



Pursuing Holiness: Holiness is for You

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Does this sort of thing ever happen to you? Here's an example. In December construction started on a house next door to us. And it's one of those big square boxes designed to take up the maximum buildable space on the lot. When they dug the hole for the foundation, it was less than a foot from our property line. And they did this just weeks after we had our lawn seeded. The grass was just starting to pop up. And within days our entire side lawn was trashed thanks to workmen tromping through it all day long. And then on top of that, they brought their dogs to work, didn't tie them up, and pretty soon the dogs are running *all over* the yard, tearing up the grass and leaving big steaming piles everywhere.

I called the builder to tell him know that his guys were destroying my lawn and would they please "keep off," but he just didn't care and made that clear to me. I went over and talked to the workmen. Things got better for about a week. Then one day as I was walking home down the path from the church after work one day, I saw that they'd been working with their excavator and had gone *way* over the property line and had *really* torn up the grass this time. I was royally ticked off. I was seething with anger, resentment, and hatred. The only thing that kept me from storming up to the construction site and giving the guys a piece of my mind was the fact that they'd already gone home for the day.

But as I went in the house and started to cool off, all that anger turned into discouragement. It had only been half an hour before that I had finished writing a sermon about witnessing our faith through our actions. And yet when I saw the mess those guys had made, I was ready to do exactly the opposite. I'd just been writing about showing to others the grace that God has shown us. I'd just been writing about being victorious over sin, and there I was not an hour later struggling with a sinful attitude.

I think that all of us experience times like that. Think of the times when you've just finished your morning devotions and minutes later fall into some kind of sinful

activity or attitude. Maybe your problem isn't anger. Maybe you struggle daily with some other sinful behaviour pattern. Whatever it is, it can be discouraging and that's the reason for this series of sermons.

Whatever your particular problems with sin are, the Bible gives us the answers. It is possible for you and I to live in obedience to God's Word and live holy lives. In fact, that's what God expects each of us to do. You see, holiness isn't just expected; it's the promised birthright of every Christian. Think about the words St. Paul wrote to the Romans, "Sin will have *no dominion over you*, since you are not under law but under grace" (Romans 6:14). If you are a Christian, sin is no longer your master.

Part of the reason we struggle so much with holiness is that we don't understand it. Think about it. I say "holy" and for a lot of people that conjures up images of monks or nuns or puritans in tall hats and buckle-shoes. Or maybe "holy" immediately makes you cringe, because you think of a self-righteous, "holier than thou" attitude. So we've got to get past our wrong ideas and go back to Scripture – because holiness is a biblical idea. The word "holy" occurs more than 600 times in various forms in Scripture. In fact, one entire book, Leviticus, is totally devoted to the subject of holiness. Holiness is a theme the God has worked throughout the Bible and his command to us is, "Be holy, as I am holy" (Leviticus 11:44).

Those false images we have of what it means to be holy come from our own misunderstanding. Holiness is about as basic it gets when it comes to doctrine, but a lot of Christians still seem to get it wrong. The Temperance Movement of a century ago practically equated temperance and abstinence with redemption and holiness and as a result many of our brothers and sister have come to equate holiness with a legalistic list of "thou shalt nots," like drinking, smoking, dancing, and going to movies. The Anabaptists kind of did the same thing. Think of the Amish, who equate holiness to a great degree with a certain style of simple living. On the other hand the Higher Life Movement and classic Pentecostalism exhort us saying that perfect holiness is possible in this life if we only try hard enough and follow the right rules – and if you're good enough and meet certain criteria along the way you can *earn* the Holy Spirit. And so with messages like that, it's no wonder Christians get discouraged in their pursuit of holiness.

It's sad, but we often miss the real meaning of "holy." You see, in biblical terms, to be holy is to be morally blameless. It's to be

separated from sin and consecrated to God. The word itself signifies "separation to God" and describes the sort of conduct and living that should characterise a person who has been set apart for God.

Look at how St. Paul describes holiness in 1 Thessalonians 4:3-7. He contrasts it with a life of immorality and impurity.

For this is the will of God, your sanctification: that you abstain from sexual immorality; that each one of you know how to control his own body in holiness and honor, not in the passion of lust like the Gentiles who do not know God; that no one transgress and wrong his brother in this matter, because the Lord is an avenger in all these things, as we told you beforehand and solemnly warned you. For God has not called us for impurity, but in holiness.

St. Peter contrast holiness with living according to the evil desires we had when we lived outside of Christ:

As obedient children, do not be conformed to the passions of your former ignorance, but as he who called you is holy, you also be holy in all your conduct, since it is written, "You shall be holy, for I am holy." (1 Peter 1:14-16)

In Revelation St. John contrasted one who is holy with those who do wrong and are vile:

Let the evildoer still do evil, and the filthy still be filthy, and the righteous still do right, and the holy still be holy. (Revelation 22:11)

The New Testament writers tell us that to live a holy life is to live a life in conformity to God's moral precepts instead of the sinful ways of the world. It's to live your life according to St. Paul's "put off, put on" principle I talked about this morning: put off your old self, which is corrupted by its deceitful desires, and put on the new self created to be like God in true righteousness and holiness (Ephesians 4:22, 24).

So we need to ask: If holiness is so basic to what it means to be a Christian, why don't we experience it in our daily living the way we should? Why do we so often feel defeated in our struggles with sin? Why does the church so often seem to be conformed more to the world than to Christ?

I think we have three basic problems. The first is that *our attitude to sin is more self-centred than God-centred*. Let me explain what I mean. I've noticed that a lot of Christians are more concerned about their

own “victory” over sin than they are about the fact that their sin grieves the heart of God. Do you see the difference? We struggle with sin, not because we know it’s offensive to God, but because we ourselves are success oriented. We know the right thing, but we’re trying to do it for the wrong reason.

You see, we’ll never have a right view of sin until we see it as against God – until we see it as a breaking of God’s law and God’s holy standards – until we see it as our despising his authority and as our attempt to be in control. We need to see sin as the cosmic treason that it is. Think of Pharaoh or Balaam or Saul or Judas. They all admitted they had sinned. But then think of the prodigal son. He admitted, “I have sinned *against heaven* and before you.” Think of David. He admitted to God, “Against you and you alone have I sinned.”

Dear friends, as much as God does want us to be victorious over sin, he wants us much more to simply walk in obedience. He wants our victory to be oriented toward himself. Victory is good, but victory needs to be the by-product, the result of our obedience to God. Instead of focusing on victory, we need to concentrate on living an obedient and holy life. If we do that we will *then* experience the joy of victory over sin.

Our second problem is that *we have misunderstood “living by faith”* to mean that no effort at holiness is required on our part. In fact, sometimes we’ve even gone so far as to say that an effort on our part is “of the flesh.”

Bishop Ryle made a good point when he wrote: “Is it wise to proclaim in so bald, naked, and unqualified a way as many do, that the holiness of converted people is by faith only, and not at all by personal exertion? Is it according to the proportion of God’s Word? I doubt it. That faith in Christ is the root of all holiness...no well-instructed Christian will ever think of denying. But surely the Scriptures teach us that in following holiness the true Christian needs personal exertion and work as well as faith.”

You see, it’s good that we rightly acknowledge that we have no part in our justification – our redemption – knowing that it is God who elects us, calls us, and regenerates us in the first place according to his good pleasure. We have nothing to add to our justification. But our sanctification is different. Think of a farmer. When he plants his crops, he enters into a joint venture with God. He may do the tilling,

planting, weeding, and fertilising, but unless God does his part, there can never be a harvest. And just so with us. God is the one who makes it possible by giving us his grace and placing his Spirit within us, but like the farmer, we have to cultivate those gifts to produce holy living. We have to take responsibility for doing a lot of hard work.

Our third problem is that *we don’t take some sin seriously*. That was the point of last summer’s series on “respectable sins.” We become legalistic and put sins into categories. We grant that it’s wrong to do the big things, like rob a bank, murder an enemy, or have an adulterous affair. But we have no problem ducking out early at work or taking home office supplies; we have no problem hating our enemy’s guts and harbouring anger and resentment towards him; and we have no problem looking lustfully at women or men to whom we’re not married. But Jesus reminds us in the Sermon on the Mount that hatred is just as much a sin as murder, and that to lust after a woman is as much a sin as if we’d committed adultery with her. Sure we aren’t guilty of the “biggies,” but we’re guilty of all sorts of “little” sins we think we can get away with.

And yet in Song of Songs, King Solomon wisely writes that it’s “the little foxes that spoil the vineyards” (Song of Songs 2:15). Those little sins often lead to bigger sins, but even when they don’t they’re still unholy and they still separate us from God. We become spiritual scoff-laws – the spiritual equivalent of the people who jay-walk, who don’t clean up after their dogs, who paint graffiti on walls, speed on the highway, and cheat “a little” on their taxes.

In his commentary on Leviticus, Andrew Bonar makes a very wise point. In commenting on the minute and seemingly unimportant points of the Mosaic law, he reminds us that it’s not the importance of the rule, but the majesty of the Lawgiver that should be the standard of our obedience. He grants that some of God’s rules might seem like petty or arbitrary trifles, but he says that even when it’s little things like what we eat or wear, the principle involved in obedience or disobedience is the same principle that faced Adam and Eve as they stood under the tree of the knowledge of good and evil pondering whether or not to eat the forbidden fruit. He says, the principle “is really this: Is the Lord to be obeyed in *all* things whatsoever He commands? Is He a holy Lawgiver? Are his creatures bound to give implicit assent to His will?”

Dear Friends, we need to be willing to call sin “sin” not because it’s big or small, but because God forbids it. We can’t put different sins into categories and say some are okay and some aren’t. If we do that, we’ll never live holy lives.

These are all ideas that I plan to develop more as we work through this series of sermons. But before we go further, each of us needs to settle these issues in our hearts. Each of us needs to ask, “Am I ready to start looking at sin as an offence against a holy God, instead of just a personal defeat? Am I ready to take responsibility for my sins? And finally, am I ready to make a conscious choice to obey God in all areas of my life, no matter how small or insignificant the issue might seem.

Please pray with me: “Almighty God and Father, you call us to holiness and have imparted each of us with a great measure of grace and the indwelling of your Holy Spirit. Forgive us for ignoring and compromising your call. Give us an understanding of what it means to pursue holiness, and work in our hearts to turn us away from sin. Give us a desire to be holy as you are. We ask this through him who knew no sin and to whose image you us to conform, Jesus Christ our Lord. Amen.