

Tonight I'm preaching on the topic of personal holiness. Of all the subjects I could preach on, this one particularly strikes home for me. It seems like I've known too many people who have struggled in this area... myself included. And I've seen too many men and women who miss out on the greatest joys of the faith because they're not focusing on the high things... the important things of the faith. Keeping the first things first, if you will.

I can't claim great expertise in this subject matter. And I confess I cannot claim great personal progress either... my growth in holiness over the years has been slower than I would like; perhaps more of an inching forward than a sprint, or a marathon. So please don't think this is a lecture directed to "ALL those other people" who struggle in this area... this sermon is for me as much as it may be for you.

I've seen many stories over the years of high profile pastors who have fallen from grace. I'm sure you have, too. You know the stories; pastors with large congregations who have committed very public sins. And I can't help but grieve with their congregations and their families as the media gleefully latches onto yet another story of a Christian biting the dust. They revel in it.

And of course this isn't a problem limited to big churches, or to the pulpit. And failures in personal holiness are also not limited to the more spectacular sins. There were a number of men in the church I grew up in who sinned very publically. One was a respected elder; he fell to his passions, was morally compromised, and lost his opportunity to serve in his church. He also lost his family, which was forever split apart as a result of his sin. And that's tragic. I've seen other times when churches have been broken by squabbling, and conflict that comes from our failure to keep our eyes on the Lord.

I don't personally know every pastor, every lay person, and every elder who has sinned. That's obvious. But from the ones I do know personally, I can draw the consistent conclusion that these were men and women who were not striving to grow in holiness. It was not their central passion. They may have been seen as holy in their public (or church) lives, but in their personal lives they showed no consistent evidence of a desire to shepherd their families or grow into the image of Christ.

Again, I can't speak to these high profile pastors we see in the news, but I'd be willing to state categorically that these men fell morally after their defenses fell. After they stopped focusing on God and started focusing on their passions. And while I suspect there's more of this type of sin going on today than there was in the past, man's basic problem hasn't changed over the generations. We're born into sin, and we do what is right in our own eyes.

- Psalm 51:5, "...I was brought forth in iniquity, and in sin did my mother conceive me."
- Jeremiah 17:9, "The heart is deceitful above all things, and desperately sick; who can know it?"
- Romans 3:10, "... None is righteous, no, not one; no one understands; no one seeks for God. All have turned aside..."

If we're going to be honest, I think the subject of personal holiness makes people nervous. People are often wary of someone who obviously strives for piety, as if there's something wrong with them. Like they're too heavenly minded to be of any earthly use. Personal holiness, it seems, has had its day, but is no longer appropriate for the real world of the 21<sup>st</sup> century. Holiness has become the private preserve of an austere group of monks, missionaries, mystics, and martyrs.<sup>1</sup>

But nothing could be further from the truth! Holiness is the everyday business of every Christian. It evidences itself in the decisions we make and the things we do, hour by hour, day by day.<sup>2</sup>

Our life as Believers is about committing ourselves to pursuing holiness, and ensuring that this commitment is actually to God, and not simply to a holy lifestyle, or a set of moral values or rules. No one can attain any degree of holiness without God working in his life, but just as surely no one will attain personal holiness without effort on his own part.<sup>3</sup> As the redeemed, we need to be offering ourselves to the Lord, and committing ourselves to pursuing holiness. And the purpose for that... is simple – it's to please God.<sup>4</sup>

From the outset, I need to be careful to point out that holiness is not about some set of rules we should be conforming to. The kingdom of God is not about movies, clothing, or dancing. The concern of God is not necessarily about what we eat or drink. Rather, as R.C. Sproul says, it's "a call to a deeper level of righteousness, that goes beyond [the] externals."<sup>5</sup>

Too many men are falling under the weight of their passions. Too many men (and women) abandon the faith, and the privileges that come with it... They abandon all of it so they can indulge their passions. Saying the hard things is hard, my friends... but the truth is, these men who fell from their elected positions in the church had no interest in growing in holiness. They may have, once upon a time... but that interest was lost a long time before their sin became public.

That's an epidemic in the church, my friends. Too many people have no interest in the great things of God. The high things. Again, this isn't just about the spectacular sins – although they bring this problem to our attention more than other the so-called "minor" sins do – this is about personal holiness in the smallest details of our lives. This isn't a problem isolated to pastors or elders, either... this is a problem that's rampant in the church as a whole. We are not as focused on growing in personal holiness as we should be.

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The Puritans of old considered communion with God to be a great thing.<sup>6</sup> A high thing. They were concerned about holiness, in a way that we are not. The measure of our concern, said J.I. Packer, is how little we talk about our daily experience with God. When Christians meet, they talk to each other about their work, interests, their acquaintances... politics... sports... but rarely of their daily experience of God. We rarely talk about our growth in holiness. How are you doing? Are you growing into the likeness of Christ?

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<sup>1</sup> Chuck Swindoll, <http://www.insight.org/resources/articles/womens-purity/moral-purity.html?t=womens-purity>

<sup>2</sup> Chuck Swindoll, *Loving God*.

<sup>3</sup> Jerry Bridges, *The Pursuit of Holiness*

<sup>4</sup> Jerry Bridges, *Holiness Day by Day: Transformational Thoughts for Your Spiritual Journey*

<sup>5</sup> R.C. Sproul, *The Holiness of God*

<sup>6</sup> J.I. Packer, cited in John Piper, *Contending For Our All*

The word “holiness” appears some 900 times in the Bible. We see it first in Genesis, and finally in the very last chapter of Revelation. Among other words, saint, sanctify, and sanctification are all obtained from its root. Yet despite its frequent use in the Bible, this concept of holiness has largely been ignored today.<sup>7</sup>

That being said, the question is... why should we care? Our access to Heaven isn't based on how holy we get in this world. It's not by good works that we're justified. The Bible tells us that repentance and faith are all that is required.

But then we see a verse like Hebrews 12:14, which says, "Follow peace with all men, and holiness, without which no man shall see the Lord."

So what do we do with that?

1 John 3:7 says, "Little children, let no one deceive you. ... Whoever makes a practice of sinning is of the devil... By this it is evident who are the children of God, and who are the children of the devil: whoever does not practice righteousness is not of God..."

The true believer has a habitual lifestyle of righteousness – he practices righteousness. Christ died to transform sinners, like you and me; and as a result, as the redeemed, we replace our old habits of sin with habits of righteousness... Holiness.

We see in Scripture a holiness that we have in Christ... that's a positional holiness... God sees us as holy because of the completed work of His Son on the Cross. That's the Gospel!

- Ephesians 5:25 says, "Christ loved the church and gave himself up for her, that he might sanctify her, having cleansed her by the washing of water with the word, so that he might present the church [that's us] to himself in splendor, without spot or wrinkle or any such thing, that she might be holy and without blemish."
- Romans 5:1, "... since we have been justified by faith, we have peace with God through our Lord Jesus Christ."
- Galatians 2:16, "a person is not justified by works of the law but through faith in Jesus Christ, so we also have believed in Christ Jesus, in order to be justified by faith in Christ and not by works of the law, because by works of the law no one will be justified."

So, as a result of the work of Christ on the Cross we can be presented to God without spot or wrinkle... holy, without blemish. We have peace with God. Not justified by works, but through faith in Christ.

But then we see a holiness that we're to strive after.<sup>8</sup>

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<sup>7</sup> Joel Beeke, *Holiness*

<sup>8</sup> Jerry Bridges, *The Pursuit of Holiness*

What does James say? James 2:14, “What good is it, my brothers, if someone says he has faith but does not have works? Can that faith save him? ... faith by itself, if it does not have works, is dead.”<sup>9</sup> Faith without holiness is dead. It’s meaningless.

God doesn't require us to have a perfect, sinless life to have fellowship with Him – if He did we'd all be in trouble – but He does require us to be serious about holiness, that we grieve over our sin.<sup>10</sup> Let me be clear... works don't save us... but they are a strong indicator of whether or not we are saved.

The New Testament talks about the normative character of holiness among believers.<sup>11</sup> All true believers are characterized by holiness... they ARE holy in Christ... it's who they are. That's great news... positional holiness is a reality for all of us who are united in Christ.

However... while sanctification (or holiness) is something we have in Christ, it's also something we must strive for.<sup>12</sup> You are called to be in Christ what you already are in principle by grace. A genuine believer's lifestyle of righteousness should stand in dramatic contrast to those who are of the world. Beloved, if you're not actively pursuing holiness, there's a disconnect in your life that should concern you. The habit of sin that we had before we were saved should be replaced with a habit of righteous living. And grieving over your sin.

Not a grief borne of being caught, or failing in your battle with sin... although that grief is legitimate, and should be present. I'm talking about a grief that comes from realizing that you have sinned against our Holy God.

Let me ask you; do you grieve deeply over your sin?

Evangelical researcher George Barna said, “When we look at the values, lifestyles, the moral perspective and behaviors of Christians, we can see that there's virtually no difference between Christians and non-Christians... of more than 70 moral behaviors we study, when we compare Christians to non-Christians we rarely find substantial differences...”<sup>13</sup>

Michael Horton noted that over and over we see polls demonstrating that evangelical Christians are as likely to embrace lifestyles every bit as hedonistic, every bit as materialistic, self-centered, and sexually immoral as the world in general.<sup>14</sup>

- Evangelicals divorce their spouses just as often as their secular neighbors.<sup>15</sup> And 90% of all divorced born-again folk divorced after they were supposedly saved. That hurts.
- Evangelicals also beat their wives as often as their neighbors.
- They're almost as materialistic, and even more racist than their pagan friends. White evangelical Christians are the people most likely to object to neighbors of another race.<sup>16</sup>

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<sup>9</sup> James 2:14-17

<sup>10</sup> Jerry Bridges, *The Pursuit of Holiness*

<sup>11</sup> Joel Beeke, *Holiness*

<sup>12</sup> *ibid.*

<sup>13</sup> <http://www.redhotpawn.com/board/showthread.php?threadid=109179>

<sup>14</sup> Michael Horton, "Beyond Culture Wars," *Modern Reformation* (May-June 1993), p. 3.

<sup>15</sup> *The Scandal of the Evangelical Conscience Why don't Christians live what they preach?* By Ronald J. Sider

<sup>16</sup> George Gallup Jr. and James Castelli, *The People's Religion* (Macmillan, 1989), p. 188.

- Josh McDowell’s research has shown that the promiscuity of today’s evangelical youth is only a little less outrageous than that of their non-evangelical peers.
- A 2001 poll found that 25% of evangelical Christians have lived with a member of the opposite sex without being married.<sup>17</sup> That number has increased in the last decade.
- Rick Thomas has found that 86% of men between the ages 18 and 34 (that’s ALL men in that age bracket).... Can you guess??? They’re watching pornography. “Watching” doesn’t mean the occasional stumble into... the occasional peek... but rather it’s a regular activity... they’re diving into it. To put that in perspective, in a room of 100 men, just 14 are NOT looking at pornography. And more than 30% of women are watching as well, and that number is climbing rapidly.
- Several years ago a seminary professor said: “We no longer ask our entering students if they are struggling with pornography; we assume every student is struggling. The question we ask is, ‘How serious is the struggle?’”<sup>18</sup>
- One missions agency said that 80% of their applicants voluntarily indicate a struggle with sexual sin, resulting in a chronic shortage of missionaries and support personnel in the field.<sup>19</sup>
- If you’re looking at pornography, you’re not qualified for service. You’re not qualified for ministry...
  - Pornography turns potential missionaries into impotent Christians.
  - It destroys marriages, many before they even begin.
  - It objectifies women... it turns them into a consumable product instead of a glorious image-bearing creation of God.
  - It leads to disqualified pastors... impotent churches.
  - It devastates children who discover that their dad has lost his job or opportunity to lead in the church because he can’t control his passions.<sup>20</sup>
- And this slide in morality is not just limited to the simple folks like you and I.
  - 38% of pastors polled said they were divorced or are currently in a divorce process.
  - Between 30 and 40% of pastors said that they had either been in an ongoing affair or had a one-time intimate encounter with a parishioner.
  - Pastors are only slightly less likely to be watching pornography than rest of us.

I’m not talking about our pastors and sheep specifically... these numbers represent evangelical Christendom as a whole.

That being said, what are we doing? As evangelicals we are – overall – indistinguishable from the unsaved world in general. We are – as a population – living in sin as much as the Pagans are. What are we doing?? Is this a picture of the church Jesus died for???

J.C. Ryle said, “Would you delight to meet [the greats of the faith...] David, and Paul, and John, after a life spent doing the very things they spoke against? Would you take sweet counsel with them, and find that you have much in common with them? Think... above all... would you rejoice to meet

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<sup>17</sup> The Barna Group, The Barna Update, “Born Again Adults Less Likely to Co-Habit, Just As Likely to Divorce,” August 6, 2001, <http://www.barna.org/FlexPage.aspx?Page=BarnaUpdate&BarnaUpdateID=95>.

<sup>18</sup> <http://www.desiringgod.org/blog/posts/sexual-sin-in-the-ministry>

<sup>19</sup> *ibid.*

<sup>20</sup> Eric Simmons, <http://www.desiringgod.org/blog/posts/i-hate-porn>

Jesus, the crucified One, face to face, after cleaving to the sins for which He died, after loving His enemies and despising His friends? Heaven would be a miserable place for an unholy man."<sup>21</sup>

True salvation brings with it a desire to be made holy. God has called us to grow in holiness. Our degree of personal holiness is not necessary as a condition of salvation – that would be salvation by works, and we don't believe that – but it's a part of salvation that is received by faith in Christ. Spurgeon said, "It's not by good works that we are justified, but if a man continues to live an ungodly life... his faith will not justify him... his faith will not justify him... the faith of God's elect conforms men to the image of Christ."<sup>22</sup>

He went on to say that, "the faith which saves the soul is not a dead faith, but a faith which operates with purifying effect upon our entire nature and produces in us fruits of righteousness... to the praise and glory of God."

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Leviticus 19:2 says, "... You shall be holy, for I the Lord your God am holy." Peter said in 1 Peter chapter 1, "...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..."<sup>23</sup> Be holy, because the Lord your God is holy... Peter went on to say, in essence, that if you're a believer, you'll have respect for the Lord and long to honor Him in all things.

These verses, along with our passage in Hebrews 12 with their warnings about holiness and obedience scare people, because they smell of works righteousness... words like pursue, and obedient sound a lot like work, don't they? Like you need to work to be saved. "Follow peace with all men, and holiness, without which no man shall see the Lord." That's an active statement – nothing passive about it. But that's not the point of the verse - if you're unsaved, you don't have a hope of pursuing a lasting righteousness. If you're unsaved, this verse isn't for you. But as the "called out ones," we've been given the responsibility of putting effort into our sanctification.

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So what is personal holiness? I'll tell you what it's not... it's NOT knowledge – plenty of Pharisees had that. It's not a great profession of faith – Judas Iscariot did that. It's not religious zeal, or doing many things, or morality and outward respectability. It's not even taking pleasure in listening to great preaching,<sup>24</sup> like we get from the pulpit every Sunday here at Gold Country.

According to the original biblical usage of the word, holiness in all its forms means to be "set apart from common secular use for the purpose of being devoted to God." That's the case whether the word be used in reference to persons, places, occasions, or objects."<sup>25</sup>

To be set apart...

In a Negative sense, to be separate from sin, and

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<sup>21</sup> J.C. Ryle, *Holiness*, p54

<sup>22</sup> C.H. Spurgeon, *A Call to Holy Living*

<sup>23</sup> 1 Peter 1:14-16

<sup>24</sup> J.C. Ryle, *Holiness*

<sup>25</sup> Joel Beeke, *Holiness*

In a Positive sense, it's the call to be consecrated (or separated) to God.

And this call to holiness is an absolute, exclusive call.<sup>26</sup> God hasn't called us to give a piece of our hearts, my friends... holiness involves every sphere of our lives... When we're alone with God, or with our families... at work... in school... in Sunday worship. It's a whole-life commitment to be set apart to the Lordship of Jesus Christ. It means to live *coram deo* – to live one's entire life in the presence of God, under the authority of God, in the face of God, to the glory of God.<sup>27</sup>

It's relationship with God, fleshed out by grace in faith and practice throughout every sphere of life.

J.C. Ryle defined it this way – “Holiness is the habit of being of one mind with God.” He went on to state that, “a holy man (or woman) will endeavor to shun every known sin... and will strive to be like our Lord Jesus. He will follow after meekness, longsuffering, gentleness... he'll pursue temperance and self-denial. Most importantly, he will follow after the fear of God.”<sup>28</sup>

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Holiness cannot save us! The salvation that Jesus offers comes without strings... “By grace you have been saved, through faith... and that not of yourselves; it is the gift of God: not of works, lest any man should boast.”<sup>29</sup>

But note that the voice of God in His Word commands us to be holy! It's not a Divine suggestion! In Matthew 5:20, Jesus said that “...unless your righteousness exceeds that of the scribes and Pharisees, you will never enter the kingdom of heaven.” He later went on to tell us to “Be perfect ... even as your Father in heaven is perfect.”<sup>30</sup>

God called Israel to be holy. “... I am the Lord your God. [Leviticus 11:44] Consecrate yourselves therefore, and be holy, for I am holy.” And then verse 45... “For I am the Lord who brought you up out of the land of Egypt to be your God. You shall therefore be holy, for I am holy.”

I'm your God, you're My people... I'm holy, you be holy... this is not for our sake, friends, but for His sake because we're identified as His children. The reason for our holiness??? Because HE is holy! Good enough, right??

It's not all about me...

Again, to be consecrated to God means to be separated from sin.

- Because God's very nature is Holy,
- because His holiness separates Him from all that is unclean,
- because He is morally perfect,

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<sup>26</sup> John MacArthur, *Falling Short of the Grace of God*

<sup>27</sup> R.C. Sproul, *What Does Coram Deo Mean?* <http://www.ligonier.org/blog/what-does-coram-deo-mean/>

<sup>28</sup> J.C. Ryle, *Holiness*

<sup>29</sup> Eph. 2:8-9

<sup>30</sup> Matthew 5:48

- because He is above His creation,<sup>31</sup>
- because He is righteous and pure,
- because His eyes cannot behold evil,<sup>32</sup>
- because He is unapproachable by sinners apart from holy sacrifice...<sup>33</sup>

Because of these things, it follows that all associated with God must also be holy. His church is to be holy,<sup>34</sup> and His people are to be holy.<sup>35</sup>

“Christ... loved the Church, and gave Himself for her, that He might sanctify and cleanse it.”<sup>36</sup>

He loved the church... and gave himself for her... that she might be sanctified. Holy.

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Arthur Pink wrote that while many are diligent in the exercise of their worldly business, and are very good at indulging their fleshly gratification, very few indeed exercise a Godly concern for their souls.<sup>37</sup> The Bible teaches that we must work out our holiness, without which we won't see the Lord. Unless there's a work of faith in keeping God's commandments, and you have a labor of love toward His saints, then your faith may be in vain.

- Attending church is not enough.
- Performing acts of charity is not enough.
- Your best works are not enough.
- Even a profession of faith is not enough.

In 1 Thessalonians 4 Paul says, "Don't act like the godless heathen who don't know God." Don't behave like you did in your ignorance before you were saved, when you didn't know Him... don't be driven by your passions as you once were. You're no longer pagans, you're children of obedience, you're transformed... so act like it. Paul wasn't idly wasting ink here... the Thessalonian believers needed this instruction... and so do we.

We must be truly exercised in our hearts as to how to please and honor God in the details of our lives. There should be an agitation. A passion.

Beloved, do you feel the importance of personal holiness as much as you should? We rarely consider how far a person may go in a profession of faith, and yet have no grace... be dead in God's sight. How many disgraced pastors and elders surprised their flocks by their very public moral failure? By their sin? How many fathers or mothers stun their families with their admission of sin? When the Lord warned the Disciples that one of them would betray Him... do you think they

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<sup>31</sup> Deut. 4:35,39; 1 Kings 8:60; Isa. 45:5, 6, 14, 18, 21, 22; 46:9; Joel 2:27

<sup>32</sup> Hab. 1:13

<sup>33</sup> Lev. 17:11; Heb. 9:22

<sup>34</sup> Exodus 12:16

<sup>35</sup> Deut. 7:6

<sup>36</sup> Ephesians 5:25-26

<sup>37</sup> A.W. Pink, Exposition of Hebrews



all pointed at the godless Iscariot? No... no one said, “is it Judas?”<sup>38</sup> Judas appeared just as spiritual as the others. Maybe more so.

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In the Beatitudes, Jesus said, “Blessed are those who hunger and thirst for righteousness, for they shall be satisfied.”<sup>39</sup> That’s Matthew 5:6. Blessed are they who desire righteousness. People in the Kingdom have something to be passionate about! Not a material thing, not a worldly honor or possession... but righteousness. Holiness.<sup>40</sup>

Thomas Watson said, “desire is the best discovery of a Christian. What you desire [or are passionate about] explains your heart.” Of course, our natural desires remain after conversion... but they should fade away in our estimation, and are counted as loss<sup>41</sup> in comparison to our Holy God. What you hunger for reveals the character of your heart like nothing else.

You can mask your outward performance, and put on a happy face, but you know what you really desire.

Multitudes flock into churches each week with “Christian masks” that hide the reality that their appetite is not for Christ... but for the things of the world.<sup>42</sup> But Jesus tells us that only those who have the spiritual appetite for righteousness will find satisfaction. Only those who have actively pursued holiness will be saved.

This “hunger and thirst” metaphor is a graphic one... people in Biblical times were a lot more familiar with hunger and thirst than we are... famine and draught were always close by.<sup>43</sup> The metaphor conjures images of incredible desperation... being close to death from thirst, all you can think about is finding a solution for your suffering. Finding that drink. Your tongue is swollen, your lips are cracked, and every moment is captivated by your condition. A starving person has a single minded, all-consuming focus – a passion for satisfaction. All other desires pale in comparison. Nothing else has the slightest attraction or appeal... and nothing else can get his attention.

Without careful consideration, I think Christ’s words fall short in our modern culture, where we have running water, and food constantly accessible to us. (...some of us more than others!) In the ancient world they had none of the comforts that we have... they were constantly dealing with hunger and thirst... the battle for basic survival was an all-consuming exercise; it took all daylight hours to find food and water. It was against this backdrop that Christ speaks of believers hungering and thirsting for righteousness.<sup>44</sup> As Kent Hughes put it, “Jesus is far from recommending a genteel desire for spiritual nourishment, ... but rather a starvation for righteousness... a desperate longing to be conformed to God's will.”<sup>45</sup>

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<sup>38</sup> J.C. Ryle, *Holiness*

<sup>39</sup> Matt. 5:6

<sup>40</sup> John MacArthur, *The Only Way to Happiness: Thirst for Holiness*. May 31,1998 90-192.

<sup>41</sup> Phil. 3:8

<sup>42</sup> Phil Newton; <http://archive.southwoodsbc.org/sermons/matthew5e.htm>

<sup>43</sup> John MacArthur, *The Only Way to Happiness: Thirst for Holiness*. May 31,1998 90-192.

<sup>44</sup> *ibid.*

<sup>45</sup> Hughes, R. K. *Sermon on the Mount: The Message of the Kingdom*. Crossway Books

These pursuits are to be our lifestyle. Hunger and thirst are in the present tense. Believers continually hunger and thirst for holiness. The Psalmist Asaph said, "Whom have I in Heaven but you? ..... there is nothing on earth that I desire besides you... My flesh and my heart may fail, but God is the strength of my heart and my portion forever."<sup>46</sup>

Sin and rebellion have separated us from God. Alienated us from any desire to worship Him. But the great news, beloved, is that God changes His redeemed... they go from hungering for sin to hungering for sanctification. When we seriously contemplate the holiness of God, the reaction of the redeemed is to cry out with Isaiah, "Woe is me, for I am ruined!" The Holy Spirit makes us more aware of our lack of holiness, and stimulates us to deeper yearning and striving for holiness.

If we truly have a zeal for growth in holiness, then we will have a zeal for God's mind... a zeal that will make us feel the weight of our sin... recognize that our sin is the mightiest of all evils... and conformity to Christ the greatest of all blessings.<sup>47</sup> A zeal for Holiness will make us feel like there is nothing which ought not be done in order to maintain a close walk with God. We'll never complain about not being able to find time to pray, or read His Word... not praying, or spending time meditating on His Word - becomes unthinkable. We enjoy a closer communion with Jesus, and all the more so as we become more like Him. That's incredible!

John Owen, the great English Puritan, was very intentional about his communion with God. He said, "Friendship is most maintained and kept up by visits; and these, the more free and less occasioned by urgent business..." In the midst of all his academic and political and ecclesiastical labors he made many visits to his Friend, Jesus Christ.<sup>48</sup> And when he went, he didn't just go with petitions for things, or even for deliverance from hardships... he went to see his glorious God... to spend time with Him... to contemplate His greatness... he was "attending to the throne of grace."

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So, if holiness is so basic to Christian life, why don't we experience it more in our daily living?

In his book, *The Pursuit of Holiness*, Jerry Bridges gives us four reasons why we fail to experience growth in holiness.<sup>49</sup>

1. First, our attitude to sin is more self-centered than God-centered.
  - a. We're more concerned about our own "victory" over sin than we are about the fact that our sin grieves the heart of God. We're success oriented in our struggle with sin... but we forget the bigger point, which is that our sin is offensive to God.
  - b. Pharaoh and Balaam, Saul and Judas all acknowledged that they had sinned, but it was the returning prodigal who said, 'I have sinned against heaven and before you'; and David said to the Lord, 'Against You, You only have I sinned.'
  - c. God wants us to walk in obedience - not victory. Obedience is oriented toward Him; victory is oriented toward our selves. As we focus on living an obedient, holy life, we'll experience the joy of victory over sin. But one must come before the other.

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<sup>46</sup> Ps. 73:25-26

<sup>47</sup> J.C. Ryle, Practical Religion

<sup>48</sup> John Piper, Contending For Our All

<sup>49</sup> Jerry Bridges, *The Pursuit of Holiness*

2. Second, we've misunderstood "living by faith" to mean that no effort is required on our part.
  - a. Galatians 2:20 says, "It is no longer I who live, but Christ who lives in me. And the life I now live in the flesh I live by faith in the Son of God..."
  - b. But in following holiness the believer needs personal exertion and work as well as faith.<sup>50</sup> We have a tremendous personal responsibility for our walk in holiness.
3. Third... we don't take all sin seriously.
  - a. We tend to overlook the "little stuff" ... those respectable sins, as Bridges put it... pride, discontent, unthankfulness, frustration, selfishness, even anxiety... how about speeding on the freeway?
  - b. We've mentally categorized sins into those which are "unacceptable," and those which may be tolerated. But compromise on the little issues leads to greater downfalls... Scripture tells us that it's the "little foxes that ruin the vineyards."<sup>51</sup> We cannot categorize sin if we are to live a life of holiness. ALL sin is an offense against the Living God, not just a personal defeat.
  - c. In commenting on some of the smaller Old Testament dietary laws God gave to the children of Israel, Andrew Bonar said, "It's not the importance of the thing, but the majesty of the Lawgiver, that is to be the standard of obedience... not the significance, or importance of the thing, but the majesty of the Lawgiver... the question is this: Is the Lord to be obeyed in all things whatsoever He commands?"<sup>52</sup>
  - d. Sin is an offense against God; it's only as we see His holiness, His absolute purity and moral hatred of sin, that we'll be gripped by the awfulness of our sin against Him.
4. Fourth, we desire what we shouldn't.
  - a. Paul lamented, "...when I want to do right, evil lies close at hand. For I delight in the law of God in my inner being, but I see in my members another law waging war against the law of my mind and making me captive to the law of sin that dwells in my members. Wretched man that I am!"<sup>53</sup>
  - b. Our hearts are still desperately wicked... David prayed, "Search me, O God, and know my heart; test me ... know my thoughts... See if there is any offensive way in me, and lead me in the way of the everlasting."<sup>54</sup> Do you share that prayer?
  - c. John Owen said that, "sin carries on its war by entangling our affections..." Entangling our desires. It deceives us... it deceives our reasoning.
  - d. And Romans 12:2 says, "Do not be conformed to this world." The word "conformed" means to fashion yourself, or to be fashioned. It means to make a complete break with your former life. Stop being like you were when you were in your unredeemed ignorance and start being like the One who redeemed you. Stop pursuing the things of this world.

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But let's face it; living a holy life is hard. It's hard. It requires concentrated effort, and apparently I have few brain cells to spare. Many Christians have the desire to live a holy life, but have come to

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<sup>50</sup> J. C. Ryle, *Holiness* (1952 edition, London: James Clarke & Co.), p. viii.

<sup>51</sup> Song of Songs 2:15

<sup>52</sup> Andrew Bonar, *A Commentary on Leviticus* (1846; reprint edition, Edinburgh: The Banner of Truth Trust, 1972), p. 218.

<sup>53</sup> Romans 7:21

<sup>54</sup> Psalm 139:23-24

believe that they just can't do it. We struggle with our "favorite" sins... some for years, some for an entire lifetime.

The promise of victory in Christ seems so far away... we begin to wonder if the promise... was for someone else. The victory eludes us, and we wonder... what went wrong? What happened? But our focus is on the wrong thing – our focus is on victory. We're not called to victory, but rather to be obedient to God's Word. In the New Testament, obedience and faith are so closely related that they become almost synonymous. If our faith in Christ is genuine, it will produce obedience.<sup>55</sup> And obedience will lead to personal holiness.

1 John 2 says, "Whoever says "I know Him" but doesn't keep His commandments is a liar, and the truth is not in him... but whoever keeps His word, in him truly the love of God is perfected. By this we may know that we are in Him: whoever says he abides in Him ought to walk in the same way in which He walked."<sup>56</sup>

Ephesians 2 tells us that unbelievers are the children of disobedience;<sup>57</sup> that's their very nature... they're characterized by disobedience. But our nature should be obedience. It should be the pattern of our lives. We are ordained unto good works (Ephesians 2:10); that's the mark of a believer... a desire to be obedient.

Obedience to the Lord, and its resulting holiness, is the only sound evidence we have that we have a saving faith in Christ.<sup>58</sup> James warned us about dead faith... true faith will always show itself by its fruits.

John Owen's personal holiness didn't just happen to him. He pursued it.<sup>59</sup> He employed strategies of personal discipline that God used to make him what he was. He kept himself low by recurring contemplation of his inbred sinfulness. This humility opened Owen's soul to the greatest visions of Christ in the Scriptures. And he believed with all his heart the truth of 2 Corinthians 3:18, that by contemplating the glory of Christ "we may be gradually transformed into the same glory." That's growing in holiness!

.....  
In preparing Timothy for ministry, Paul gave him a warning. He said, "... train yourself for godliness; for while bodily training is of some value, godliness is of value in every way, as it holds promise for the present life and also for the life to come."

Train yourself to be holy. Make a commitment to grow in holiness. Make it your goal in life. Of course, the assumption here is that the Holy Spirit is dwelling within you. Paul writes that if man or woman is in Christ, the old things (including old appetites) pass away, and new things replace them.

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<sup>55</sup> James 2:17

<sup>56</sup> 1 John 2:4-6

<sup>57</sup> Eph. 2:2

<sup>58</sup> J.C. Ryle, *Holiness*

<sup>59</sup> John Piper, *Contending For Our All*

We're not talking about a perfect appetite for righteousness. My friends, the question is, do you have any appetite whatsoever?

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So...

1. Do you see an increasing desire to be in God's Word, and to obey that Word?
  - a. David, a man after God's own heart,<sup>60</sup> proclaimed his "one thing" ... "One thing have I asked of the Lord, that will I seek after: that I may dwell in the house of the Lord all the days of my life... to gaze upon the beauty of the Lord and to inquire (or meditate) in His temple."<sup>61</sup>
2. Do you have an increasing love of the things God loves, and a hatred of the things God hates?
3. Is there a growing longing in your heart to do God's will?
4. Are you dissatisfied with where you're at? Can you cry out with Paul, "O wretched man that I am!"<sup>62</sup> Are you grieved because you know that God is dishonored by your sin... are you more concerned about the Divine implications of your failures than you are the human ones?
5. Do you find that the things of earth are becoming less and less satisfying?
6. And are the things of God precious to you?

These are great indicators that you're moving in the right direction! As we surrender to Christ and God's call on our lives, and as we learn more about Him, we grow to be more like Him.

But instead of calling us to surrender to Christ, modern evangelism has asked us to simply accept some basic facts about Him. This "modern gospel" says that once we ask Jesus into our hearts, we're good to go – no more effort or attention is required. This is a shallow understanding of salvation, and a shallow understanding of the Gospel. The gospel call to faith presupposes that sinners must repent of their sin and yield to Christ's authority. That's obedience.

.....  
I've found that when I read His Word more, I pray more – *I think that's a universal truth* – and I learn more about God. The more we learn about Him, the more we love Him, and the more we love Him, the more we obey Him, and the more we thirst for righteousness. Holiness. Obedience and love are inextricably interwoven together... you won't get one without the other.

1 John 5 says, "Everyone who believes that Jesus is the Christ has been born of God, and everyone who loves the Father loves whoever has been born of him. By this we know that we love the children of God, when we love God and obey his commandments. For this is the love of God, that we keep his commandments. And his commandments are not burdensome."

So... keeping His commandments IS the love of God. "... this is the love of God, that we keep his commandments."

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<sup>60</sup> Acts 13:22

<sup>61</sup> Psalm 27:4

<sup>62</sup> Rom. 7:24

But the busy-ness of life drowns out the voice gnawing away at the back of my noggin telling me to devote more time to communing with my Lord. When asked about his plans for the following day, Martin Luther famously said, “Work, work, from early until late. In fact, I have so much to do that I shall spend the first three hours in prayer.” His focus was on his dependency on God. Luther fought a life-long battle for holiness. To the point of having his sanity questioned at times.

But I wonder if you can identify more with this painfully honest quote from Pastor Mark Altrogge?

“Sometimes prayer can feel like a waste of time. Surely I’m not the only one who feels like this. I’ve got a lot of stuff to do. I’ve got books that I need to read, sermons to prepare, kids to play with, diapers to change, and television to watch (Downton Abbey is such a long series). When I’m praying it feels like I’m not doing anything. Like I’m just sitting around. Like nothing is happening. I need to get moving on my day and start getting things done.”<sup>63</sup>

I’m a busy guy – places to go, people to see.

But Martin Luther was busy, wasn’t he?!?... He was leading a spiritual revolution! He was preaching, writing, pastoring, translating the Bible, being a dad... being a husband. And yet, in spite of his workload, he found it absolutely necessary to meet with God before he met with the cares of the day.

Jesus is an even greater example of the necessity of prayer. He was charged with being the Savior of the world! He was constantly swamped with people and ministry needs, yet he always carved out time to meet with His Father.

Prayer can be hard..... I get distracted by shiny objects. I have a lot going on – a lot of things I need to be doing. But like Mark Altrogge’s testimony, mine is all too often filled with pressing obligations like watching Downton Abby. Truth is, I need to pray. I must pray. I must make thirsting for righteousness a top priority in my life.

I need to meet with God... be strengthened by Him... receive wisdom from Him, and cast my cares on Him... and yes, cling to Him..... I need Him if I’m to have a hope of serving my family well... and being the husband and the father God has called me to be.

Beloved, God intends the Christian life to be a life of joy. Paul tells us in Romans 14 that the “...kingdom of God is not a matter of eating and drinking but of righteousness and peace and joy in the Holy Spirit.”<sup>64</sup> But only those who are obedient - those who are pursuing holiness as a way of life - will know that joy. David sinned with Bathsheba, and was confronted in his sin by the prophet Nathan. Convicted of his sin, he said to the Lord, “Against you and you only have I sinned!” Then he went on to beg God to restore to him the joy of His salvation.<sup>65</sup> The life of obedience can be joyful, when we have a repentant heart!

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<sup>63</sup> <http://www.theblazingcenter.com/2012/03/so-busy-that-i-must-pray.html#sthash.CGpL8gw.dpuf>

<sup>64</sup> Romans 14:17

<sup>65</sup> Psalm 51:12

In Deuteronomy 30 God says, “This commandment which I command you ... is not too hard for you.”<sup>66</sup> And John tells us that His commandments are not burdensome.<sup>67</sup> The obedience God loves is the obedience of faith... and faith means banking our hope on the mercy of God. And I’ve got great news for you – are you ready for this? – mercy means that our obedience doesn’t have to be perfect; it only has to be penitent. Sincere. We have to mean it!

Jesus said, "Sanctify them in the truth; your word is truth. As you sent me into the world, so I have sent them into the world. And for their sake I consecrate myself..... that they also may be sanctified in truth."<sup>68</sup> Jesus was set apart for the Father's will in order that believers might be set apart unto God... that’s pretty good news!

We don’t have to be perfect... we don’t have to reach perfect holiness in this life. What matters is that we are trying. We’re striving for it. The great news is, Jesus Christ loves those who have been redeemed. “For God so loved the world that He gave His only begotten Son, that whosoever would believe in Him would not perish, but have eternal life.”

Our God is faithful to forgive. He is faithful, and He is just, and He is merciful, and He is worthy of our praise and adoration.

You will I cherish, O Lord... You will I honor,  
You my soul’s glory, joy and crown!

Beautiful Savior! Lord of the nations!  
Son of God and Son of Man!  
Glory and honor, praise, adoration,  
Now and forever more be Thine!

He forgave me, and by His grace He can forgive you, too. We have confidence as the redeemed that as we strive for holiness in this life, we have the promise of being holy in God’s eyes and the promise of holiness in the life to come. What an incredible promise that is! If we are saved, our faith will justify us. And we’ll work because we love Him and want to show our love for Him. But let’s remember Spurgeon’s warning – if we live an ungodly life, in the end our faith will be meaningless. It won’t save us.

We work because we want to; because of what He has done for us. We strive for holiness because He is holy... that’s good enough for me.

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<sup>66</sup> Deuteronomy 30:11

<sup>67</sup> 1 John 5:3

<sup>68</sup> John 17:17-19