



Pursuing Holiness: Holiness in an Unholy World

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September 6, 2009 – Trinity 13

As we've look at what it means for us to pursue holiness, we can't wrap it up without talking about what it means to pursue holiness in a world that's so often very, very unholy. When we become Christians, God doesn't just pull us out of the world and take us home to heaven – we still have to live this side of eternity in the world. Most of us here probably aren't as bad off as some are, who face an extraordinary onslaught of temptation as they live in the middle of flagrantly sinful atmospheres. I thought it was bad when I lived in a university dorm, but that was fifteen to twenty years ago and from talking to university students today, it's far worse now than it was then. I've heard terrible things about what life in the military can sometimes be like. But even in the business world, Christians can be put under a lot of pressure as they see the people around then immersing themselves in greed and dishonesty. If we're not prepared for the assaults of the world, we're going to have a much more difficult time pursuing holiness.

St. James wrote in his epistle, in 1:27, that true religion consists in keeping ourselves "from being polluted by the world." In 2 Corinthians 6:17, St. Paul urges us to "come out from them [the sinful world] and be separate." If that's what we're called to be and do, what are we as believers supposed to do when we find ourselves surrounded on every side by the unrelenting pressures of a sinful world?

In his great high priestly prayer in John 17 Jesus prayed, "I do not ask that you take them out of the world, but that you keep them from the evil one." God never intended for us to avoid sin by just withdrawing from unbelievers. In fact, he said we're supposed to do the opposite. In the Sermon on the Mount Jesus tells us that we're supposed to be salt and light to the world. Salt doesn't work unless it's worked into a piece of meat and light doesn't do much good if you never take it into a dark place. Saints Paul and Peter

take it for granted that Christians *will* live in the midst of an unholy world. Paul wrote in 1 Corinthians 5:9-10, "I wrote to you in my letter not to associate with sexually immoral people—not at all meaning the sexually immoral of this world, or the greedy and swindlers, or idolaters, since then you would need to go out of the world." And the New Testament is full of passages just like that. We're also never told that life in the world is going to be easy. In fact, we're told over and over to expect ridicule, abuse, and persecution.

So instead of withdrawing from contact with the world, what we need to do is resist its influence, and the key to that is for each of us to resolve to live by the convictions God has given us from his Word. Too many Christians end up – and even take pride in being like – Mr. Talkative in *Pilgrim's Progress*. He prided himself on being able to adapt to any kind of company and to any kind of talk. He was like a chameleon who changed his colour every time he changed his environment. We've all known people like that, who have two vocabularies: one for when they're around Christians and one for when their around non-Christians.

I think it goes without saying that those convictions we develop about God's will for a holy life also have to be rock solid if they're going to stand up to the ridicule of the ungodly, and the pressures they put on us to conform to their unholy ways. When I was a boy scout I dreaded bedtime when we were on campouts, because when the guys went into the tents, out came the pornography – and I and a couple of other guys were the brunt of an awful lot of jokes because we wouldn't look at it. Anyone who didn't take part was ridiculed.

In a lot of situations, one of the best things we can do to help in those kinds of situations is to openly identify ourselves as followers of Christ. We don't have to be self-righteous about it. Too many Christians do it that way and only serve to give the rest of us a reputation as hypocrites. We need to identify ourselves in a clear-cut way, but we also need to do it graciously. When I lived in a university dormitory, my Bible was always sitting in plain sight on my desk. I wasn't doing it to show off or anything – that was where it lived normally, but I didn't make a point of hiding it like some other people I knew. I know of one man in the navy who would

always carry his Bible with him when he went ashore. He didn't say anything and he didn't call attention to it, but because he carried it with him, the other guys knew he was a Christian. Common experience shows that in a lot of cases, simply letting people know that you're a Christian in a graceful and non-confrontational way spares us from a good deal of worldly temptation. When I was in university, the guys did and said all sorts of things, but when they were in my room, they knew better. And for the most part it wasn't because of anything I said.

But even when we resolve to live in the world by the convictions God has given us from his Word and even though we openly identify ourselves with Christ, we're still going to face the pollution of unholy surroundings. Sex is everywhere, people tell dirty jokes in earshot or we hear them telling or bragging about their sinful activities. All those sorts of things tend to drag our minds down into the filth of this world. We're exposed to the dishonest dealings and shortcuts that are often common where we work, in the constant gossiping of our neighbours, and the lies and half-truths we hear all around us.

The Bible is our best defence against this kind of pollution. David wrote in Psalm 119:9, "How can a young man keep his way pure? By guarding it according to your word." The Bible will cleanse our minds of the world's defilement if we meditate on its teachings. It will also serve as a continual warning to us not to give in to the frequent temptations to indulge our eyes and thoughts in the immorality around us. I read the account of one man who, as he went off to a university known for being particularly godless and humanistic. To guard his mind from the corrupting influences of that environment, he pledged to spend as much time in Scripture as he did in his studies. Today that man is a missionary leader who has had a profound impact on hundreds of lives.

As we memorise Scripture verses, it's a good idea to memorise some verses that will remind us of the corrupting nature of our surroundings – verses like Proverbs 27:20: "Hell and destruction are never full; so the eyes of man are never satisfied." Or Ephesians 5:4, "Neither filthiness, nor foolish talking, nor jesting, which are not convenient: but rather giving of thanks."

But so far everything I've mentioned is defensive. We also need to approach the world with some kind of *offensive*. We need to be concerned not only for our own purity of mind and heart, but also for the eternal destiny of those who would pollute us. God has left us in the world to be salt and light. Jesus' description of us as salt really describes our relationship to the world as a preserving power – as an antiseptic and as an agent to prevent decay. William Hendrickson says, "Salt combats deterioration. Similarly Christians, by showing themselves to be Christians indeed, are constantly combating moral spiritual decay... To be sure, the world is wicked. Yet God alone knows how *far more* corrupt it would be without the restraining example, life, and prayers of the saints."

As the "light of the world" we are the bearer of the Good News of salvation. Jesus himself is the true light, and just as it was said of John the Baptist, we are to be "a witness to testify concerning that light" (John 1:7-9). A Christian who witnesses in a spirit of genuine concern for another person is not likely to be corrupted by that person's immorality. And through gracious, loving concern, he may even win that person to Christ.

We need to understand, though, that we don't act as the salt of the earth or shine as the light of the world by necessarily denouncing the sins of our family and friends and acquaintances in the world. Most of the time, our own holy life should be a sufficient rebuke, and our interest in others at this point is not their conduct but their need of Jesus Christ as their Saviour. Henry Clay Trumbull was, among other things, a great personal evangelist. One day he found himself on a train, sitting next to a drunk. The man was drinking, and every time he opened his bottle, he offered a drink to Trumbull, who simply declined with thanks. After this went on for a while, the young drunk said to Trumbull, "You must think I'm a pretty rough fellow." Trumbull's gracious response was, "I think you're a very generous-hearted fellow." And that gracious response opened the way for an earnest conversation with that young man about his need to commit himself to Christ.

After Jesus called Matthew the tax collector to himself and was eating in

Matthew's house with his friends, the Pharisees complained about Jesus, "Why do you eat and drink with tax collectors and sinners?" We all know Jesus reply: "It's not the healthy who need a doctor, but the sick. I have not come to call the righteous, but sinners to repentance" (Luke 5:30-32). We all know how Jesus responded, but I think as we deal with sin in the world we fail to really apply verses like this. And yet this is exactly what God wants us to do as salt and light in the world.

Finally, in spite of all I've said so far, there will be times when the corrupt environment around us is intolerable – times when we, just like Lot, become tormented by the lawless deeds we see and hear (2 Peter 2:7-8; Genesis 19). When situations like that come up, we need to prayerfully consider the need to leave that ungodly situation and if it's not possible to leave, we need to pray that God will deal with it. That may mean praying that God will find a way to remove us when we don't see any human way out of it.

Maintaining personal holiness in an unholy world is not an easy thing. I don't mean to make the problem seem easy, but I hope that this is some practical help for a tough problem. Above all, we need to look to Jesus. Even though he ate with tax collectors and sinners, he was himself, "holy, blameless, pure, set apart from sinners, exalted above the heavens" (Hebrews 7:26). And we need to claim his promise that "No temptation has overtaken you that is not common to man. God is faithful, and he will not let you be tempted beyond your ability, but with the temptation he will also provide the way of escape, that you may be able to endure it" (1 Corinthians 10:13).