Role.

1. God’s love—not guilt—becomes our greatest motivation.

“For the love of Christ controls us, having concluded this, that one died for all, therefore all died; and He died for all, so that they who live might no longer live for themselves, but for Him who died and rose again on their behalf” (2 Cor 5:14–15).

2. We can pursue holiness with complete honesty.

“For I am the least of the apostles, and not fit to be called an apostle, because I persecuted the church of God. But by the grace of God I am what I am, and His grace toward me did not prove vain; but I labored even more than all of them, yet not I, but the grace of God with me” (1 Cor 15:9–10).

“The gospel, applied to our hearts every day, frees us to be brutally honest

with ourselves and with God. The assurance of His total forgiveness of our sins through the blood of Christ means we don't have to play defensive games anymore. We don't have to rationalize and excuse our sins. We can say we told a lie instead of saying we exaggerated a bit...We can call sin exactly what it is, regardless of how ugly and shameful it may be, because we know that Jesus bore that sin in His body on the cross" (Bridges, *Transforming Grace*, p. 22–23).

3. We can pursue holiness with confidence.

"For this reason I also suffer these things, but I am not ashamed; for I know whom I have believed and I am convinced that He is able to guard what I have entrusted to Him until that day" (2 Tim 1:12).

II. My Role in the Pursuit of Holiness

"If by the Spirit you are putting to death the deeds of the body, you will live" (Rom 8:13).

A. God's role in spiritual growth should inspire effort, not laziness (Phil 2:12–13). After Peter rehearses God's promise that believers will "become partakers of the divine nature" (2 Pet 1:4), he states, "Now for this very reason also, applying all diligence, in your faith supply moral excellence..." (2 Peter 1:5).

B. The NT describes the pursuit of holiness as requiring diligent effort.

"I do not regard myself as having laid hold of *it* yet; but one thing *I do*: forgetting what *lies* behind and reaching forward to what *lies* ahead, I press on toward the goal for the prize of the upward call of God in Christ Jesus" (Phil 3:13–14).

C. We must practice the spiritual disciplines.

"Discipline yourself for the purpose of godliness...For it is for this we labor and strive, because we have fixed our hope on the living God" (1 Tim 4:7, 10).

1. Bible Study

"Sanctify them in the truth; Your word is truth" (John 17:17).

2. Prayer

"Devote yourselves to prayer, keeping alert in it with *an attitude of thanksgiving*" (Col 4:2).

3. Local Church

"Take care, brethren, that there not be in any one of you an evil, unbelieving heart that falls away from the living God. But encourage one another day after day, as long as it is *still* called 'Today,' so that none of you will be hardened by the deceitfulness of sin" (Heb 3:12–13).

D. We must eradicate sin and pursue godliness.

"Cleanse your hands, you sinners; and purify your hearts, you double-minded. Be miserable and mourn and weep; let your laughter be turned into mourning and your

joy to gloom” (James 4:8–9).

“Now flee from youthful lusts and pursue righteousness, faith, love and peace, with those who call on the Lord from a pure heart” (2 Tim 2:22).

E. We must plan to succeed.

“But put on the Lord Jesus Christ, and make no provision for the flesh in regard to *its* lusts” (Rom 13:14).

“Discipline does not mean gritting your teeth and saying, ‘I’ll not do that anymore.’ Rather, discipline means structured, planned training” (Bridges, *Pursuit of Holiness*, p. 100).

F. Necessity of Our Role

1. The NT repeatedly warns believers that if they do not grow, they will not inherit eternal life.

“Pursue peace with all men, and the sanctification without which no one will see the Lord” (Heb 12:14).

2. Professing believers who do not grow were never truly saved.

“They went out from us, but they were not *really* of us; for if they had been of us, they would have remained with us; but *they went out*, so that it would be shown that they all are not of us” (1 John 2:19).

III. Conclusions/Applications

- A. Exactly how God’s role and my role correlate is difficult to comprehend. The Bible never asks us to understand exactly how this works; instead, it commands us to trust God to fulfill his role and to pursue holiness diligently.
- B. All of us struggle in different ways, and we face varying seasons in our own lives. Some are prone to discouragement, others to laziness and apathy, and still others to self-righteousness and pride. Whatever your struggle may be, keep both roles clearly in view. Trust God to fulfill his promises, be encouraged for the battle, and work hard to make progress.

IV. Going Deeper

- A. Do you struggle more with trusting God to fulfill his role or with working hard to fulfill your role? How does this manifest itself in your life (e.g., one of the sins listed in the opening paragraph)?
- B. What are some practical steps you can take to remain more focused on God’s role?
- C. Reread Philippians 3:12–14 and consider how Paul pursued godliness. Can you say that you work as diligently? Are there any specific areas where you have grown lazy in the pursuit of holiness?
- D. In light of the Bridges quote on p. 10, what are some practical steps you can take to improve your pursuit of holiness?

## Lesson Three: It's a Process

*All of us like quick and easy solutions to our problems. Many books have been sold over the years based on a promise to provide quick and easy answers for dieting, parenting, getting rich, and even for pursuing holiness. Christians are gluttons for books which promise the key to unlocking the Spirit or which offer a psychological trick that will eradicate the influence of the flesh. Should we be looking for quick and easy solutions to our sin problems? What does the Bible have to say about the process of spiritual growth?*

### I. Spiritual Growth Is a Process.

#### A. Various Christian groups have promoted instantaneous sanctification.

1. This idea was popularized by the early evangelistic efforts of John Wesley and the Methodists and is common today among various Pentecostal and revivalist groups.
2. According to these groups, sanctification is empowered by a second work of grace, which follows conversion and which allows believers to enter a sphere of “entire sanctification” or “Christian perfection” in which sinful desires are eradicated and replaced with pure desires. This life is commonly described as the “victorious Christian life” or the “higher life.”
3. This second work is normally said to result from a crisis experience or an act of surrender.

#### B. The New Testament describes spiritual growth as a lifelong process.

“And have put on the new self who is being renewed to a true knowledge according to the image of the One who created him” (Col 3:10).

“Now for this very reason also, applying all diligence, in your faith supply moral excellence, and in *your* moral excellence, knowledge, and in *your* knowledge, self-control, and in *your* self-control, perseverance, and in *your* perseverance, godliness, and in *your* godliness, brotherly kindness, and in *your* brotherly kindness, love” (2 Pet 1:5–7).

##### 1. 2 Corinthians 3:18

“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 Cor 3:18).

- a. This verse is built on two activities—the believer’s “beholding” and the resulting transformation.
- b. The verbs translated “beholding” and “are being transformed” are both present tense. In the Greek language, the present tense pictures an ongoing or continuous process. Therefore, 2 Corinthians 3:18 describes two present, continuous processes.
- c. The source of change is a continual gazing at the glory of Christ (4:6

clarifies that the “glory of the Lord” is seen “in the face of Christ”).

- d. The term translated “are being transformed” describes a radical transformation.
  - e. In sum, as the believer continues to gaze on Christ, he will progressively be changed into Christ’s image.
2. This process begins at conversion and will inevitably continue throughout life. Conversion necessarily involves the intention to submit to Christ, and the new life we receive in regeneration will be apparent.

“For they themselves report...how you turned to God from idols to serve a living and true God” (2 Thess 1:9).

“If anyone is in Christ, *he is* a new creature; the old things passed away; behold, new things have come” (2 Cor 5:17).

3. The New Testament assumes that sanctification is a process by describing it as a continual struggle against the sin nature. Nowhere does the NT speak of a “victorious Christian life” where the believer has little difficulty overcoming sin.

“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” (Gal 5:17).

“Beloved, I urge you as aliens and strangers to abstain from fleshly lusts which wage war against the soul” (1 Pet 2:11).

#### C. What about the fruitless “Christian”?

1. The process of spiritual growth is not linear. Scripture leaves room for believers to enjoy periods of rapid growth and to endure periods of stunted growth or backsliding.
 

“And I, brethren, could not speak to you as to spiritual men, but as to men of flesh, as to infants in Christ. I gave you milk to drink, not solid food; for you were not yet able *to receive it*. Indeed, even now you are not yet able, for you are still fleshly. For since there is jealousy and strife among you, are you not fleshly, and are you not walking like mere men” (1 Cor 3:1–3; see also Heb 5:11–12)?
2. Several passages already quoted make it clear that a genuine believer who is immature or backslidden will ultimately repent and grow. A regenerate heart will show its character.
3. If a supposedly carnal Christian never repents and changes, we can only conclude that his true nature has been revealed and that he was never truly saved (1 John 2:19; 2 Pet 2:20–22).
4. The NT authors were willing to make judgments based on the fruit they observed (1 John 2:19; Jude 4); however, since we cannot see the heart, we

cannot ultimately know the condition of the “carnal Christian.” God may be at work in ways which are not apparent to us (e.g., Lot, c.f., 2 Pet 2:7–8).

#### D. Practical Significance

1. There are no quick and easy solutions to our sin struggles. Disregard any offer to the contrary because spiritual growth is a lifelong, hard process.
2. Anticipate the ups and downs of pursuing holiness and press forward through them all.
3. Don’t allow yourself to feel secure in a fruitless faith. You should be afraid if there is no fruit in your life, and you should get busy pursuing holiness.

### II. The Purpose of the Process is Transformation.

- A. The NT repeatedly describes the process of spiritual growth as a struggle between two competing natures—the sin nature and the new nature (Gal 5:17).

“I find then the principle that evil is present in me, the one who wants to do good. For I joyfully concur with the law of God in the inner man, but I see a different law in the members of my body, waging war against the law of my mind and making me a prisoner of the law of sin which is in my members” (Rom 7:21–23).

- B. The goal of spiritual growth is not merely the suppression of the sin nature or that we have more good days than bad days. The goal of spiritual growth is the progressive eradication of the sin nature and the growth of the new nature.

1. Spiritual growth is repeatedly described as transformative (2 Cor 3:18).

“You laid aside the old self with its *evil* practices, and have put on the new self who is being renewed to a true knowledge according to the image of the One who created him” (Col 3:9–10).

2. Believers can progressively lessen the influence of the flesh.

“So then, brethren, we are under obligation, not to the flesh, to live according to the flesh—for if you are living according to the flesh, you must die; but if by the Spirit you are putting to death the deeds of the body, you will live” (Rom 8:12–13).

3. Believers can progressively become more holy.

“Let us cleanse ourselves from all defilement of flesh and spirit, perfecting holiness in the fear of God” (2 Cor 7:1).

#### C. Practical Significance

1. There is a heavy emphasis in some quarters on decisions as the key to spiritual growth or on seeking a definitive work of God to eliminate particular struggles. Sometimes believers are able to change a pattern overnight. However, because of the continuing presence of the sin nature, we shouldn’t expect change to be

instantaneous or easy. When we are convicted about our sin, we should commit ourselves to the process of transformation, not to stopping altogether.

2. The fact that we are to pursue transformation means that we cannot be content with merely changing our behavior. We must seek to eliminate sin at the deepest levels of our heart and to replace it with genuine godliness.
3. While the struggle against sin will not end in this life, we should be encouraged by the fact that we can change. Our battle against specific sins can become easier as we are transformed.
4. Although we will make progress in the battle, it will not be over until death or the rapture. As long as we have a sin nature, we must remain on guard.

### III. The Target of the Process Is Holiness.

#### A. God's holiness is the standard we are to pursue.

1. The Bible repeatedly commands believers to imitate God's character.  
 "Like the Holy One who called you, be holy yourselves also in all *your* behavior; because it is written, 'YOU SHALL BE HOLY, FOR I AM HOLY' (1 Pet 1:15–16; cf., Lev 19:2; 20:7; Matt 5:48).

"Be imitators of God, as beloved children" (Eph 5:1).

2. God's holiness consists of absolute purity and the complete absence of evil.  
 "God is Light, and in Him there is no darkness at all" (1 John 1:5).

#### B. The commands of Scripture define how we imitate God's holiness.

1. Leviticus 19:2 commands Israel to "be holy, for I the LORD your God am holy." The remainder of the chapter defines how Israel was to imitate God's holiness by detailing a variety of laws regarding such things as honoring parents, acceptable worship, caring for the needy, and living honestly.

2. Obedience is at the heart of discipleship.

"Go therefore and make disciples of all the nations, baptizing them in the name of the Father and the Son and the Holy Spirit, teaching them to observe all that I commanded you" (Matt 28:19–20a)

#### C. We must not allow the pervasive wickedness of our society to dull our sense of holiness and sinfulness.

"Therefore be imitators of God, as beloved children...but immorality or any impurity or greed must not even be named among you, as is proper among saints; and *there must be no* filthiness and silly talk, or coarse jesting, which are not fitting, but rather giving of thanks. For this you know with certainty, that no immoral or impure person or covetous man, who is an idolater, has an inheritance in the kingdom of Christ and God" (Eph 5:1–5).

#### D. We must pursue holiness in our entire person (1 Thess 5:23).

1. The mind must be shaped by a proper view of God and biblical truth.  
 “How blessed is the man who does not walk in the counsel of the wicked, nor stand in the path of sinners, nor sit in the seat of scoffers! But his delight is in the law of the LORD, and in His law he meditates day and night” (Ps 1:1–2).
2. The will must obey biblical commands and be disciplined in all areas.  
 “Now flee from youthful lusts and pursue righteousness, faith, love *and* peace, with those who call on the Lord from a pure heart” (2 Tim 2:22).
3. The emotions must reflect biblical values and judgments.  
 “Slaves, be obedient to those who are your masters according to the flesh, with fear and trembling, in the sincerity of your heart, as to Christ; not by way of eyeservice, as men-pleasers, but as slaves of Christ, doing the will of God from the heart. With good will render service, as to the Lord, and not to men” (Eph 6:5–7).

#### IV. Going Deeper

- A. What are a couple of sin struggles you face where you especially feel the power of your sin nature?
- B. Why are we attracted to theologies which promise instantaneous sanctification? What are a couple of reasons why such theologies are dangerous?
- C. Why should you remain encouraged in your battle against the sin struggles you listed in the first question?
- D. Read Romans 7:14–25.
  1. Describe in your own words the struggle between the sin nature and the new nature.
  2. Is this struggle a mark of maturity or immaturity? What does it say about a believer if he or she cannot identify with this type of struggle?
  3. According to vv. 24–25, what hope should motivate believers to continue the battle?
- E. What are a couple of areas where you struggle to properly pursue God’s holiness?
- F. What are a couple of reasons why we struggle to keep the proper standard of holiness in view?
- G. What disciplines can you establish to keep a better perspective on the standard of holiness?

## Lesson Four: Fighting the Flesh

The last lesson described the battle for holiness as a lifelong and oftentimes frustratingly slow process. The reason is that we have a powerful enemy within—the flesh. While we may be familiar with this term, do we really understand what the flesh is? Why is it so powerful? How we can overcome it?

### I. What Is the Flesh?

#### A. The flesh in the ethical sense is equivalent to the sin nature.

1. “Flesh” commonly refers to the believer’s inclination toward sin—his sin nature.

“For I know that nothing good dwells in me, that is, in my flesh; for the willing is present in me, but the doing of the good *is* not...I find then the principle that evil is present in me, the one who wants to do good” (Rom 7:18, 21).

2. The ethical uses of “flesh” do not refer to the physical body. The NT is clear that the body has been affected by sin, but it is not the primary opponent of godliness (1 Cor 6:19–20).

#### B. The flesh primarily manifests itself through sinful desires or lusts.

1. James teaches that the origin of temptation is the lusts of our own hearts.

“But each one is tempted when he is carried away and enticed by his own lust. Then when lust has conceived, it gives birth to sin; and when sin is accomplished, it brings forth death” (James 1:14–15).

“What is the source of quarrels and conflicts among you? Is not the source your pleasures that wage war in your members” (James 4:1)?

2. The “lust of the flesh,” “lust of the eyes,” and the “boastful pride of life” (1 John 2:16) are all rooted in our desires.

#### C. Fleshly desires produce sinful behavior.

“Now the deeds of the flesh are evident, which are: immorality, impurity, sensuality, idolatry, sorcery, enmities, strife, jealousy, outbursts of anger, disputes, dissensions, factions, envying, drunkenness, carousing, and things like these” (Gal 5:19–21a).

### II. Defining the Battle

#### A. We must replace fleshly desires and practices with those that reflect the character of Christ (Eph 4:17–32).

“But now you also, put them all aside: anger, wrath, malice, slander, *and* abusive speech from your mouth. Do not lie to one another, since you laid aside the old self with its *evil* practices and have put on the new self who is being renewed to a true knowledge according to the image of the One who created him...As those who have been chosen of God, holy and beloved, put on a heart of compassion, kindness, humility, gentleness and patience; bearing with one another, and forgiving each other” (Col 3:8–10, 12–13a)

B. Replacement requires that we “walk by the Spirit.”

“Walk by the Spirit, and you will not carry out the desire of the flesh” (Gal 5:16).

“The fruit of the Spirit is love, joy, peace, patience, kindness, goodness, faithfulness, gentleness, self-control; against such things there is no law” (Gal 5:22–23).

“And do not get drunk with wine, for that is dissipation, but be filled with the Spirit, speaking to one another in psalms and hymns and spiritual songs, singing and making melody with your heart to the Lord; always giving thanks for all things in the name of our Lord Jesus Christ to God, even the Father” (Eph 5:18–20).

1. Since this life is commanded, it is not automatic.
2. While we must seek this life, it is ultimately supernatural.

“And when they had prayed, the place where they had gathered together was shaken, and they were all filled with the Holy Spirit and *began* to speak the word of God with boldness” (Acts 4:31).

3. We pursue this life by filling our minds with biblical truth and by submitting to it. Ephesians 5 states that this life happens as believers fill their minds with truth. The phrase “walk by the Spirit” describes life in submission to God and his Word.

C. Replacement requires a holistic and long-term strategy.

1. The character of your heart (including your flesh) is the product of years of experiences, influences, decisions, and patterns.
2. Changing your heart can require long periods of time and attention to all of the things which affect your heart.
3. For example, a man who is addicted to pornography became addicted as a result of years of influences, decisions, and patterns. As a result, his mind, will, and emotions have all been deeply affected. Therefore, eradicating this activity will require time and a strategy which takes into account all of the factors which have contributed to the problem.

III. Components of the Battle

A. Battle for the Mind

1. Priority of the Mind

- a. Spiritual growth begins with the mind.

“Do not be conformed to this world, but be transformed by the renewing of your mind, so that you may prove what the will of God is, that which is good and acceptable and perfect” (Rom 12:2).

- b. Spiritual growth is rooted in God’s Word.

“Sanctify them in the truth; Your word is truth” (John 17:17).

- c. We live in a day which values passion above sound reasoning. Christians

must resist this direction recognizing that Christianity is rooted in a set of truths which must govern every aspect of life. We must be truth-driven, not passion-driven.

## 2. Transforming the Mind

- a. A common and significant misunderstanding among believers is that transforming the mind merely means knowing the right facts; however, the mind is far more than a compilation of facts. Transforming the mind requires that we transform our values, priorities, and patterns of thought. Consider Paul's testimony in 2 Corinthians 4:17–18. Paul didn't just know the facts about the value of eternity; he allowed those facts to shape his perspective on life and particularly the trials of life.

“For momentary, light affliction is producing for us an eternal weight of glory far beyond all comparison, while we look not at the things which are seen, but at the things which are not seen; for the things which are seen are temporal, but the things which are not seen are eternal” (2 Cor 4:17–18).

- b. Transforming our values, priorities, and patterns of thought requires that we fill our minds with truth and limit the influence of wickedness and error.

“How blessed is the man who does not walk in the counsel of the wicked, nor stand in the path of sinners, nor sit in the seat of scoffers! But his delight is in the law of the LORD, and in His law he meditates day and night” (Ps 1:1–2).

- c. Transforming the mind requires that we discipline our minds to think on truth and purity.

“Set your mind on the things above, not on the things that are on earth” (Col 3:2).

“Whatever is true, whatever is honorable, whatever is right, whatever is pure, whatever is lovely, whatever is of good repute, if there is any excellence and if anything worthy of praise, dwell on these things” (Phil 4:8).

## B. Battle for the Will

1. Since the flesh is evil (Rom 7:18), it is impossible to pursue holiness without living a disciplined life. Until we are glorified, we will have to battle sinful desires.

“Discipline yourself for the purpose of godliness” (1 Tim 4:7).

2. It was already noted that we must make godly choices about what we put into our minds and about what we think.

3. We must choose to resist the temptations that come from within and without.

“Flee from youthful lusts and pursue righteousness, faith, love *and* peace, with those who call on the Lord from a pure heart” (2 Tim 2:22).

4. We must discipline ourselves to obey the commands of Scripture.

5. By disciplining our thoughts and our actions, we can choose to experience right emotions (Ps 73).
6. As we continually make right choices, they become habitual and, therefore, easier. These patterns will ultimately extend to the entire person and to increased victory over the flesh.

#### C. Battle for the Emotions

1. Until we are glorified, we will be tempted with sin and battle evil desires. However, we can grow deep-seated godly affections and values which limit the influence of the flesh (e.g., Paul's testimony in 2 Corinthians 4:16–18).  

“Not that I speak from want, for I have learned to be content in whatever circumstances I am. I know how to get along with humble means, and I also know how to live in prosperity; in any and every circumstance I have learned the secret of being filled and going hungry, both of having abundance and suffering need” (Phil 4:11–12).
2. The battle for the emotions begins with the mind and the will. In Philippians 4:11, Paul says that he “learned” contentment. In vv. 6–7, he says that believers can replace anxiety with peace through “prayer and supplication with thanksgiving.”
3. Sometimes believers invest little effort in sanctifying the emotions either because they think emotions are disconnected from the heart and entirely random or because they think it is too difficult to change them. We will not eliminate fleshly desires in this life; however, we should not surrender the battle. Many NT commands and examples demonstrate that God demands progress in this area (Acts 5:41; Phil 4:4); therefore, we must work toward change. Finally, we should be encouraged that as we make progress in this area, the influence of the flesh will decrease.

#### IV. Battling Fleshly Patterns and Habits

- A. Most if not all believers can identify specific battles against the flesh which are especially challenging. Making progress in these areas requires a battle plan.  

“But put on the Lord Jesus Christ, and make no provision for the flesh in regard to *its* lusts” (Rom 13:14).
- B. Understand that your challenge is unique. There is no “once size fits all” strategy for overcoming the lusts of the flesh. Therefore, what works for someone else may not work for you, and what works for you may not work for someone else.
- C. Identify patterns for your struggle. Is there a certain time of day when your struggle is especially strong? Maybe a certain television show, style of music, location, or person arouses your flesh in unusual ways.
- D. Develop a plan of action.

1. Build resistance through the Word.

“How can a young man keep his way pure? By keeping *it* according to Your word...Your word I have treasured in my heart, that I may not sin against You” (Ps 119:9, 11).

- a. Let the character of God and the truth of the gospel shape your entire view of life.
- b. Identify verses and truths which relate to your struggle. Memorize them and develop the habit of rehearsing them in the face of temptation.
- c. As the Word works, it transforms the values which cause the struggle.

2. Build obstacles to failure.

- a. Since you have identified patterns to your struggle, build obstacles which prevent those patterns from repeating themselves.
- b. Don't be afraid to take radical steps even regarding issues that are not inherently sinful.

“If your right eye makes you stumble, tear it out and throw it from you; for it is better for you to lose one of the parts of your body, than for your whole body to be thrown into hell” (Matt 5:29).

3. Replace sinful patterns and habits (Eph 4:22–32).

- a. Build godly characteristics, don't simply eliminate wicked ones.
- b. Positive replacement can include many things, not just “spiritual” activities (e.g., exercise, reading).

E. Deal with failure biblically.

1. Confess it (1 John 1:9).
2. Learn from it and move forward. Don't allow failure to multiply.

V. Going Deeper

- A. In the previous “Going Deeper,” you identified a couple of sin struggles. What patterns are there to one of your struggles? Are there certain times, locations, etc. where the struggle is especially strong?
- B. What verses and biblical truths can you meditate upon to help you think biblically about this struggle?
- C. What obstacles to sin can you incorporate into your life?
- D. What are a couple of positive attributes or practices that you can develop in place of your sinful pattern?