



Pursuing Holiness: Help for the Battle

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A quick recap to jog your memories. A month ago we looked at the fact that God has delivered us from the dominion and reign of sin through our union with Christ in his death. We were slaves to sin and we acted like it. We worked hard to develop sinful habits. But as he took our place on the cross, he died to sin and took us with him. In his death he freed us from sin – we're no longer slaves to it. I stressed that we *need* to count on this fact and resist sin so that it doesn't, as St. Paul says, reign in our mortal bodies.

Three weeks ago we looked the continuing problem: sin is still present in our mortal bodies. It's not the king, it's not the master, but it wages this guerrilla war anyway, working all the time to deceive our minds through evil desires. And so we might ask, "What good does it do to be told that Jesus won the war with sin when he died on the cross, if I'm still harassed and daily defeated by that same sin?"

If we want to experience holiness day by day in practical ways, the first thing we have to do is accept that in his good and perfect wisdom, God has seen fit to allow our daily battle with indwelling sin. But we also have to realise that God doesn't leave us alone for the battle. Just as he delivered us from the dominion of sin, he's with us as we fight to win the daily battle.

We've look at lot at Romans 6:11 in the past couple of sermons and I want to go back to it again tonight. St. Paul tells us there that not only are we dead to sin, but we're *also* alive to God. We're not only delivered from the dominion of darkness, but we're also brought into the kingdom of God. In fact, Paul says that we have now become *slaves* of righteousness (Romans 6:18). He doesn't leave us in a neutral no-man's land in between the two kingdoms.

If we're alive to God, the first thing that means for us as we pursue holiness is that

we are united with Christ in all his power. We can never do it on our own. There's nothing "do-it-yourself" about Christianity.

Philippians 4:11-13 is a great example of this. In those verses St. Paul talks about how he's learned to be content in all things and in all circumstances, whether he's well-fed or hungry, in plenty or in want. Earthly circumstances don't matter – he is always content and the secret is Christ, who gives him strength. Holiness works the same way. Our reaction to our circumstances is a part of our pursuit of holiness. *Holiness is not a list of do's and don'ts; it's conformity to the character of God and obedience to his will.* Accepting with contentment whatever circumstances God allows for us is very much a part of a holy walk.

We're able, as Paul says, to respond with contentment *because* Christ gives us strength. He stressed this again to the Colossians when he prayed that they would be "strengthened with all power, according to his glorious might, for all endurance and patience with joy" (Colossians 1:11). Where do the endurance and patience come from? They come as we are strengthened by God's power.

Consider another prayer. This was the one St. Paul described in Ephesians 3:16. His prayer was "that according to the riches of his glory he may grant you to be strengthened with *power* through his Spirit in your inner being." He concluded that prayer by acknowledging that God is "able to do far more abundantly than all that we ask or think, according to the power at work within us."

This is the first implication we need to understand of being "alive to God." We've been united with the One who is at work in us to strengthen us with his mighty power. All of us have known that sense of hopelessness caused by sin's power. We struggle with a particular sins and have resolved time after time not to give into it, and yet we still do. That's when Satan comes to us and says, "You might as well just give up. You can't overcome sin." And he's right as long as we're trying to do it on our own. But you see, in Christ we are alive to God, united to him who will strengthen us. By reckoning on this *fact* – counting it to be true – we *will* experience the strength we need to fight temptation.

Friends, it's *only* as we reckon these two facts – that we are dead to sin and to its reign over us, and that we are alive in God, united to him who strengthens us – that we will keep sin from reigning in our mortal bodies.

Martyn Lloyd-Jones, in his commentary on this passage, says, "To realise this takes away from us that old sense of hopelessness which we have all known and felt because of the terrible power of sin.... How does it work? It works in this way: I lose my sense of hopelessness because I can say to myself that not only am I no longer under the dominion of sin, but I am under the dominion of another power that nothing can frustrate. However weak I may be, it is the power of God that is working in me."

Our problem is that we treat this knowledge as if it's just theory or as something to be stored away on the shelf – just knowledge, but not something practical. But it is practical. To count on the *fact* that we are dead to sin and alive to God is something we *must* do – and do *actively!*

We need to *form the habit* of continually realising that we are dead to sin and alive to God. Practically speaking, we do this when by faith in God's Word we resist sin's advances and temptations. We count on the fact that we are alive to God when by faith we look to Christ for the power we need to do the resisting. Faith, though, always has to be based on fact, and Romans 6:11 is *fact for us*.

A second implication of being alive to God is that *he has baptised us by his Spirit, who now lives within us.* Really, it's not so much a second result, but another way of looking at our union with Christ, because his Spirit is the agent of our union with him. It's the Spirit who gives spiritual life and the strength to live that life (Romans 8:9-11). It's the Spirit of God who works in us so that we may decide and act according to God's good purpose (Philippians 2:13).

St. Paul wrote to the Thessalonians, "God has not called us for impurity, but in holiness. Therefore whoever disregards this, disregards not man but God, who gives his Holy Spirit to you (1 Thessalonians 4:7-8). Paul connects the giving of the Holy Spirit with our living a holy life. He's called the *Holy Spirit* and

he's given to us primarily to make us holy – to conform us to the character of God. Think about St. Paul's call to flee sexual immorality. Why? Because, he says, our bodies are temples of the Holy Spirit (1 Corinthians 6:18-19). In Romans 8:9 he tells us that if the Holy Spirit lives in us we aren't controlled by our old sinful natures, but by the Spirit of God. To the Galatians he wrote, "Walk by the Spirit, and you will not gratify the desires of the flesh" (Galatians 5:16).

So why do we have the Holy Spirit living in us to strengthen us toward holiness? It's because we're alive to God. We're now living under the reign of God, who unites us to Christ and gives us his Holy Spirit to dwell within us.

The first thing the Spirit does in us is to open our eyes to real holiness. He makes us aware of God's perfect standard and as he does that he starts to show us our own sins – the area where we miss the mark. One of Satan's most powerful weapons is his ability to make us spiritually blind – unable to see our sin. Jeremiah wrote, "The heart is deceitful above all things, and desperately sick; who can understand it?" The answer is that no one can understand it and expose it except the Holy Spirit.

Even Christians taking in good Bible teaching can be deceived about their own sins. A lot of time we think that consent to the teaching of Scripture is as good as obedience. We hear a point of application in a sermon or in our own study and we say, "Sure, that's true; that's something I should act on." But we let it drop at that point. St. James says we're deceiving ourselves when we do that (James 1:22). We're like the guy who looks in the mirror and sees he needs a wash and shave, but walks away and forgets what he looks like.

As we grow in the Christian life one of the dangers we face is spiritual pride. We know all the right things, the right methods, all the do's and don'ts. But we start to lose sight of the poverty of our own spiritual character. We may not see our critical and unforgiving spirit, our habit of backbiting, or our tendency to judge others. We may become like the Laodiceans of whom Jesus said, "You say, I am rich, I have prospered, and I need nothing, not realizing that you are

wretched, pitiable, poor, blind, and naked" (Revelation 3:17).

Think of David when he committed adultery with Bathsheba and then had her husband murdered to cover his sin. Was he repentant and humbled by his sin? Not in the slightest. In fact, when Nathan came to him with the story of the man who stole his neighbour's lamb, David was ready to condemn that man to death for a far more minor crime. You wonder how he could do that. He could because he was spiritually blind. It wasn't until Nathan the Prophet said to him, "You are the man!" that David was able to see the awful heinousness of his sin.

When we are alive to God in Christ, it's the Spirit's job to come to us like Nathan and say, "You are the man!" Even when that accusation comes from the mouth of a brother or sister, it's the Holy Spirit who enables us to accept it and to say like David did, "I have sinned against the Lord." The Holy Spirit opens the inner recesses of our hearts and enables us to see the moral cesspools that are hidden there. This is where he starts his ministry of making us holy.

And the natural result of seeing God's standard and our own sinfulness is the awakening in us of a desire to be holy. This is the ministry of the Holy Spirit as he works in us to make us holy. We're sorry for our sins with a godly sorrow that leads to repentance (2 Corinthians 7:10). We say with David, "Wash me thoroughly from my wickedness, and cleanse me from my sin...purge me with hyssop, and I shall be clean...wash me, and I shall be whiter than snow" (Psalm 51:2, 7).

St. Paul wrote to the Philippians, "For it is God who works in you, both to will and to work for his good pleasure" (Philippians 2:13). Before we can *act* we have to *will*. To will means to desire and to resolve. When the Holy Spirit shows us our sinfulness, he doesn't do it so we can despair over it, but to lead us to holiness. He shows us the nastiness of our sin so that we'll develop a hatred of it and begin to desire holiness instead.

Sanctification, the theological word for the process of becoming holy, doesn't happen overnight. There's no quick fix. We need a strong desire for holiness in order to prevail in the fight. We fail time after

time. The attacks of Satan and our own old, fallen nature are too strong for us *unless* the Holy Spirit is at work in us to create that strong desire for holiness.

He gives us that desire as he shows us our sins and holds them up against God's standard of holiness. The primary way he does this is through Scripture. As we read and study the Bible and as we hear it taught, we ought to be captivated by the moral beauty of God's standard of holiness. Even though his standard is something beyond our reach, we recognise and respond to that which is "holy, righteous, and good" (Romans 7:12). Even though we fail so often, in our inner being we "delight in God's law" (Romans 7:22).

Now this is one of the places where we need to make a distinction between God's job and our job. If the Holy Spirit uses Scripture to show us our need and to create in us a desire for holiness, then doesn't it follow that we need to be in God's Word on a consistent basis? Should we not go to the Word, whether to hear it preached or to do our own study, with the prayer that the Holy Spirit would search our hearts for any sin in us? (Psalm 139:23-24).

After the Holy Spirit has enabled us to see our need and has created in us a desire for holiness, there's still something else he has to do. He has to give us the spiritual strength to live a holy life. St. Paul said, "walk by the Spirit, and you will not gratify the desires of the flesh." To live by the Spirit is to live in obedience *to* and dependence *on* the Holy Spirit. There has to be a balance between our wills (which is expressed by obedience) and our faith (which is expressed by our dependence).

No one overcomes the corruptions of his heart except by the enabling strength of the Spirit of God. St. Peter said that God has given us "His precious and very great promises, so that through them you may become partakers of the divine nature, having escaped from the corruption that is in the world" (2 Peter 1:4). It's as we participate in the divine nature that we escape corruption – and this participation is through the indwelling Holy Spirit.

We express our dependence on the Holy Spirit for a holy life in two ways. The first is through a *humble and consistent*

intake of Scripture. If we truly desire to live in the realm of the Spirit we have to continually feed our minds with his truth. It's hypocritical, stupid, and presumptuous to pray for victory over our sins while being careless in our intake of the Word of God.

But it's still possible to be consistent in our intake of the Word and yet not have an attitude of dependence on the Holy Spirit. God said through Isaiah, "But this is the one to whom I will look: he who is humble and contrite in spirit and trembles at my word" (Isaiah 66:2). We are to come to the Word in a spirit of humility and contrition, because we recognise that we're sinful, that we're often blind to our sinfulness, and that we need the enlightening power of the Holy Spirit in our hearts.

The second way we express our dependence on the Spirit is *to pray for holiness*. St. Paul prayed continually for the working of God's Spirit in the lives of those to whom he wrote. He told the Ephesians that he prayed that they would "be strengthened with power through his Spirit in [their] inner being." He prayed that God would fill the Colossians "with the knowledge of his will in all spiritual wisdom and understanding, so as to walk in a manner worthy of the Lord, fully pleasing to him" (Colossians 1:9-10).

He wrote to the Thessalonians, "May God himself, the God of peace, sanctify you through and through" (2 Thessalonians 5:23 NIV); and, "May the Lord make your love increase and overflow for each other and for everyone else... May he strengthen your hearts so that you will be blameless and holy in the presence of our God" (3:12-13). Paul knew that we depend on the Holy Spirit for holiness, and he expressed his dependence in his prayers.

I think a lot of us start out in the Christian life thinking that all we have to do to lead a holy life is to find out from the Bible what to do and then just do it, but that only leads us to *self*-confidence. We need to learn that we're ultimately dependent on the enabling power of the Holy Spirit to reach any degree of holiness. Then as we look to him, we'll see him working in us – revealing our sin, creating a desire for holiness, and giving us the strength to respond to him in obedience.

Please pray with me: Holy God, you gave your Son to die and to rise again that we might die to sin with him and rise with him to new life, but Father, remind us also that you've put your Spirit within us to make that life a reality. Remind us that relying on ourselves will never produce holiness. Give us a desire to seek out your holy standard as we study your Word, and open our hearts to the working of your Spirit as he gives us understanding and enables us to live the new life you put before us. We ask this through Jesus Christ, Our Lord. Amen.