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**Series: People In Step With The Spirit**  
**Message: The Spirit's #1 Priority in Your Life**

**Transcribed Message**  
**December 2, 2018**  
**Ephesians 4:13**

This past Tuesday, the elders had their regular monthly meeting. One of the things we did in our meeting was we reviewed a recent survey that was put out by Ligonier Ministries called the "2018 State of American Theology". Every so often Ligonier Ministries will commission a survey. They'll go out to the general public and ask them questions about God, the Bible, salvation, sin, heaven, hell and those kinds of things. As you read that survey, honestly there isn't anything that was terribly surprising about how the average American looks at some of those things. Yeah, there are some changes from one or two years to the next, but by and large people believe in God. Now that may likely not be the God of the Bible. They believe the Bible is a good book along with a lot of other good books. They believe there's a way of salvation often times and that there is an afterlife. All of that we simply expect from people who do not know the truth of the Word of God in the way that we do.

The thing that is somewhat discouraging is the slice of the survey in which they interview and ask questions of evangelical Christians. Evangelical Christians, if you're not familiar with that terminology, are people like us. We would be considered an evangelical church based on the things that we believe. It is a group of people that is somewhat discouraging to read their answers. A couple of things that we talked about stood out. The inability of evangelical Christians to recognize false teaching. All through the survey you see the inability of churchgoing Christians to be able to spot and detect something that is put before them that isn't accurate. 50% of evangelical Christians believe in some form of prosperity gospel – that if you just live your life the way you're supposed to, God's going to bless you with money and stuff and things. 20% of these evangelical Christians said that they believe that it's possible that the Holy Spirit would tell them to do something that is contrary to the Word of God. So somehow the author of Scripture, the Holy Spirit, tells a Christian in his daily life to do something that is

inconsistent and against the Scripture that He's written. Sadly, 60% of evangelical Christians think that the Holy Spirit is not a person but a force, some kind of a power. It makes you wonder. What do you think they think about the Trinity? The Trinity is God, three in one. If the Holy Spirit isn't even one in terms of being a person, He is more as they said a force or power. One of the other troubling aspects of it as you read through the survey that comes out is the failure on the part of so many evangelical Christians to see the connection between theology and doctrine and how they live their life. In other words, they don't see the very vital connection between doctrine and discipleship, between the things that they believe and how those things are to translate over into their life day-to-day.

So what we're going to do this morning is jump into some doctrine and discipleship. We're going to do it in looking at this matter of the Holy Spirit's number one priority in our lives. Here's what we want to see. The Holy Spirit's primary purpose, the Holy Spirit's number one priority in every believer if you're a child of God by faith, I confidently say to you this morning this is the Holy Spirit's number one desire for you as a child of God – to transform you into the image of Christ, so that every day it becomes a little bit more apparent that you're a Christ follower. To do that, let's begin at a very necessary starting point. That necessary starting point is to acknowledge His good work that has been started within us as Paul says in Philippians.

To do that obviously, we looked a number of weeks ago at the Holy Spirit's work of regeneration. The Holy Spirit's work of regeneration, of new birth, of giving us a new beginning. So just as we had a physical birth in which we entered into this world, so too it's necessary for us to have a spiritual birthday, to be a new creation, to have the very life of God within us by means of His Holy Spirit. Peter says in 1 Peter 1:3 that it is the work of the Father in bringing us to a place where we are born again to a new and living hope. That is speaking of the miracle of regeneration. The first miracle that takes place in our life is the miracle of regeneration.

That's followed by a second miracle and that second miracle is the work of the Holy Spirit in sanctification. The work of the Holy Spirit in sanctification. If regeneration is the new birth, if regeneration is miracle number one and we're born spiritually made alive, then the second miracle that God engages in our life is this matter of growing in

our walk with God, growing as a new Christian. Sanctification. I know you've heard that word. It may not be a word that you can remember the last time you used it and that's okay. You don't necessarily have to use this word, but you need to know what it means. Basically it's just simply saying that as a Christian it's the whole process of living out the life of Christ. Sanctification in its most basic understanding and meaning is to be set apart. It is the idea of holiness. The word "holy" comes from the very root word that we translate or understand to be sanctification. But it also is the idea of being devoted to God. It is the idea of being consecrated to God. So what the Holy Spirit wants to do is He wants to bring transformation into our life by means of consecration, by means of our being set apart, by means of bringing a greater holiness into our life. So we consecrate and we dedicate and we devote ourselves to God. We set ourselves apart to God.

Do you know what happens when you do that? You set yourself apart from other things. Primarily you set yourself apart from the world. In this process of sanctification, as you consecrate, devote yourself to God you're making a willful, conscious decision to not give yourself over to the things of the world. Jesus said to us that you can't serve God and man. You can't serve God and the world. You can't get yourself to the things of the world and give yourself to God in the way that He wants you to. Scott McKnight put it well when he said: "This matter of sanctification means that we listen and dance to the music of the Holy Spirit rather than listening and dancing to the music of the world." In as practical a way as I can say it, sanctification is as a teenager or as a child your parents tell you to do something and you do it. That is sanctification. Sanctification is when you're asked something and you're beginning to think in your mind am I going to tell the truth here or am I going to lie? Sanctification means you tell the truth. You're honest even in the midst of a potentially costly situation. You want to gossip and say something about somebody that you know you shouldn't. sanctification is when you don't. As a wife, you acknowledge and you entrust your husband into the hands of the Lord and into the Holy Spirit's hands to change him. As a husband, you put your wife into the hands of the Lord and you desire to treat her with the tenderness and the kindness and the love that God calls you to. As a single person, you're trusting God that He is going to be enough. He is going to meet you at the point where you live and He's

going to meet every need. That is sanctification. sanctification says that as believers we understand that the gift of sexuality is something that God has created and gifted us with within the context of marriage between a man and a woman. It is not to be used outside of it. That is sanctification. The list is endless. But it is in principle setting ourselves apart to the things of God and at the same time turning away from the things of the world.

So the question ultimately is of course how can I become like that? How can I become holy? How do I become more devoted to God? How is it that I can become more like Christ? One step at a time.

Let's look this morning at seven truths that we need to know about the Spirit's number one priority in our life. If you see it the way I do, and this is in fact the Spirit's number one priority, then it would seem to me as a follower of Christ we'd want it to be our number one priority too. We want to get in line with, we want to get in step with this. So let's look at seven things about the Spirit's work in our life called sanctification.

In one sense, we can start off and say that it is something that is shared among the Godhead. It is shared among the Godhead. Whenever you read your Bible and you come across something in which the Father, the Son and the Holy Spirit are all specifically said to be involved and engaged in, that's important. Everything is important but there's something about this matter of the Trinity engaging in different aspects and works within our life and in our world that cause me to sit up and pay attention. If the Father is interested in it, and the Son is interested in it, and the Holy Spirit is interested in it, then I want to be interested in it as well. That's what we see in this matter of sanctification. As with regard to the Father, it's the Father's specific purpose that you and I be conformed to the image of His Son.

Ephesians chapter 1: "Blessed be the God and Father of our Lord Jesus Christ who has blessed us in Christ with every spiritual blessing in the heavenly places even as He chose us in Him before the foundation of the world that we should be holy and blameless before Him." Purpose statement. That He chose us in Him so that that goal of making us like His Son would be realized. That is the whole point of Roman 8. Those whom He foreknew He predestined to be conformed to the image of His Son. It says in 1 Thessalonians 4:8 this is the will of God for your life. This is the will of God for your life

– your sanctification. It's the purposed desire of the Father that you and I be increasingly conformed to the image of Jesus. And it was the very sacrifice of Christ. The purchased goal of Jesus was that we experience this sanctification. In Ephesians 5 and we know this chapter well. It is a great marriage chapter. But in the 25<sup>th</sup> verse when he's talking about the love of Christ and the love of the husband he says: Husbands, love your wives as Christ loved the church and gave Himself up for her that He might sanctify her, having cleansed her by the washing of water with the Word. The very purpose of the Father is purchased then by the Son to bring about the sanctification in our lives.

Then of course it is the work of the Spirit. I find this very encouraging. Back in Ezekiel chapter 37. Listen to what the prophet said. "I will put my Spirit within you and cause you to walk in My statutes and be careful to obey My rules." You realize that we're back hundreds and hundreds and hundreds of years before Pentecost, right? The promise of the Spirit's coming on God's people back in Ezekiel's day, that He was going to come and live within us. He was going to move us to obedience and follow after the rules, as he says, that God has put forward. In 1 Peter chapter 1 and verse 2 there's a statement about the work of the Spirit: "According to the foreknowledge of God the Father and the sanctification of the Spirit." The Spirit is the one who is charged specifically within the Godhead to carry out and to accomplish this purpose of our sanctification. Paul talks about it in 1 Thessalonians 4 and he talks about it in 2 Thessalonians 2 that it is the Holy Spirit who is the one who's bringing about this work in our lives. So we start off and we say this is the Holy Spirit's number one priority shared among the Godhead absolutely. The purpose of the Father, purchased by the Son, pursued in our lives by the Holy Spirit.

Secondly it is an act of God's grace. This is an act of God's grace. I want you to see and you've heard this before so this is a review for many of you. but when the Bible talks about sanctification, it does so in a number of different ways. As it looks at us with regard to the past, we talk about what is called definitive sanctification. Definitive. It is looking at something in the past. With regard to definitive sanctification, we're looking in the past and we're saying because of what Jesus did for us we are saved from the very penalty of sin. The penalty of sin is death and separation from God. Because we have been sanctified as to our position before God we are viewed now by God as having

been clothed in the righteousness of Christ. You realize when we talked about that beginning work of regeneration, the moment you put your trust in Christ, God looks at you and He sees you clothed in the righteousness of His Son. He sees you standing before Him absolutely perfect. That's what we call positional sanctification. Definitive sanctification. As God looks at you as His child. That's your position. Now that's not your practice necessarily but it is your position. That's how God the Father views you and sees you. That's why when you read your Bible, you regularly see the writers of Scripture calling Christian saints because of definitive sanctification. They are saints. Feel free to call me Saint Carlon if you'd like because truly I am a saint in that sense. Bonnie has other words that she calls me. What? Sweetie pie, honeybunch – those kinds of things. We are saints, aren't we? We may not always look like it. We may not always act like it but because of definitive sanctification, God sees you in that way.

The second way we use this word is what's simply referred to in the present tense as progressive sanctification. That's what we're talking about this morning so we're not going to say a lot more about that. But I am saved from the very power of sin. Those choices that we talked about a few moments ago as to what sanctification looks like, that's progressively walking in obedience to the revealed will of God. That gives us power over sin because God's Spirit is within us to enable us to do that. We see that one progressing daily in our life.

Then the last one is perfected sanctification. Perfected sanctification is I'm saved from the very presence of sin. I'm saved from the very presence of sin. No longer at that point will we even be bound by the limitations of this existing body and all that goes with that, but we will be in a perfect and glorified body. We will be saved from the very presence of sin. Now listen. That's a glorious future. That's an expectation that we look forward to. Paul writes about it wonderfully in 1 Corinthians 15 of overcoming sin and death at that great and glorious time when either Christ comes or we die. But the whole point this morning is we don't need to wait and we are not to be waiting for a future glorification to be sanctified. We're to be stepping into this progressive sanctification every day.

So let's look at the third point. Point C. It's rooted in the truth of the gospel. It is rooted in the truth of the gospel. Here's what I mean by that. The Bible has a certain

theological grammar about it. Before we're ever commanded to do anything, God tells us what He has done for us. This is huge because it begins as far back in terms of just showing us this principle in Scripture back in Exodus 20. Before God gave His people the 10 Commandments and told them these are the things that I want of you, these are the things that I require of you, these are the ways that you can specifically obey Me. What did He do? In the theological grammar of giving them an understanding of who He was and what He has done, He said this. Exodus 20 verse 2: "I am the Lord your God who brought you out of the land of Egypt, out of the house of bondage." Why does He do that? Because He wants to zero in, He wants to remind them of who He is, what He has done, what He has accomplished for them. It is on the basis of what He has done and who He is that we then respond in obedience. We can say it this way. What God commands always flows out of what He has done. What God has commanded of us always flows out of what He has done.

We talk sometimes about imperatives. Imperatives are commands. Do you know what you find in Scripture? That imperatives always follow indicatives. Indicatives are statements of truth. Go to Ephesians chapter 1. It's a whole page of indicatives of what it is that God has done for you, of who you are as a child of God in Christ. It isn't until you get to the fourth chapter that Paul begins to launch into the imperatives of the Christian life. It is a well-established principle that until and unless you learn who you are in Christ you're going to struggle in your walk with God. When you understand your identity in Christ, when you understand who you are in Christ. You remember a few weeks ago I put in the bulletin 36 things that happen to you at the moment of salvation. That is your identity in Christ. You need to be reviewing those often, regularly. There are all kinds of negative voices and negative circumstances that undermine the truth of our identity in Christ. We keep coming back to the reality that God says this is who you are. This is who you are. It is then that you step into the imperatives. After you've grasped the indicatives of who it is that God is and what He has done for you.

Point D. Sanctification always includes the following. Sanctification always includes the following. It always includes first of all the truth. It always includes the Word of God. When we talk about spiritual disciplines, about reading our Bible, about praying, about praise and worship and contemplating the blessings of God, about memorizing a

verse of Scripture, you're basically saying I am committing myself to spending time with God. I'm devoting my life, my, mind my heart. I'm consecrating myself to the things of God because it is in that the transformation takes place. Consecration brings about transformation. You devote yourself to God and to the things of God. That means what? The same principle as before. If you're devoting yourself to spiritual disciplines in some measure, you're not giving yourself to something else. It's when all of these other things crowd out the spiritual disciplines that we shortchange ourselves, that we miss out on the greatest blessing of bringing and spending time with God and inviting Him into our life into our day. That's how transformation takes place. Jesus said read the Word. Listen to the Word. Teach the Word. Pray the Word. Give praise on the basis of the Word. In His Upper Room Discourse, Jesus prays Father, sanctify these people. Sanctify them in the truth. Your Word is truth. Sanctification always includes the Word of truth.

Secondly, it always includes wise people. It always includes wise people. There's a reason why in the book Proverbs on about every other page or maybe every page you and I are encouraged to seek out and hang out with wise people and we're encouraged to not seek out and hang out with foolish people. Wise people bring the wisdom of God into our life. Wise people bring encouragement into our life. Wise people are the people that God uses in their gifts and their graces to grow us in grace. God uses those things to affect change in our life. I've mentioned it not that long ago that our Friday men's group is reading through Tim Keller's book *The Meaning of Marriage*. We had an assignment about a month ago that said list out the most significant people in your wife's life in terms of those who have had the greatest impact on her spiritually. It was a good exercise because it was to challenge us as men and as husbands to know who are the people, the wise people who've taken in most cases the Word of God and the truth of God and they've invested in our wives and they've impacted them in ways that have shaped who our wife is today. Now not only was it to jar our memory and cause us to think about who those people are, but it was also to get us to think am I on that list? Am I one of those impacting my wife in her spiritual progress and sanctification even as God uses her in our lives? And that's what God does, doesn't He? He takes wise people



as iron sharpens iron, so one woman, one man sharpens. Could we say sanctifies? I think we can in the right sense. Wise people are always a part of that.

Thirdly. This is one we would like to skip but can't. Suffering. There's suffering – struggles, hardships, trials. They grow us in Christlikeness. That's why Paul says in Philippians 3 says that I might know Him and the power of His resurrection and the fellowship of His suffering. The fellowship of His suffering. Oh, we want the power. We want to know the power. But you step into the power when you acknowledge that God allows suffering and hardship and difficulty into your life. James says in the first chapter consider it all joy when trials come into your life. Why? Because those trials are perfecting you and they're working out this matter of sanctification in your life. A wonderful statement by Paul in Romans 5 verses 1 through 5 in which he just recounts how it is that suffering develops the very character and perseverance of Christ in our lives. God always is about using hardship. David Powell said this: "People change because something is hard, not because it's always going well. Struggles force us to God." They force us to God.

Point 4. Obedience. We can't make this list without obedience. We're called to obey. We're called to believe. We're called to trust. We're called to seek. We're called to pursue. We're not called to be passive. It's not let go and let God and hope it all works out. It's get going and obey God. It's get going and trust God. We walk by faith, not by sight. We're the ones who are charged with this responsibility. It's a mystery, isn't it? We're 100% responsible for our sanctification. somebody else can't do it for us. But you know what? We're hundred percent dependent on God to do this good work in our life.

Point E. It's difficult and it's gradual. Sanctification is difficult and it's gradual. There's no silver bullet. There's no 10-point checklist that when you finally get to the last one you made it and you've arrived. If your progress in sanctification is like mine, you take two steps forward and about three steps back. Then you take two steps forward and take three steps back. Sometimes you wonder if you are progressing. It sometimes is so indiscernible but you're not even sure that you are. It is difficult and it is gradual and there is a tension daily between holiness and sin. Lest we be discouraged, the apostle Paul towards the end of his life in Romans 7 gives us his personal testimony and in that 7<sup>th</sup> chapter he says the things that I want to do I don't do. The things that I

don't want to do, I'm doing those things. That's where we live. Do you know why we live there? Because we're in a battle with the world, the flesh and the devil.

If I could make two observations about why sanctification is difficult and gradual I would say two things. One is too often it is because you and I are resisting the Spirit, because we're grieving the Spirit, because we're quenching the Spirit. We're not listening to the Spirit. We're not in tune with the Spirit. We're attempting in our life to manage sin when Scripture calls us to kill it, to flee from it, to run from it, to have no part in it. It is what John Owens in that famous statement said: "You better be killing sin or sin will be killing you." That's the nature of the battle.

I think the second observation I would make is this: It is gradual, it's difficult, it's sometimes hard to even see what's going on because every part of our lives has been affected by the fall. Every part of our lives has been touched by sin. Our physical bodies, our minds, our hearts, our emotions, our relationships – all of them have been spoiled by sin. Every human tendency is pulling us away from Christ. That is the reality. That's the flesh. the flesh is always going to be pulling us away from Christ. That is why we have to be devoted and consecrated to Christ. This is a lifelong process of renewal and restoration and healing. Don't be discouraged. But do be persistent. Do carry on. Do struggle on. Do push on. Because in due season, God is doing a work in your life.

Point F. Number six. It flourishes in the life of the church. Sanctification flourishes in the life of the church. Sanctification in that sense is a community project. I've said it 100 times and I'm going to say it again. Your Christian life is a very personal experience but it is not a private experience. It's very personal. Your walk with God is different than mine and we don't need to be trying to replicate that personal nature of our walk with God. But your walk with God is not private. We are a people who are deeply committed to each other if we understand what the New Testament is teaching about the church and about sanctification. we have been saved and brought into a body of believers. We have been saved and brought into a family of believers. We need to be giving ourselves regularly to each other. That's why there are 32 statements in the New Testament that either end or start off with "one another". We're trying to get a message across, the Holy Spirit says, that see this matter of sanctification as being very corporate. We share in the lives of each other. Apart from the body of Christ, and I will qualify this slightly, but

apart from the body of Christ I think sanctification is impossible. That's a general principle. That's not to be applied to every circumstance because obviously some circumstances that life puts us in we can't experience body life. But in general, for most of us, you cannot experience the sanctification that the Father purposed, that the Son purchased, and that the Holy Spirit has committed Himself to in terms of His primary purpose in your life apart from the church.

That's why I can say with absolute confidence you are not a growing Christian if your connection to Covenant is one of convenience. There's nothing this weekend. What do you think? Should we go to church? Let me check again and make sure. It doesn't work that way. If you are a "one-in-six'er" or a "one-in-four'er" that's where we are going. All the studies and statistics about church life point to evangelical Christians basically giving themselves once every 4 to 6 weeks to their local body. We don't need to question necessarily whether they are Christians or not. Some maybe aren't, but we can categorically say they're not growing Christians in the way God wants them to be growing because it takes our sharing life together for God to accomplish what He wants in our life. So we need to value this gathering. There are storm clouds that are gathering on the horizon in our world and we need to value what it means to be the people of God. We need to value what it means to have the freedom to be able to come together and rub shoulders and share life with each other. We need to be bothered when we can't make it rather than a little bit happy when we can't make it. We need to look and see when is the next communion. It's December 30<sup>th</sup>. We don't miss Sunday because we get together around that table and be reminded of what Jesus did for us on the cross to make all of this possible. That is the mindset that a growing child of God brings to this gathered company we call Covenant.

Finally, in its essence, sanctification is making us like Christ. This is just a repeat of everything I've said. Simply stated, sanctification is making us like Christ. It is the life of Christ being produced in the believer by the power of the Holy Spirit as you walk in obedience to God. That's what we're talking about. It's the life of Christ being produced in the child of God by the power of the Holy Spirit as we walk in obedience to the Word of God. My friend, I say to you again, it is the very purpose of your heavenly Father that you become more like His Son. It is the very reason that Jesus purchased us with His

life that we would be conformed to His image and likeness. It is the primary purpose. Do you know how I know that? Because the Bible tells me so. In the giving of the Great Commission when Jesus said go and make disciples of all the nations of all of the peoples and when they believe, baptize them. Then teach them to observe everything that I have commanded. That is sanctification. that's bringing together doctrine and discipleship because that's the purpose of the Father, the very reason Jesus died, and is the primary objective of the Holy Spirit living within you.

So I say to you what do we want to take away this morning? Listen to this quote and then I'm going to ask you four questions: "The solution to the problems of the church today is to solve the individual Christian's problems and the solution to these problems is a person – the Holy Spirit. He is the antidote for every error, the power of every weakness, the victory of every defeat and the answer to every need. He is available to every believer for He lives in your heart and life. The answer and power you already have been given in the person of the Holy Spirit of God." So let me ask you as we close. Are you growing in holiness? Would those who know you well believe that you're growing in holiness? Are you listening to the Spirit who moves you toward holiness? What's one step? Don't leave here today without answering in your own mind what's one step that you can take out of all that we talked about this morning. What is one step that you can take to grow more like Christ every day?

Maybe you're here and the first step that you need to take is to put your trust in Christ. You need to acknowledge that before God you have sinned and fallen short of His glory. You want what we've talked about this morning in terms of having a relationship with God. You can't get there on your own. You can't have that by human achievement, human effort, human works. God says it's a gift of grace. God says I am not asking people to earn this. I'm not looking for good people who are going to measure up. I'm looking for people who are going to simply say I can't do this on my own and I accept Your grace gift of salvation. We want you to consider that. We want you to receive that this morning and enter into a personal relationship with God.

Let's pray. Gracious Father, what an incredible reality it is to realize Father, Son and Holy Spirit all of You are committed to each of us as Your children to be conformed into this glorious, unimaginable goal of making us more and more like Jesus every day.

Father, I thank You that You are relentless in Your pursuit of us. Jesus, I thank You for the amazing love that You have demonstrated. Holy Spirit, I thank You that You are there speaking into our life every day if we will simply listen to what You're saying. Enable us by Your grace to do that. We pray in Jesus's name, amen.