



HOW DOES



SANCTIFICATION



WORK?



DAVID POWLISON

“There’s nothing more invigorating in your walk with Jesus than getting up every morning and getting actively engaged in your own sanctification. To partner with the Spirit of Christ in your own change, growth, and maturity is a wonderful way of ‘making it your ambition to be pleasing to him.’ And I’m so excited that David Powlison shows the reader how to do just this in his remarkable new book *How Does Sanctification Work?* I give it a hearty thumbs-up!”

Joni Eareckson Tada, founder and CEO, Joni and Friends
International Disability Center; author, *A Spectacle of Glory* and
Beside Bethesda

“Every Christian leader, writer, or pastor should have David Powlison whispering in his ear, ‘God’s Word is deep and rich . . . don’t just sit on one paradigm—teach the full counsel of God.’ This book will do that for you.”

Paul Miller, executive director, see Jesus; author, *A Praying Life* and
A Loving Life

“To know David Powlison is to know a man who is growing in the sweet fruit of sanctifying grace. To witness his ministry is to see one whom the Lord is using to sanctify many. That is why I am so grateful for *How Does Sanctification Work?* One of the most crucial areas of debate among Christians today concerns the doctrine of sanctification. David’s is a voice of sound, biblical wisdom in the midst of much confusion. If you are looking for a book on sanctification that is profoundly personal, biblically balanced, and deeply relevant, then this is it.”

Heath Lambert, associate pastor, First Baptist Church of
Jacksonville; executive director, Association of Certified Biblical
Counselors; author, *A Theology of Biblical Counseling* and
Finally Free

“In this book, David Powlison sets out a case against simplistic statements that sanctification can be reduced to a ‘just do this’ or ‘just believe that’ kind of process. Doing what he always does so brilliantly, he shows us how the riches of Scripture get applied to the details of life. Personal, practical, and bursting with fresh and important insights, here is a book to help God’s people become more like Christ.”

Steve Midgley, executive director, Biblical Counselling UK; senior
pastor, Christ Church Cambridge

“When I think about wise men who have shaped my life and thinking, David Powlison consistently rises to the top. His thoughtful and incisive insight into the human heart and what makes sanctification work is something each of us desperately needs. David recognizes that for all the conversation and writing which have taken place on the topic of sanctification, what seems to be left out is *you!* David helps bring his personal story and others’ narratives into the discussion surrounding sanctification, and in so doing reminds us of the multifaceted way God *works* in people’s lives. Grab this book today, read it and soak it in, and join David and many others in the process of becoming more like our Savior.”

Jonathan Holmes, pastor of counseling, Parkside Church, Uniontown, Ohio; author, *The Company We Keep: In Search of Biblical Friendship*

“*Sanctification* is a very long word. Though many Christians would be able to give a simple definition such as ‘growing in holiness’ or ‘becoming like Jesus,’ few have given much thought to the dynamics of how it happens—how it works. In *How Does Sanctification Work?*, Powlison helpfully identifies five ways our growth in holiness happens. The principles are grounded in Scripture and illustrated by a transparent look at how it has ‘worked’ in his own life. And this is an encouragement for us to see how it—no, how *God’s Spirit*—is at work in our lives, too.”

Timothy Witmer, professor of practical theology, Westminster Theological Seminary; pastor, St. Stephen Reformed Church, New Holland, Pennsylvania; author, *The Shepherd Leader* and *The Shepherd Leader at Home*

“Sanctification is essential to fulfilling our greatest calling in life: namely, to love God with all our hearts and love our neighbors as ourselves. David has not only set forth the essential themes of this process but also described many of the spiritual nuances that guide our steps through this blessed transformation.”

Ken Sande, founder, Peacemaker Ministries and Relational Wisdom 360

“Sanctification is a life-and-death matter. What David Powlison offers in this book is no mere how-to manual on having your quiet time. Instead, behind this straightforward title lies an explosively powerful and practical theology of human transformation. This book is deep enough to instruct those who have spent their lives agonizing over how sanctification really works, and accessible enough to guide those who have never had the question cross their minds. In short, this book will leave you fundamentally changed for the better.”

Alasdair Groves, director of counseling, CCEF New England

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WORK?

DAVID POWLISON

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To Paul Miller—
faithful friend, wise counselor,
and mere Christian

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INTRODUCTION

At the close of his Gospel, John stands back and considers all that he has witnessed over a lifetime: “Now there are also many other things that Jesus did. Were every one of them to be written, I suppose that the world itself could not contain the books that would be written” (John 21:25). I love the juxtaposition of those two sentences. The fact that John left out innumerable stories prompts a cosmic leap of insight and imagination. He has just finished a sixteen-thousand-word book—slightly shorter than the short book you are holding. But the *whole earth* could not hold all the *other* books that could be written about what Jesus did!

What would all those unwritten books say? We know with certainty that they would contain the same *kinds* of things as the book that John did write. His Gospel largely consists of scenes selected from Jesus’s encounters and conversations with various followers, foes, inquirers, and “undecideds.” John gives glimpses into the life stories of different people as their lives intersect with Jesus. We do not witness Jesus’s life story in isolation from other people. His loving actions are not a theological abstraction. We learn of Jesus by seeing and hearing how he

interacts with others. Those countless books that could be written would tell of innumerable personal encounters.

When did all these other things take place? Some stories John left out were about encounters before Jesus ascended. And the unwritten books would include what the Spirit did in carrying Jesus's work forward during the subsequent fifty years of John's life—things he witnessed personally, things he heard from other people, and things he never knew happened because they occurred outside his purview. And, no doubt, these books would also tell all that the Lord is continuing to do ever since John's death. The unwritten books would include your story and mine.

And why are there so many possible books, and why are the books so voluminous? The world cannot contain life stories of events more numerous than grains of sand on the seashore. The details matter. Every person, in every circumstance, in every moment displays never-to-be-repeated specifics. God considers them all—every careless word, every hair on your head, every tear. What Jesus does in each of our lives works with the particulars.

Amid this variety there are commonalities, of course. The common denominator is Jesus Christ and how he works out his saving, sifting, sanctifying purposes. But the variety of personal stories is as significant to God as the common themes. The unique moments are the touch points where the Lord gets specific. So as John writes about the Lord, the camera repeatedly zooms in, slows everything down, lingers on a snippet of conversation, notes a situational detail. John (like all the Gospel writers) invites us to watch Jesus interact, person by person,

situation by situation. He invites us to notice how and what Jesus notices. He lets us hear the questions Jesus asks, and how he answers those who question him. We learn how Jesus sizes up people. We watch how he finds the point of engagement, and then how he enters in, reacts, helps, rattles, invites, irritates, teaches, argues, clarifies, perplexes, saves, warns, encourages. When Jesus crosses paths with you, he reveals you for who you are. He precipitates decisive choices. In response to him, people change, either making a turn for the better or taking a turn for the worse.

Whenever a person makes a turn for the better, *sanctification* is happening. That five-syllable word which forms part of the title of this book needs some defining. What are we talking about when we ask, “How does sanctification work?” First, to be most accurate, we are discussing *progressive sanctification*. Like the word *save*, *sanctify* has a past tense, a present tense, and future tense:

- In the past tense, your sanctification has already happened. You are a saint—an identity for which you get no credit! God decisively acted by making you his very own in Christ. You have been saved.
- In the present tense, your sanctification is now being worked out. God is working throughout your life—on a scale of days, years, and decades—to remake you into the likeness of Jesus. You are being progressively sanctified. You are being saved.
- In the future tense, your sanctification will be perfected. You will live. Your love will be perfected. You will see God’s face when he decisively acts to complete his work

of conforming you to the image of Jesus. You will participate in the glory of God himself. You will be saved.¹

That present-tense inworking of faith and outworking of love is the focus of this book. But we should always bear in mind that what God is doing now in your life builds on what he has done and leads to what he will do.

Second, the words *sanctification*, *saint*, *holy*, and *holiness* frequently conjure up a variety of odd, hyper-spiritual images. But these words intend to communicate earthy, practical realities. To be sanctified is to have your faith simplified, clarified, and deepened. You need God. You know God. You love God. You see life, God, yourself, others more truly. And to grow as a saint is to grow in actually loving people. How other people are doing matters increasingly to you. You care. You help.

Becoming more holy does not mean that you become ethereal, ghostly, and detached from the storms of life. It means you are becoming a wiser human being. You are learning how to deal well with your money, your sexuality, your job. You are becoming a better friend and family member. When you talk, your words communicate more good sense, more gravitas, more joy, more reality. You are learning to pray honestly, bringing who God really is to the reality of human need.

And to grow in holiness does not mean you now talk in hushed tones and every third sentence quotes the Bible. It means you live in more clear-minded hope. You know the purpose of your life, roll up your sleeves, and get about doing what needs doing. You are honestly thankful for good things. You honestly face disappointment and pain, illness and dying.

Sanctification, saint, holy, and holiness—they speak of daily life. There is nothing more practical than to live with an ever-growing love, joy, and purposefulness. There is nothing more eyes-open and helpful than to be maturing in wisdom, hope, and faith.

These two clarifications of the language of sanctification are meant to help us keep oriented. Clear-minded, true theology tracks the big themes. But most of this book will come down to street-level living. The variety, freshness, and complications of stories are what make the Gospels, life, people, and ministry so interesting. The details make both your life and God’s Scripture interesting. The details matter because Jesus finds each one of us in our particulars.

And it is noteworthy that, in finding us, Jesus never ministers by rote. Because people and circumstances are not clones, there is no boilerplate in his conversations, friendships, or preaching. No distilled formula. No abstract generalizations. No “Just do x” sorts of advice. Because situations and persons come unscripted, fluid, and unpredictable, Jesus engages each person and situation in a personalized way. It is no truism to say that Jesus really does meet you where you are. Always. Scripture does the same. No boilerplate. The Holy Spirit makes words personal.

This book will revel in the *variety* of how Jesus Christ works to change lives. And it will probe in order to establish the deeper *patterns* that are operating within all the variations.

The chapters that follow will drill down into how growth in grace actually works, and thus how ministry works to promote growth. I will interweave personal stories and exposition. The Christian life can be expressed biographically or described

Introduction

theologically. Both have their place, and ideally they come hand in hand—as they do in the Bible! Scripture weds stories and interpretation, and I hope that my attempt to do likewise will prove faithful to the message and the method of Scripture, and helpful to you.²

GOD MEETS US WITH HIS PROMISES

Let me begin by telling a story about events so familiar as to seem unremarkable. Yet it mirrors the experience of innumerable Christians who find the Word of God coming to life. Like making a Skype connection, or like an antibiotic healing bronchitis, the apparently mundane appears almost miraculous when you think about it.

In the Bleak Midwinter

This morning my wife, Nan, and I were each feeling mildly overwhelmed by the pressures of life. The family had succumbed to various combinations of flu, bronchitis, pneumonia, and head colds over Christmas. A week later, both of us still felt half-sick and weary. On top of this, we were pressed by a weight of concern for an elderly loved one battling intractable,

deteriorating health problems. Nan faced a swarm of decisions and projects arising from a kitchen renovation, and I was deep in snowdrifts of overdue grading, correspondence, and writing projects. The net effect? We were both beset with that most endemic of human disorders: a nameless mash compounded of stress, distraction, preoccupation with responsibilities, ambient anxiety, incipient irritability, and complaint. Neither of us entered the day as a flourishing garden of love, joy, peace, or patience.

We needed sanctifying this morning—as we do every morning. And God met us with gifts of his Word and Spirit. He refreshed us, giving us what we needed. How? What brought renewal? We happened to be reading a passage from the farther reaches of Deuteronomy:

[The LORD] found [Jacob] in a desert land,
and in the howling waste of the wilderness;
he encircled him, he cared for him,
he kept him as the apple of his eye.
Like an eagle that stirs up its nest,
that flutters over its young,
spreading out its wings, catching them,
bearing them on its pinions,
the LORD alone guided him. (Deut. 32:10–12)

What happened? The Lord wrote these words on our hearts, as he promises he will do (Jer. 31:33). Here in a suburb of Philadelphia, on an early January day, the Holy Spirit took hold of things written down long ago. He clarified our minds, re-awakened our faith, and animated our obedience. What hap-

pened pointedly illustrates how these words in Deuteronomy were “written down for our instruction” (1 Cor. 10:11; see also Rom. 15:4).

Nan picked up on the first half of the passage. She put her immediate response this way: “When you feel like a castaway who needs to be found and rescued, to be treated as ‘the apple of his eye’ means the world to me. The Lord encircles me. The Lord cares. The Lord watches over me. I’m not alone.” She perked up. Her prayers and plans for the day came to life. She made good choices through her day.

My response was similar—but, no surprise, with a nuance of difference. The image of God’s people trekking through the desert resonated both metaphorically and literally. It connected a vivid image—“the howling waste of the wilderness”—to my sense of living amid a swarm of pressures. And it evoked significant memories of hiking through California’s Anza-Borrego Desert in 115-degree heat during the 1980s. Similarly, the image of being encircled with protective care, like an eagle fluttering over its nest, resonated with me. I’ve seen ospreys do that. The Lord encircles, hovers over, and carries his beloved people—and I am one of his. Troubles, temptations, and our God came together. Like Nan, I went into my day with a clearer sense of purpose, a more focused mind, and more attentiveness to others.

That day, in a small way, the Lord changed how we lived. Each of us, and both of us together, found what we needed. He comforted our hearts and established each of us in today’s version of “every good work and word” (2 Thess. 2:16–17). We needed sanctifying; the Spirit sanctified us.

How Many Are His Ways

It was a textbook example of the innumerable ways God speaks and works. The words he used this time to meet us in our need surprised us. I'd never been struck by this particular passage. Though I'd no doubt read it many times, it formed no part of my conscious Bible knowledge. These particular promises and metaphors had never "popped" for either of us. Were there thematic similarities with how God's hand, Scripture, and life experience intersected on other days? Certainly. But this was a fresh encounter on a new day.

I am convinced that our understanding of the process of the Christian life is greatly enriched by considering multiple mundane examples, both in Scripture and in our lives. The pages that follow will look from many angles at how God changes people.

The actual unfolding of progressive sanctification is no theoretical topic. One interesting characteristic is that all Christians already have at least some firsthand experience. Every Christian can say of some person, passage, or event that God used, "*This* was key in helping me when I was struggling with *that* in *those* circumstances." The stories are indeed varied!¹

But firsthand experience also presents a danger. It is tempting to extrapolate a general rule from your own experience: "This must be the key for everyone." Both Scripture and personal testimony teach us that there is no single formula for the kinds of problems that call for sanctification. There's no one-size-fits-all goal. No sound bite captures the range of truths that shape change. There's no one blueprint for the constructive influence of other people. There is no single formula for how God weaves together the turns of events, the intricacy and beauty of his

creation, the rich portrayals of life in literature and the arts—all things.

Multiple stories help us realize that not everyone is like us. Are there common denominators? Yes. But to become a general rule, the underlying patterns must be of the sort that adapt well and flexibly to a multiplicity of cases. I will seek to do justice to both the variety and the commonality of factors God uses in our sanctification.

*The process of sanctification is personal and organic—
not a one-size-fits-all formula.*

Many popular views try to reduce the process of Christian growth to a single template: *Remember past grace. Rehearse your identity in Christ. Avail yourself of the means of grace. Discipline yourself.* But Scripture portrays the dynamics of sanctification in a rich variety of ways. No single factor, truth, or protocol can capture why and how a person is changed into the image of Christ.

Weaving together personal stories, biblical exposition, and theological reflection, David Powlison shows the personal and particular ways that God meets you where you are to produce change. He highlights the variety of factors that work together, helping us to avoid sweeping generalizations and pat answers in the search for a key to sanctification. This book is a go-to resource for understanding the multifaceted, lifelong, personal journey of sanctification.

“To partner with the Spirit of Christ in your own change, growth, and maturity is a wonderful way of ‘making it your ambition to be pleasing to him.’ And I’m so excited that Powlison shows the reader how to do just this.”

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HEATH LAMBERT, associate pastor, First Baptist Church of Jacksonville; executive director, Association of Certified Biblical Counselors

DAVID POWLISON (PhD, University of Pennsylvania) is a teacher, a counselor, and the executive director of the Christian Counseling and Educational Foundation. He is also the senior editor of the *Journal of Biblical Counseling* and the author of *Seeing with New Eyes*, *The Biblical Counseling Movement*; and *Speaking the Truth in Love*.

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