

The Necessity and Practice of Holiness

By Daryl Wingerd

The definition of holiness includes the concept of being distinct, set apart from everything (or everyone) else. Christians are holy people in two ways. First, believers are holy in God's sight in terms of their position. Through faith in Christ, they are uniquely set apart *by* God, and *for* God. In this sense, no true Christian can be any more holy than he already is.



The Bible also speaks of the need for consistent and increasing holiness in terms of behavior. In this sense of the word, the holy person is the one who practices righteousness rather than sin, who lives in purity rather than uncleanness, who is godly rather than worldly. It is this second meaning that I wish to address here. Consider four facts from the Bible:

1. Holiness is not optional. Consider the command in Hebrews 12:14: “Pursue peace with all men, and the sanctification [or “holiness”] without which no one will see the Lord.” These may initially appear to be conflicting commands: get along with all people *and* be holy in your behavior. But if we allow peace with the people of this world to be our overriding concern, we might easily be lax in living according to God's standard of holiness. The practice of holiness, after all, has the tendency to offend. So, as it seems, the writer saw the need to qualify his first command with a second: be holy in your behavior *even if it causes conflict with others*. The reason for giving the second command priority over the first is seen in the last phrase: “without which [i.e., holiness] no one will see the Lord.” You may end your life, as many Christian martyrs did, as the apostles did, and as Jesus Himself did, amidst great animosity from the people of this world, and yet you can still be confident of your entrance into heaven. But if you die as one whose behavior was not consistently (and increasingly) holy—not set apart from the worldliness all around you—then as this text makes plain, you will not enter into glory. Instead you will hear from Christ, “I never knew you. Depart from Me, you who practice lawlessness” (Matt. 7:23).

2. Holiness is required in every corner of your life. Christians are rightly fond of the concept of freedom from the law. This fondness, however, often stems from a misunderstanding of what Christian freedom really is, which in turn leads to an undue expansion of the concept, thus allowing for compromising behavior. Peter includes a statement in his first letter that should shatter any misconceptions:

As obedient children, do not be conformed to the former lusts which were yours in your ignorance, but like the Holy One who called you, be holy yourselves also in all your behavior; because it is written, “You shall be holy, for I am holy.” (1 Pet. 1:14-16)

In this text, Christian freedom has its boundary. You are free to live as you want to live, and do as you want to do—as long as all your behavior is holy. And by holy, Peter clearly points us to the imitation of God. Would God approve of the things you allow yourself to say, or the things you allow yourself to do, or the things you allow yourself to think, or the things you allow yourself to listen to, or the things you allow yourself to watch? In your ignorance as an unbeliever you felt no qualms about engaging in less-than-holy behavior. But what about now, as one who has been set apart for God? Are you pursuing holiness in *every* area, or are there still a few dark corners of your life where you are taking liberties you shouldn't?

3. Holiness has only one instruction manual: the Bible. The psalmist asks a simple yet profound question: “How can a young man keep his way pure?” (Ps. 119:9). This was no reflection of idle curiosity, but rather an expression of urgent need and conviction. He longed to be pure (holy, righteous) in the way he conducted his life, and so he asked how this can be done. He then gave the only acceptable answer: “By keeping it according to Your word.” Holiness is not the product of intuition, but of instruction. The person who walks in holiness is the one who knows and obeys his Bible.

The practice of holiness is one and the same as a vigorous spiritual life. One cannot have the one without the other, and the person who has the one also has the other. Furthermore, both flow from one's relationship with Scripture. As George Muller once said, “the vigor of our spiritual life will be in exact proportion to the place held by the Bible in our life and thoughts.”

4. Holiness requires discretion. It may seem that holiness is just resolving to obey the “Thou shalt” and “Thou shall not” commands in Scripture. But Paul commands us to go further—to take pains to avoid even being tempted to sin. “Make no provision for the flesh in regard to its lusts” (Rom. 13:14). Recognize the seductive, deceptive nature of sin, along with the unholy desires of your flesh that still tend to draw you toward sin, and make every effort to keep the two apart. To put Paul's command another way, never unnecessarily place yourself in the presence of temptation. If our only command were to avoid committing the sin itself, there would be no violation in drawing near, as long as we did not actually succumb. But with Paul's command in Romans 13:14, we sin when we get careless. We sin when we intentionally and unnecessarily create the opportunity for our flesh to be lured toward sin. We are not merely obligated to stay out of the pit of sin, but also to build personal fences around the pit, and some distance from it. The person who is zealously pursuing holiness never wants to get close.

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