



## Pursuing Holiness: Holiness is Not Optional

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Last week we looked at those words from Hebrews: “without holiness on one will see the Lord” (Hebrews 12:14). But what do those words mean? If we left things hanging there, we might be inclined to think that in the end our salvation depends to some extent on our attaining some level of personal holiness.

Lest we mistakenly think that, Scripture makes the following two points very clear: First, even the “best” Christian can never merit his own salvation through his personal holiness. Isaiah reminds us that even our *righteous* deeds are like filthy rags in the light of God’s holy law (Isaiah 64:6). Our best works are still stained and spotted with imperfections and sin. And second, Holy Scripture so often refers to the obedience and righteousness of Christ on our behalf. St. Paul wrote to the Romans: “For as by the one man’s disobedience the many were made sinners, so by the one man’s obedience the many will be made righteous” (Romans 5:19). And St. Peter tells us, “For Christ also suffered once for sins, the righteous for the unrighteous, that he might bring us to God” (1 Peter 3:18). Christ is the righteousness we don’t have, but he does that in two ways. We are disobedient to God, but he was obedient, both actively and passively.

Christ was *actively* obedient in the sense that while he was here on earth he lived in a way that was completely sinless. His obedience to God was perfect. And his perfect life is credited to all those who trust in him for salvation. He was *passively* obedient when he died on the cross and fully paid the penalty for our sins and satisfied God’s wrath toward us. Hebrews 10:5-9 tells us that Christ came to do the will of the Father. And the writer says, “And by that will *we have been sanctified* [that means “made holy”] through the offering of the body of Jesus Christ once for all” (Hebrews 10:10). So it’s important that we understand that our holiness before God depends entirely on

the work of Jesus Christ for us, by God’s will.

So we might then think that the holiness we have to have to see God is this holiness that we have in Christ. But that’s not it either. The same writer of Hebrews goes on to write about a holiness that we are to strive after; we are to “make every effort...to be holy.” And he says that without *this* holiness, no one will see the Lord.

You see, the Bible talks about both a holiness that we have in Christ before God, *and* a holiness that we’re called to strive after. And these two aspects of holiness compliment each other, because our salvation is a salvation *to* holiness. St. Paul wrote to the Thessalonians saying, “God has not called us for impurity, but in holiness” (1 Thessalonians 4:7). He wrote to the Corinthians, “To the church of God in Corinth, to those sanctified in Christ Jesus and *called to be holy*” (1 Corinthians 1:2 NIV). To be sanctified is to be made holy. So we’re both made holy in our standing before God *through Christ*, and at the same time *called* to be holy in our daily living.

So the writer of Hebrews is telling us to take seriously the necessity of personal and practical holiness. When the Holy Spirit came into our lives at the moment of our salvation, he came to make us holy *in practice*. And so if there’s not *at least* a yearning in our hearts to live a holy life that’s pleasing to God, we really need to seriously consider whether or not our faith in Christ is real.

When we first start out, that desire for holiness may only be a spark, but as we walk with God that spark should grow and become a flame. True salvation brings with it a desire to be made holy. We forget that God not only saves us from the penalty of our sin, but he also saves us from its dominion over us. Bishop Ryle wrote this: “I doubt, indeed, whether we have any warrant for saying that a man can possibly be converted without being consecrated to God. More consecrated he doubtless can be, and will be as his grace increases; but if he was not consecrated to God in the very day that he was converted and born again, I do not know what conversion means.”

We get stuck in a narrow view that tells us salvation is just fire insurance – a get out of hell free card. And yet the whole

purpose of our salvation is that we be, according to Paul, “holy and blameless in his sight” (Ephesians 1:4). If we continue in our sin, we’re living contrary to God’s very purpose for our salvation. The Puritan, Walter Marshall, wrote: “What a strange kind of salvation do they desire that care not for holiness... They would be saved by Christ and yet be out of Christ in a fleshly state... They would have their sins forgiven, not that they may walk with God in love, in time to come, but that they may practice their enmity against him without any fear of punishment.”

So holiness then isn’t a necessary *condition* of our salvation. That would be salvation by works. But it is a *part* of salvation that is received by faith in Christ. Think back to the angel’s announcement to St. Joseph: “you are to give him the name Jesus [which means ‘Yahweh is Salvation’], because he will save his people from their sins” (Matthew 1:21).

Because of this we can say that no one can trust in Jesus Christ for true salvation *unless* he trusts in him for holiness. It doesn’t have to mean that the desire for holiness is necessarily a conscious desire at the time a person comes to Christ, but it *does* mean that the Holy Spirit who creates within us saving faith also creates in us the desire for holiness. He just plain doesn’t create one without the other.

St. Paul wrote to Titus saying, “For the grace of God has appeared, bringing salvation for all people, training us to renounce ungodliness and worldly passions, and to live self-controlled, upright, and godly lives in the present age” (Titus 2:11-12). The same grace that brings salvation teaches us to renounce ungodly living. You can’t somehow receive half of God’s grace. If you experience it at all, you’re going to experience not only forgiveness of your sins, but *also* freedom from sin’s dominion.

This is the point that St. James drives home when he talks about the relationship between faith and works. He tells us that a “faith” that doesn’t produce any works – and by works he means a holy life – isn’t a living faith; it’s a dead one. You might believe that Jesus saves, but if you haven’t put your *trust* in him and made him your *Lord*, your faith – really just “belief” – in Jesus is no different than that which the demons have. They know Jesus saves too!

God's holy nature demands holiness in the life of a Christian. When he calls us to salvation, he calls us to fellowship with himself and with his Son, Jesus Christ (1 John 1:3). But, as St. John says, God is light; in him is no darkness at all. So how can we have fellowship with him if we continue to walk in darkness?

Holiness is *required* for fellowship with God. David asked in Psalm 15, "O LORD, who shall sojourn in your tent? Who shall dwell on your holy hill?" He was asking, "Lord, who may live in fellowship with you? And the answer that he gives in the next four verses can be summarised: "he who leads a holy life."

Think about this. Prayer is a vital part of our fellowship with God (and maybe the first aspect of that fellowship that we think of), and yet David wrote, "If I had cherished iniquity in my heart, the Lord would not have listened" (Psalm 66:18). Even that most basic element of fellowship – prayer – is cut off if we aren't pursuing holiness!

We need to be careful though, because God doesn't require a perfect, sinless life in order to have fellowship with him. If that were the case, we'd never have any fellowship at all. But he does require that we be serious about holiness – that we grieve our sins and that we earnestly pursue holiness as a way of life.

Holiness is also for our own well-being. Again, going back to Hebrews, Scripture tells us, "The Lord disciplines the one he loves, and chastises every son whom he receives" (Hebrews 12:6). God isn't capricious. He disciplines us because we need it and to help draw us back in line. As long as we continue to be disobedient we increase our need for discipline. In the church of Corinth there were some who were so persistently disobedient that God had to take their lives. Sin isn't something to mess around with. It's serious business.

David describes God's discipline this way: "For when I kept silent, my bones wasted away through my groaning all day long. For day and night your hand was heavy upon me; my strength was dried up as by the heat of summer" (Psalm 32:3-4).

When God starts talking to us about sin in our lives, we need to wake up, pay

attention, and do something about it. If we ignore God, we risk experiencing his discipline. We need to listen to that still, small voice. If we don't, we may end up listening to a divine two-by-four between the eyes.

But it goes beyond fellowship and our well-being. Holiness is also necessary for effective service to God. Paul wrote to Timothy saying, "If anyone cleanses himself from what is dishonorable, he will be a vessel for honorable use, set apart as holy, useful to the master of the house, ready for every good work" (2 Timothy 2:21). Holiness and usefulness in God's kingdom go hand in hand. You can't bring your service to God in an unclean vessel.

Remember that the one who makes our service effective and who empowers us for service is the Holy Spirit. The Holy Spirit isn't called the *Holy* Spirit for no reason. When we indulge our sinful natures and live in unholiness, we grieve the Spirit of God – and he will not prosper our service. Now I'm not talking about the times when we fall to temptation and immediately go to God for forgiveness and cleansing. But if our lives are characterised by unholy living, God is not going to use us for holy things.

Do you ever doubt your salvation? Well, holiness is also necessary for our assurance of salvation. True faith, as I said earlier, shows itself by its fruit. St. Paul says, "Therefore, if anyone is in Christ, he is a new creation" (2 Corinthians 5:17).

"Easy Believism" doesn't do anybody any favours. There's a world of people out there who sadly think that because they said a prayer at some point and asked Jesus into their heart, that they're all set for heaven. They bear no fruit. They have no desire for holiness. Why? Because they never put their trust in Christ and never made him their Lord. In many ways they're worse off than those who have never heard the Gospel, because they've been given a false security. (In case you're wondering, this is why I'm not fond of altar calls, commitment cards, or "sinner's prayers." Jesus and the apostles (and the rest of the Church for 1900 years) never used any of those things.) You don't become a Christian by walking the aisle, signing a card, or even saying a

prayer – and yet too many people are led to believe that they're "safe" because they did. The only way you become a Christian is by making Jesus your Lord.

And the only safe evidence that we are in Christ is a holy life and a desire for personal holiness. St. John said that everyone who has within him the hope of eternal life purifies himself just as Christ is pure (1 John 3:3). St. Paul said, "All who are led by the Spirit of God are sons of God" (Romans 8:14). If we know nothing of holiness, we may flatter ourselves that we are Christians, but we don't have the Holy Spirit dwelling in us.

If you profess to be a Christian, you need to ask yourself: "Is there evidence of a practical holiness in my life? Do I desire and strive for holiness? Do I grieve over my lack of it and earnestly seek the help of God to be holy?"

Because, you see, it's not those who profess to know Christ who will enter heaven, but those whose lives are holy. Even those who do "great Christian works" will not enter heaven unless they also do the will of God. Jesus said:

**Not everyone who says to me, 'Lord, Lord,' will enter the kingdom of heaven, but the one who does the will of my Father who is in heaven. On that day many will say to me, 'Lord, Lord, did we not prophesy in your name, and cast out demons in your name, and do many mighty works in your name?' And then will I declare to them, 'I never knew you; depart from me, you workers of lawlessness.'** (Matthew 7:21-23).

Heavenly Father, you sent your Son to die that he might give us the holiness that we can never have on our own. We give you thanks for your grace. But help us to remember that you have also given us your Spirit to work in our lives and make us holy in reality. Give us a passion for holiness, we ask Father, a passion for your holiness, a passion for the holiness that Christ gives us as a covering, and finally a passion for that holiness of life empowered by your indwelling Spirit. Amen.