

Holiness

By Joel R. Beeke

There is a simple yet profound word which occurs nine hundred times in the Bible. You see it first in Genesis, as we are informed how God created heaven and earth. You see it last in the Bible's final chapter, where we are told about God's creation of a new heaven and a new earth. One entire book, Leviticus, is devoted to the subject of this word.

Yet this word is strangely overlooked today. Though it describes the uniqueness of God and the calling of all His children, it is largely ignored.

This short yet awesome word is holy. Among other words, saint, sanctify, and sanctification are obtained from its root.

What does holy, holiness mean? What is the scriptural call to holiness? How must holiness be practiced? Why does the church so desperately need holiness in our day?

Let's divide our subject into five sections: (1) What Holiness Is: Purging Misconceptions (2) Holiness in Scripture: Set Apart (3) Holiness in Theology: Sanctification (4) Holiness in History: The Church's Understanding (5) Holiness in Practice Today: The Church's and Our Greatest Need.

WHAT HOLINESS IS: PURGING MISCONCEPTIONS

Holy and holiness bear the brunt of considerable misconception. To some, the word holy seems archaic; they envision “outdated backwardness.” For others, holiness smacks of moralistic legalism; that is, holiness demands a lengthy list of prohibitions. From person to person, group to group, this list will vary, but a list there shall be wherever holiness is. For still others, holiness is associated with a repugnant “holier than thou” attitude. They view it as a despicable tool with which to implement haughty superiority. Finally, for some, holiness spells unattainable perfection. They view holiness as a discouraging doctrine that addresses nothing but sin and demands radical perfection.

Though there are fragments of truth in certain aspects of these conceptions, all of these ideas miss the true concept of holiness. According to original

word usage, holiness in all its forms (that is, when applied to any person, place, occasion, or object) implies to be set apart from common secular use for the purpose of being devoted to God.

Holiness means to be set apart. But what does set apart mean? Two things. The negative sense of set apart is holiness' call to separate from sin. The positive sense of set apart is holiness' call to consecrate to God. These two concepts—separation from sin and consecration (or separation) to God—comprise holiness. When combined, these two concepts make holiness very comprehensive. In fact, holiness covers all of life. Everything, Paul tells us is to be sanctified: “For every creature of God is good, and nothing to be refused, if it be received with thanksgiving: For it is sanctified by the word of God and prayer” (I Tim 4:4,5).

The call to holiness is an absolute, exclusive call. God never calls us to give Him a piece of our hearts. The call to holiness is a call for our whole heart: “My son, give me thine heart” (Pro 23:26).

The call to holiness is wholistic. That means, our whole life is involved—soul and body, for time and eternity. And that, in every sphere of life in which we are called to move: in privacy with God, in the confidentiality of our homes, in the competition of occupational work, in the pleasures of social friendship, as well as in Sunday worship. The call to holiness is seven-day-per-week, 365-day-per-year call. It is radically comprehensive; as such, the call to holiness belongs to the core of religious faith and practice.

So you can see how wrong the misconceptions of “backwardness, legalism, and superiority” are as regards holiness. Holiness is never spelled out in Scripture as a pharisaical concept with an endless list of do's and don'ts combined with a self-righteous attitude. Rather, holiness is a whole-life commitment to be set apart to the Lordship of Jesus Christ. Holiness is not a list but a lifestyle. Holiness means to live Godward. Holiness is religion par excellence. It is relationship with God—covenant relationship to be sure—worked out by grace in faith and practice throughout every sphere of life.

This will become crystal clear as we examine Scripture's concept of holiness.

HOLINESS IN SCRIPTURE: SET APART

In the Old Testament, holiness is spoken of primarily in relation to God. “The LORD our God is holy” (Psa 99:9). Holiness is God's very nature—the

very foundation of His being. Thrice holy, intensely holy is the Lord (Isa 6:3). God is Holiness. Holiness is God's permanent crown. It is the “shining of all His perfections,” as the Puritans used to say. Holiness is the backdrop for all else the Bible declares about God.

The Old Testament concept of divine holiness presents three cardinal truths about God: First, it denotes the separateness or otherness of God from all His creation. The most common Hebrew word for holy, *qados*, has as its most fundamental meaning—to be separate or apart. God is above and beyond all His creation. Nothing is like Him. “To whom then will ye liken God? or what likeness will ye compare unto Him?” (Isa 40:18). “The LORD He is God; there is none else beside Him” (Deut 4:35,39; I Kings 8:60; Isa 45:5,6,14,18,21,22; 46:9; Joel 2:27).

Secondly, it denotes God's total “apartness” from all that is unclean or evil. God is moral perfection. His holiness is total righteousness and purity (Isa 5:16). His eyes are too pure to condone evil (Hab 1:13).

Thirdly, due to God's being set apart by nature and from all sin, He is unapproachable by sinners apart from holy sacrifice (Lev 17:11; Heb 9:22). Only with bloody, life-giving sacrifice can the holy God justly dwell among sinners (for the wages of sin is death, Rom 6:23)—and that for Christ's sake, the Sacrifice to come. In and through the coming Messiah, the unique and perfect God of Israel can live among His chosen people: “I am God, and not man; the Holy One in the midst of thee” (Hosea 11:9). This apparent contradiction—Holy One in your midst—is explainable only through Jesus Christ, God's appointed sacrifice, for the Holy One sees only a perfect Christ when He looks upon His own (cf. Heidelberg Catechism, Q. 60).

From this threefold concept of God as the Holy One, it naturally follows that all associated with God (that is, divine phenomena) must also be holy. Hence, God's instituted sabbath is “a holy sabbath” (Exo 16:23); His home is the “holy heaven” (Psa 20:6); He sits on a “holy throne” (Psa 47:8); Zion is His “holy mountain” (Psa 2:6); His very Name is holy (Exo 20:7). So, too, His church is called to be a “holy assembly” (Exo 12:16) and His covenant people a “holy people”: “For thou art an holy people unto the LORD thy God: the LORD thy God hath chosen thee to be a special people unto Himself, above all people that are upon the face of the earth” (Deut 7:6).

Israel, God's covenant people, is called to holiness by means of holy separation from sin (Deut 7:6), holy consecration to God (Lev 11:44), holy

worship of God (cf. the bulk of Leviticus), and inner holiness or cleansing (Lev 16:30; Psa 24:3-4).

The New Testament

The New Testament underscores all the Old Testament teaches on holiness. It develops a greater emphasis, however, on the themes of holy Trinity and holy saints. Now holiness is often ascribed to one Person of the Godhead. The God of love is the Holy Father (John 17:11); Jesus Christ is the Holy One of God (Mark 1:24; John 6:69); and the Spirit of God is denominated Holy ninety-one times!

In terms of saints , the New Testament highlights three themes. First, it accents the ethical dimension of holiness. The stress is on inward rather than ritual holiness. Basic to this is the witness of Jesus Himself, who as the Son of man lived out a life of complete holiness, for He “committed no sin; nor was any deceit found in His mouth” (I Peter 2:22). He is “holy, harmless, undefiled, separate from sinners” (Heb 7:26). As a result of His redemptive work, believers in Him are declared righteous and enter into holiness: “We are sanctified through the offering of the body of Jesus Christ once for all” (Heb 10:10).

Secondly, the New Testament emphasizes the normativity of holiness among believers. Holiness belongs to all true followers of Christ. A common term for all believers is holy ones (hagioi) , usually translated “saints.” Saints, therefore, does not refer to persons preeminent in holiness, but to the typical believer who is holy in Christ (I Cor 1:30). Holiness is an internal reality for all who are united with Christ. Even though a child of God feels often how unholy he is in himself and would not dare to call himself a “saint,” God views all His elect as holy and saintly in and through the perfect, active and passive, obedience of His well-beloved Son. For Christ's sake, their state is holy before God and their condition is made holy by the indwelling Spirit.

Thirdly, the New Testament envisions holiness as transforming the total person: “And the very God of peace sanctify you wholly; and I pray God your whole spirit and soul and body be preserved blameless unto the coming of our Lord Jesus Christ” (I Thess 5:23). Though this “whole holiness” falls beyond the reach of the believer in this life, it nevertheless remains his goal and prayer. He delights to pursue holiness and seeks to “perfect holiness in the fear of God” (II Cor 7:1).

HOLINESS IN THEOLOGY: SANCTIFICATION

With scriptural data in hand, we are able to draw the broad strokes of a theology of holiness. The resulting doctrine is called sanctification. For brevity's sake, we may subsume the nature of sanctification under two subheads.

Status conferred by Christ's merits

The New Testament informs us that every believer is sanctified in principle by the sacrifice of Christ: "We are sanctified" (Heb 10:10). Christ is our sanctification (I Cor 1:30), and the living church is sanctified (Eph 5:25-26). The believer's status before God is one of sanctity in Christ, even when his character has not yet perfected holiness (I Cor 1:2; cf. I Peter 1:1,2; Heb 2:11; 9:13,14; 10:14,29; 13:12).

Process pursued by Christ's application

Despite a sanctified status, the true Christian has not arrived to a wholly sanctified condition. He must strive for sanctity, for holiness (Heb 12:14). Growth in holiness should follow regeneration (Eph 1:4; Phil 3:12). Paul prays that the Thessalonians be sanctified wholly as something still to be accomplished (I Thess 5:23).

True believer, sanctification is something you have in Christ before God, and something you must strive for in the strength of Christ. Your state in holiness is conferred; your condition in holiness must be pursued. Through Christ you are made holy in your standing before God; and through Christ you are called to reflect that standing by being holy in daily life. You are called to be in lifestyle what you already are in principle by grace.

What then must you concretely pursue? Three things:

Conformity to the character of God the Father. God says, "Be ye holy; for I am holy." Seek to image your Father in heaven in righteousness, holiness, and integrity. In the Spirit, strive to think God's thoughts after Him (via His Word), and to live and act as God Himself would have you do.

Conformity to the image of Christ. Of course you cannot be holy in your strength. All our righteousness is filthy rags (Isa 64:6). Do not aim for conformity to Christ as a condition of salvation, but as a fruit of salvation received by faith. Look to Christ for holiness. As Calvin would say: "Set Christ before you as the mirror of sanctification, and seek grace to mirror yourself in His image." Ask in each situation encountered: "What would Christ think, say, and do?" And then trust Him for holiness. He won't disappoint you (James 1:2-7).

Conformity to the mind of the Spirit. The Holy Spirit was sent to conform your mind to His mind (I Cor 2). He was sent to make sinners holy. Lean hard upon Him. How does the Spirit work holiness? First, He shows you your need for holiness through conviction of sin, righteousness, and judgment (John 16:8). Secondly, He plants desire for holiness. His convicting work never leads to despair but always to sanctification in Christ. Thirdly, He provides strength to live a holy life. Live by the Spirit, and you will not gratify the desires of your sinful nature (Gal 5:16). Live by the Spirit—that's the key. And that means to live in obedience to and dependence on the Spirit. Fourthly, through humble intake of Scripture and exhaling of prayer, the Spirit establishes an ongoing realization that holiness remains essential as being worthy of God and His kingdom (I Thess 2:12; Eph 4:1; Col 1:10; Phil 1:27), as aiming at fitness for service (I Cor 9:24,25; Phil 3:13), and as striving for personal consecration of the whole life (like the apostle Paul who writes as a willing *doulos* —that is, servant, slave—in short, as a man in love with his God).

There is room for unending growth in sanctification because Christ's fulness is infinite. Jesus is the bottomless well of salvation. You can't go to Him too much for holiness, for He is Holiness *par excellence*. He is it; He lived it; He merited it; and He sends His Spirit to apply it. “Christ is all, and in all” (Col 3:11). After all, isn't this what holiness is all about? He must increase; I, decrease —that's sanctification in a nutshell. Oh, what a great blessing it is, as we live and walk amid the crowds of this world, to be overwhelmed in our pursuit of sanctification with this truth: “I am nothing. Christ is everything!”

Then our prayer shall be: Gracious God, conform us to Thy character, to the image of Christ, to the mind of the Spirit. Help us to see our need for holiness, to desire holiness, to pursue holiness.

HOLINESS IN HISTORY: THE CHURCH'S UNDERSTANDING

So rich a theme as holiness has yielded a variety of emphases in church history. For the apostolic church, the essence of holiness was conformity to Christ. Christlike purity was the accented goal. In the patristic church (that is, early Church Fathers), holiness was largely viewed as withdrawal from the contaminations of society.

As the ancient church moved into the medieval era, three major Roman Catholic and Eastern Orthodox perceptions of holiness evolved:

1. Ascetic. In this tradition, holiness was pursued by forsaking the world literally (e.g., abandoning secular occupation, marriage, worldly goods) and by engaging extensively in prayer vigils, fasting, and self-mortification. (Medieval asceticism is a hardening of the patristic church's emphasis.) Only those who reached this “high level” of holiness were regarded worthy to be reckoned as saints. “Sainthood” was not normative among Christians, but reserved largely for the ascetics. Hence, a double standard evolved: “saintliness” came to be applied only to the “religious” person (i.e., priest, monk, nun), whereas a “lower attainment” of holiness, necessitated by remaining in the world, was tolerated in the “ordinary, secular, or lay” Christian.

The problems with asceticism are many. Briefly, the ascetic forgets that the Christian must remain in the world, but not be of it. Also, he ignores that the major problem with the world is his own heart's worldliness which he brings with him into a monastery setting. Finally, unusual forms of self-denial which serve no worthy purpose in themselves, tend to promote an attitude of salvation by works rather than by grace.

2. Mystical. According to the medieval mystics, holiness was not to be attained so much by fleeing the world as by rising above it. Holiness could be viewed as a ladder with various stages of spiritual absorption into God, such as purgation, illumination, and contemplation.

The danger of this view is twofold: Mysticism tends to lose sight of Scripture as the touchstone for all faith and practice; and it is prone to forget the calling of the Christian to be salt in the earth and light on the hill.

3. Sacramental. This form of holiness was available to all, since sanctification was automatically regarded as being imparted when the mass' wafer was lifted by the priest. Regardless of personal lifestyle, anyone who witnessed this event received, according to Roman Catholicism, an “objective fusion of holiness” without any of the struggle involved in the ascetic and mystical views of holiness. The danger here is obvious: The sacrament is prone to replace the need for the personal, subjective work of the Holy Spirit in the heart of a sinner.

Classical Protestantism (sixteenth century) was largely a movement away from ascetic, mystical, and sacramental views of holiness to a more Biblical perspective.

Luther, for example, successfully tore down the double standard of holiness between “the religious” and “the secular,” the clergy and the laity. All believers are called to holiness in equal measure; hence Luther's emphasis on the “priesthood of all believers.” Holiness must be normative, springing from an inward attitude toward all the affairs of the outside world. Believers must be transformed into godly living by the Word and the Spirit.

While underscoring Luther's emphasis, Calvin stressed holiness as a lifestyle of gratitude which reflected self-discipline and obedience to the moral law as the core of biblical ethics (Calvin's view is reflected in our Heidelberg Catechism which places a detailed consideration of the law under the heading of “gratitude”).

This Calvinian emphasis was continued in the seventeenth century by the Scottish Presbyterians, English Puritans, Dutch Second Reformation divines (Nadere Reformatie), and German Pietists (though a more significant portion of the latter inclined to unbiblical forms of mysticism). These groups also accented the divine will, personally revealed as “leading of the Spirit,” and the power to fulfil it in Christ's strength, as a hallmark of holiness. In sum, their concept of holiness may be termed as a merging of the disciplinary and experimental elements which flow out of dependency upon the Word and Spirit.

From time to time, perfectionist views of holiness have also surfaced (e.g., Wesley), which generally stress “entire sanctification” by faith through the eradication of sin and the gift of perfect love. The apostle John contradicts perfectionism plainly in I John 1:8, “If we say that we have no sin, we deceive ourselves, and the truth is not in us.”

So long as he is “in this body,” the true believer continues to be tempted and at times to fall, growing more sensitive to sin the closer he lives to God. But he will continue to repent and seek forgiveness by grace, ever desiring to be further conformed to Christ's image by the Spirit. Though he detests his lack of holiness, he yearns to practice it.

HOLINESS IN PRACTICE TODAY: THE CHURCH'S AND OUR GREATEST NEED

Its necessity and inducements

These are at least ten in number for God's people:

1. God has called you to holiness. “For God hath not called us unto uncleanness, but unto holiness” (I Thess 4:7). Whatever God calls us to, is necessary. His call itself should induce us to seek and practice holiness.

2. Holiness evidences your justification and election. Sanctification is the inevitable outgrowth of justification (I Cor 6:11). The two may be distinguished, but never separated. In and through Christ, justification gives God's child the title for heaven and the boldness to enter; sanctification gives him the fitness for heaven and the preparation necessary to enjoy it.

Election too is inseparable from holiness: “God hath from the beginning chosen you to salvation through sanctification of the Spirit “ (II Thess 2:13). From God's side, election is known first , for it is the cause of our salvation, just as sanctification is the evidence of our salvation. From our side, however, election is known last, for sanctification is the earmark of Christ's elect sheep. That's why election is always a comforting doctrine for the church, for it is the sure resting-ground that explains the grace of God working within them. No wonder our Reformed forebears called election the comfort of the church!

That's also why Calvin was so insistent that election should discourage none, for the believer receives comfort from it, and the unbeliever is not called to consider it; rather, he is called to repentance. Whoever is discouraged by election, the Reformers so clearly taught us, is falling prey to a satanic misuse of this precious, encouraging doctrine.

3. Without holiness, all things are defiled. “Unto them that are defiled and unbelieving is nothing pure” (Titus 1:15). Through Christ, God sanctifies His child and makes his prayers and thanksgivings acceptable. As Thomas Watson has noted: “A holy heart is the altar which sanctifies the offering; if not to satisfaction, to acceptation.”

4. Holiness augments your spiritual health. As John Flavel quipped: “What health is to the heart, that holiness is to the soul.” Moreover, this spiritual health of holiness God generally works through discipline. Through chastisement, child of God, you are profitably exercised (Heb 12:11) by the Father, which results in genuine holiness without which you cannot see the Lord (v 14). Through Christ's justifying power, you receive a clean slate before God; through His sanctifying power a clear conscience. Both are critical for spiritual health.

5. Holiness fosters assurance. “Ye shall know them by their fruits” (Matt 7:16). All Reformed divines are agreed that most of the forms and degrees of assurance experienced by true believers—especially daily assurance—are reached gradually in the path of sanctification through careful cultivation of God's Word, the means of grace, and corresponding obedience (Read the Westminster Confession, Chapter 18, and the Canons of Dort, Head 5, for our forefathers' appreciation of the intertwining of holiness and assurance).

The way to lose a daily sense of assurance is to daily forego the pursuit of holiness. Believers who live sloppily (i.e., treat sin lightly or neglect daily devotions and study of the Word) or inactive (i.e., don't pursue holiness, but assume the posture that nothing can be done in the area of sanctification—as if holiness were something outside of us, except on rare occasions when something very special “happens” inside) are courting a recipe for daily spiritual darkness, deadness, and fruitlessness.

The godly farmer who plows his field, sows seed, fertilizes and cultivates, is acutely aware that in the final analysis he is utterly dependent for an assured crop on forces outside of himself. He knows he can't cause the seed to germinate, the rain to fall, the sun to shine. But he pursues his task with diligence anyhow, both looking to God for blessing and knowing that if he doesn't fertilize and cultivate the sown seed his crop will be meager at best!

Similarly, the believer who doesn't pursue holiness with diligence will neither have much assurance nor be obeying Peter's call to seek it (II Peter 1:10).

6. Holiness is essential for effective service to God. Paul joins sanctification and usefulness together: “If a man therefore purge himself from these, he shall be a vessel unto honour, sanctified and meet for the Master's use, and prepared unto every good work” (II Tim 2:21).

7. Holiness makes you resemble God. As Watson notes: “We must endeavour to be like God in sanctity. It is a clear glass in which we can see a face; it is a holy heart in which something of God can be seen.”

8. The God you love, loves holiness. Hence the intensity of His discipline! William Gurnall says it best: “God would not rub so hard if it were not to fetch out the dirt that is ingrained in our natures. God loves purity so well He had rather see a hole than a spot in His child's garments.”

9. Holiness preserves your integrity. It saves you from much hypocrisy, from resorting to a “Sunday only” Christianity. It gives vitality, purpose, meaning, and direction to daily living.

10. Holiness fits you for heaven. “Follow [literally: pursue]...holiness, without which no man shall see the Lord” (Heb 12:14). As John Owen writes: “There is no imagination wherewith man is besotted, more foolish, none so pernicious, as this—that persons not purified, not sanctified, not made holy in their life, should afterwards be taken into that state of blessedness which consists in the enjoyment of God. Neither can such persons enjoy God, nor would God be a reward to them. Holiness indeed is perfected in heaven: but the beginning of it is invariably confined to this world. God leads none to heaven but whom He sanctifies on the earth. This living Head will not admit of dead members.”

Its attainment

How must we pursue holiness? Briefly, here are ten hints of assistance:

1. Know and relish Scripture. This is God's primary road to holiness—the Spirit blessing His Word. Jesus prayed, “Sanctify them through Thy truth: Thy Word is truth” (John 17:17). Memorize Scripture, search it, and seek grace to live it. Let Scripture be your compass to guide you over the waves and storms of life, to teach you how to live holy in an unholy world with a heart prone to be tempted away from sanctity.

2. Strive for constant faith in Christ. Flee often to Christ. Seek to touch the hem of His garment to be washed from all your impurities. Faith in Christ is a powerful motivator for holiness; for faith and the love of sin cannot mix. Be careful, however, not to seek your holiness in your experiences of Christ, but in Christ Himself. As William Gurnall beautifully states: “When thou trustest in Christ within thee, instead of Christ without thee, thou settest Christ against Christ. The bride does well to esteem her husband's picture, but it were ridiculous if she should love it better than himself, much more if she should go to it rather than to him to supply her wants. Yet thou actest thus when thou art more fond of Christ's image in thy soul than of Him who painted it there.”

3. If you would grow in holiness, ask always: “What would Christ do?” Seek grace to do as Paul: “Be ye followers of me, even as I also am of Christ” (I Cor 11:1).

4. “Breathe after the Spirit,” writes Thomas Watson. “The Spirit stamps the impression of [His] own sanctity upon the heart, as the seal prints its likeness upon the wax. The Spirit of God in a man perfumes him with holiness, and makes his heart a map of heaven.”

5. Associate with mentors in holiness (I Cor 11:1). Converse with fellow believers whose godly walk you admire. “He that walketh with wise men shall be wise” (Prov 13:20). Association begets assimilation.

6. Pray for holiness. No one is sufficient to bring a clean thing out of an unclean but God (Job 14:4). Hence, pray with David, “Create in me a clean heart, O God” (Psa 51:10).

7. Regard yourself as dead to the dominion of sin and as alive to God in Christ (Rom 6:11). Seek to cultivate the same hatred of sin that God possesses. Recognize that God is worthy of obedience not only as Judge, but especially as loving Father. Say with Joseph in temptation, “How then can I do this great wickedness, and sin against God?” (Gen 39:9). And believe that Christ is mighty to preserve you alive. You live through union with Him. His righteousness is greater than your unrighteousness. His Saviorhood is greater than your sinnership. Do not despair: you are strong in Him, alive in Him, victorious in Him. Satan may win many skirmishes, but the war is yours; the victory is done-yours. In Christ, realistic optimism, not negative pessimism, reigns (Rom 6:11)!

8. Nurture, and persevere in, personal discipline. If you “sometimes through weakness fall into sin, [you] must not therefore despair of God's mercy, nor continue in sin” (Baptism Form). Rather, resolve with Jonathan Edwards: “Resolved, never to give over, nor in the least to slacken my fight with my corruptions, however unsuccessful I may be.”

These two things, fighting against sin and lack of success, appear contradictory but are not. The believer recognizes he will often fail, but he seeks to cultivate perseverance even through his failures. Failure doesn't make him quit, but it makes him repent and plod on in the Spirit's strength. “For a just man falleth seven times, and riseth up again: but the wicked shall fall into mischief” (Prov 24:16).

9. Develop a Biblical formula for holy acting. Here's one possibility drawn from I Corinthians: Does this glorify God? (10:31) Is this consistent with the Lordship of Christ? (7:23) Is this consistent with biblical examples? (11:1) Is this lawful and beneficial for me—physically, spiritually, mentally? (6:9-12)

Does this help others positively and not hurt others unnecessarily? (10:33; 8:13) Does this bring me under any enslaving power? (6:12)

10. Live “present-tense,” total commitment. Don't fall prey to the “one-more-time” syndrome. Tomorrow's obedience is disobedience now. Tomorrow's holiness is impurity now. Tomorrow's faith is unbelief now. Aim not to sin at all (I John 2:1), asking for divine strength to bring even your very thoughts under the captivity of Christ (II Cor 10:5), for Scripture indicates that our “thought-lives” ultimately determine our character: “For as he thinketh in his heart, so is he” (Prov 23:7). An old verse says it this way: Sow a thought, reap an act; Sow an act, reap a habit; Sow a habit, reap a character.

Follow Paul's advice to the Philippians: Whatsoever things are true, honest, just, pure, lovely, and of good report, “think on these things” (4:8). Holiness begins in our minds with a present-tense, total commitment and works outward to our actions. That's why we ought to jealously guard what we allow to enter our minds. The material we read, the music we listen to, and the conversations we have all affect our minds and ought to be judged in the context of Philippians 4:8.

Its impediments

Much impedes holiness. Four common problems which we need to be on guard against are these: 1. Our attitude toward sin and life itself is prone to be more self-centered than God-centered. We are often more concerned about the consequences of sin or victory over sin than about how our sins grieve the heart of God. We must labor to continue to see sin as against God. Positive consequences and victory then become by products of obedience and holiness.

2. We fail when we don't consciously live with our priorities fixed on God's will. In the words of the Scottish theologian, John Brown, “Holiness does not consist in mystic speculations, enthusiastic fervours, or uncommanded austerities; it consists in thinking as God thinks, and willing as God wills.”

3. Our progress is dampened when we misunderstand “living by faith” (Gal 2:20) to imply that no effort toward holiness is commanded of us.

Sometimes we are even prone to consider human effort sinful or “fleshly.”

J.C. Ryle provides us with an instructive corrective here:

“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 this 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.”

4. We are generally too prone to avoid the battle of daily spiritual warfare. No one likes war. The believer is prone to blind himself to his enemies—especially to the reality of his own ongoing pollution which Paul so poignantly expresses in Romans 7:14-25. Hence the remedy of Christian armor (Eph 6:10-20) also tends to be ignored at our peril. True holiness must be pursued against the backdrop of an acute awareness of indwelling sin which continues to live in our hearts and to deceive our understanding.

Its joy

God intends the Christian life to be one of humble joy, not negative drudgery. The idea that holiness is to be associated with a dour disposition is a tragic caricature of Scripture. In fact, Scripture asserts just the opposite: Only those who walk in holiness experience true joy! Jesus said, “If ye keep My commandments, ye shall abide in My love; even as I have kept My Father's commandments, and abide in His love. These things have I spoken unto you, that My joy might remain in you, and that your joy might be full” (John 15:10,11). Those who are obedient—who are pursuing holiness as a way of life—will know the joy that comes from God: a supreme joy, an ongoing joy, an anticipated joy.

The supreme joy: fellowship with God. No greater joy can be had than communion with God. “In Thy presence is fulness of joy” (Psa 16:11). True joy springs from God as we are enabled to walk in fellowship with Him. When we disfellowship ourselves from God by sin, we need to return with penitential prayer to Him like David: “Restore unto me the joy of Thy salvation” (Psa 51:12). The three key words Jesus spoke to the thief on the cross represent the chief goal and delight of every child of God: “Thou...with Me.”

The ongoing joy: trusting obedience. True holiness obeys God, and obedience always trusts God. It believes, “And we know that all things work together for good to them that love God” (Rom 8:28)—even when it can't be seen. Like faithful workers on Persian carpet, who blindly hand up all colors of strand to the overseer who works out the pattern above them, God's intimate saints are those who hand Him even the black strands He calls for, knowing that His pattern will be perfect from above, notwithstanding the

gnarled mess underneath. Do you too know this profound, childlike trust in believing the words of Jesus: “What I do thou knowest not now: but thou shalt know hereafter” (John 13:7)? That is ongoing, stabilizing joy which surpasses understanding.

The anticipated joy: eternal, gracious reward. Jesus was motivated to endure His sufferings by anticipating the joy of His reward (Heb 12:1-2). Believers too may look forward to entering into the joy of their Lord as they pursue lifelong holiness in the strength of Christ. By grace, they may joyously anticipate their eternal acquittal: “Well done, thou good and faithful servant...Enter thou into the joy of thy Lord (Matt 25:21,23). As John Whitlock noted: “Here is the Christian's way and his end—his way is holiness, his end, happiness.”

You too are called to practice holiness. Are you heeding this call? Have you been persuaded that pursuing holiness is worth the price of saying “no” to sin and “yes” to God? Do you know the joy of walking in God's ways? The joy of experiencing Jesus' easy yoke and light burden? The joy of not belonging to yourself, but belonging to your “faithful Savior, Jesus Christ,” who makes you “sincerely willing and ready, henceforth, to live unto Him” (Hei. Cat., Q.1)?

May it be our prayer: Lord, grant me to practice holiness today—not out of merit, but out of gratitude, by the grace of the Spirit and through faith in Christ Jesus.

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