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Pursuing Holiness: The Holiness of Christ

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The last time we were together to look at this subject of pursuing holiness, you'll remember that one of our key texts was the passage from Leviticus 11:44. God tells us there, "Be holy, because I am holy." I think that Lent is a particularly appropriate time to look at God's command for us to be holy and what its implication are for us. But before we go further into our study of holiness, we need to take some time to look first at the holiness of Jesus Christ. You see, we need *to be firmly grounded in our security in Christ*. The more we study the subject of holiness, the more we'll be confronted with our own wickedness and the deceitfulness of our hearts. The more we study holiness, the more we'll see just how far we miss the mark of God's perfect holiness.

To see the sin in our lives can be hard. The key is that the true Christian will always in his heart flee for refuge to Christ. So it's important that we understand the righteousness of Christ and the fact that his righteousness is credited to us. If we don't have that we might be tempted to despair.

So what does the Bible have to say about Christ's righteousness? Over and over the Scriptures tell us that during his time on earth, Jesus lived a perfectly holy life. The writer of Hebrews describes him as being "without sin" (4:15). St. Peter describes him as one who "committed no sin" (1 Peter 2:22). St. Paul describes him as "him who had no sin" (2 Corinthians 5:21). St. John wrote, "In him is no sin" (1 John 3:5). We see the same in the Old Testament. Isaiah describes Jesus prophetically as "the righteous servant" (53:11) and the Psalmist as one who "loved righteousness and hated wickedness" (45:7). Those are just from six different writers, but they pretty well cover the universal witness of Holy Scripture that Jesus Christ was perfectly sinless during the time of his earthly life.

Jesus' own testimony about himself is even more compelling. At one point he confronted the Pharisees, looked them right in the eye and asked, "Can any of you prove me guilty of sin?" (John 8:46). Now the significance there isn't that the Pharisees failed to answer his question, but the fact that he dared to ask it in the first place. Here's Jesus in direct confrontation with the people who hated him. He had just told them that they were of their father the devil, and they wanted to carry out his desires – not God's. You have to think that if anyone wanted to point out some sin, some character flaw, or even just a careless act, here was their chance to point something out in Jesus. And consider that Jesus was there with his disciples. They'd been living with him for quite a while and would have had plenty of opportunity to notice any inconsistencies between his message and his life. And yet Jesus dared to ask the question because he knew there was only one answer: he was without sin.

But Jesus' holiness is more than just external conformity to God's law. It was more than the absence of actual sin. His holiness was also a perfect conformity to the will of his Father. He said that he came down from heaven "not to do my will but to do the will of him who sent me" (John 6:38). On another occasion he said, "My food is to do the will of him who sent me" (John 4:34). I think the highest testimony to his positive holiness was his statement, "I always do what pleases him" (John 8:29).

And still his holiness goes deeper, because it goes beyond his actions – it goes all the way to his attitudes and motives. Consider how often we do the right thing, but we do it for the wrong motive. How often do you do the right thing only because someone else is watching? Doing the right thing gives you more esteem in their eyes – or doing the wrong thing, you fear, would cause them to look down on you. I look back to my teenage years and can think of all sorts of situations where I did the right or the "spiritual" thing only because I wanted to get the attention of some girl I liked at church – I gave little or no thought to how doing that right thing might please God. But you see, there's a lot more to holiness than just our outward acts. Our motives have to be holy too – they have to arise from a desire to do something simply because it is the will of God. (Remember that a few weeks ago I noted that one of the reasons we fail in our

attempts at holiness is because we see our triumph over sin as an issue of personal victory when we should instead see it as an issue of obedience to God.) Even our thoughts should be holy, since they're known to God even before they're formed in our minds. Jesus Christ perfectly met these standards, and he did it for us. He was born into this world subject to the law of God that he might fulfil it on our behalf (Galatians 4:4-5).

If we're serious about holiness, any contemplation on our part of the holiness of God ought to cause us to react just like Isaiah. Remember that when he was confronted with God's holiness he fell on his face and cried, "Woe is me, for I am ruined! Because I am a man of unclean lips, and I live among a people of unclean lips, and my eyes have seen the King, the Lord Almighty" (Isaiah 6:5).

A real understanding of the holiness of God – of his own moral perfection and infinite hatred of sin – should leave us, as it did Isaiah, seeing with utter dismay our own lack of holiness. His moral purity makes our own impurity stand out in greater relief.

So it's important that as we see the holiness of God, we also receive the same assurance that Isaiah received when the angel came to him, touched his lips with the coal and said, "See...your guilt is taken away and your sin atoned for" (Isaiah 6:7). It's not just at the initial moment of our salvation that we need this assurance. In fact, the more we grow and mature in holiness, the more we need assurance that the perfect righteousness of Christ has been credited to us. Part of our growth in holiness is the work that the Holy Spirit does in us to make us aware of our need for greater holiness. It's what I talked about on Wednesday night – the divine microscope that focuses in on our sin, and just at the point where we think we've taken care of everything, God ups the power and shows us new things that we need to deal with. The more we see our need for holiness, we also need to keep in mind the righteousness of Jesus Christ on our behalf, and the fact that "God made him who had no sin to be sin for us, so that in him we might become the righteousness of God" (2 Corinthians 5:21).

I know this is probably a basic concept for most of us, but I stress it here because we need to dwell on it when Satan attacks.

He's the Accuser. The Holy Spirit works to make us more aware of our lack of holiness and stimulates us to a deeper yearning and striving for holiness. But Satan will often try to use that work of the Spirit to discourage us.

As we see our need for holiness, Satan often attacks by trying to convince us that we're not really genuine Christians after all. He'll whisper something to you like, "A true Christian wouldn't think the evil thoughts you've been thinking today." Sometimes he'll attack us with his accusations when we're young in the faith and think we're immune and beyond his attention as we mature – but the fact is that this is an attack he uses on all of us just at the point when the Spirit makes us aware of our greater need for holiness.

During my first year of seminary I was working as a chaplain at the local college. I started out with a Bible study on the Sermon on the Mount. And as I studied the Holy Spirit began to work in my heart to show me areas of sin in my life that I needed to clean up – and I started to see just how far short of God's standard I was. It was a good thing. But often Satan would hijack things and I'd find myself asking, "How can anyone who struggles with these sorts of sins really be a Christian?" One day when I was really struggling I remembered back to a biography of Martin Luther I'd read a few years before – and I thought back to the way in which Luther talked about feeling Satan's presence so profoundly that one day he actually threw his inkpot at him. I considered how Luther, in the face of those attacks by the Accuser, found his confidence in Christ. I remembered the words of his famous hymn:

*Did we in our own strength confide,
Our striving would be losing;
Were not the right man on our side,
The man of God's own choosing:
Dost ask who that may be?
Christ Jesus, it is he;
Lord Sabaoth his Name,
From age to age the same,
And he must win the battle.*

Those words reminded me that my assurance of salvation rests not in anything I can do or in any holiness I can achieve, but in the perfect holiness of Christ that has already been credited to

me. He is the Mighty Fortress. He is the Rock.

All of us, as we pursue holiness, need to flee to the Rock of our salvation. We don't flee to be saved again, but we do flee to him to confirm in our hearts that we are saved through his righteousness alone. We start to identify with St. Paul when he wrote, "Here is a trustworthy saying that deserves full acceptance: Christ Jesus came into the world to save sinners – of whom I am the worst" (1 Timothy 1:15). This is the point at which Christ's holy life lived on your behalf and my behalf becomes important to us.

But Christ's holiness gives us more than assurance. *His life is also meant to be an example to us.* St. Peter tells us that Christ left an example for us to follow in his steps (1 Peter 2:21). More specifically, he wrote about Christ's suffering without retaliation – and then he stresses that Christ committed no sin. St. Paul urges us to be imitators of God (Ephesians 5:1), and also writes, "Follow my example, as I follow the example of Christ" (1 Corinthians 11:1).

Jesus' sinless holy life is meant to be an example for us. Consider Jesus' statement, "I always do what pleases him." Have we truly made that our goal in life? Are we really willing to look at all our activities, all our goals and plans, and all of our impulsive actions in the light of this statement: "I am doing this to please God"?

If we ask that question honestly, it ought to make us squirm. We know we do some things, good things in themselves, to get admiration for ourselves instead of the glory of God. There are a lot of things we each do for our own pleasure, with no regard at all for God's glory.

What's my reaction when some acts like a real jerk towards me? Usually my first reaction comes from a spirit of retaliation until the Holy Spirit reminds me of the example of Jesus. How do we look at those who don't show love for us? Do we see them as people for whom Christ died or as people who make our lives difficult?

This was driven home to me when I was in University. There was a guy who lived in my dorm. He was a particularly unpleasant and disagreeable person and I

treated him in a far less than Christian fashion. One day one of my friends showed up for a Bible study with this guy in tow and together they explained how a couple of weeks before my friend had shared the gospel with him and it ended with him putting his faith in Christ as a result. I was embarrassed by how I had treated him – and particularly shamed by the difference between how I'd seen him as just some jerk to be avoided, while my friend had had compassion on him, seeing him as a fellow soul for whom Christ had died. Think of Jesus, who prayed for the sinners who crucified him even as he was dying on the cross.

Let me close with a few words from John Brown, who wrote, "Holiness does not consist in mystic speculations, enthusiastic fervours, or uncommanded austerities; *it consists in thinking as God thinks, and willing as God wills.*" Lots of people think that holiness is characterised by religious fervour or enthusiasm or – and this is good to keep in mind as we enter Lent – by some level of asceticism. It's not. It's also not the result of holding to a list of "do's and don'ts." When Christ came into the world, he said, "I have come to do your will, O God" (Hebrews 10:7). This is the example we are to follow. In all of our thoughts, all of our actions, in every part of our character, the ruling principle that motivates and guides us should be the desire to follow Christ in doing the will of the Father. This is the road we must follow in the pursuit of holiness.

Please pray with me: Heavenly Father, you sent your only Son to succeed where every one of us has failed, that by faith we might each appropriate his righteousness for ourselves. We confess that we often forget that it's by his stripes, not our own, that we are saved. Forgive our pride and self-righteousness. Drive us we ask you to the cross that we might find there both assurance of his saving work in our lives and an example to live as we seek to please you. We ask this through Jesus Christ, our Saviour and Lord. Amen.