

## **The Pursuit of Holiness**

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*"Pursue holiness without which no man shall see the Lord" Hebrews 12:14 (NIV)*

As I put pen to paper, I am fully conscious of the difficulty that meets us when dealing with this crucial topic of "Holiness". It is a vital subject which deserves far more attention than it receives in our times. This paper discusses practical aspects of 'Holiness' rather than its root meaning. For a deeper treatment of its root meaning from the Old Testament, we recommend a reading of Dr. Joel Beeke or Andrew Bonar's work. In many senses, I am indebted to the late good old Bishop of Liverpool, John Charles Ryle (1816-1900) whose monumental work continues to echo and help many of us over a century after his passing into glory.

Our lot is cast in extremely dynamic times in where any talk about 'Holiness' is viewed with suspicion and to some extent treated as repugnant to some people. In some sense, 'Holiness' is treated like a beggar meddling with our pockets. Several reactions naturally come to the fore though at least two definitely will rear their heads. To some, any "Holiness talk" sounds archaic. The very word "Holiness" generates graphic images of being old fashioned, reclusive, backward and fossilised (Ryle 1968). Images like toe touching long skirts, old thread bare and badly bleached clothes, dangerously depreciated tilted shoes and long brittle wire-like kinky hair immediately come to the post-modern globally minded liberal Christian's mind. To others, the idea is associated with a bigotry-like "holier than thou" attitude. Yet Holiness is very much a Scriptural idea. It certainly deserves attention than it generally does in present times.

### **What Holiness is and why it should be pursued**

It is known that theologically, the word 'Holiness' (GK: *hagiasmos* as in 'sanctification'; Heb: *Qadash*) can be viewed at least in a two-fold sense. The first, as suggested by others such as Bonar is what is known as positional holiness (Bonar, 1864). This is the state in which all the Christians are when they become born again (i.e. regenerated [GK: *Paliggenesia*]; Titus 3:5-7; I Corinthians 6:11; 2 Corinthians 5:17). The moment that person is converted from a life of sin having believed in the Lord Jesus Christ alone for salvation through

faith and not works, at that moment, God declares them righteous and sets them apart. This positional holiness implies that anyone who has never truly turned from sin is still under God's condemnation (John 3:18). All their good works such as church attendance, alms giving among others are futile before the Ancient of Days. Their best physical good works are as filthy rags before God's eyes (Isaiah 64:6). The Christian then is sanctified for holy use by God and thus called living 'saints', not dead (Ephesians 1; 1b; Romans 1:7; 1 Corinthians 1:2; 2 Corinthians 1: 1b; Philippians 1;1 etc.).

The second is progressive holiness which our text (Hebrews 12:14) highlights. This is the moral standard that every true Christian has to strive after (Ryle 1968). Mark my words "true Christian", not any hypocrite. This means that the moment that someone flies to Christ for refuge, they suddenly resolve to fight sin to the bitter end, 'until they breathe their last', as someone has aptly coined the phrase.

To be 'holy', then, is to be separated (or 'cut off from') from sin and, thus consecrated to God. It is a curious fact that several people lay claim to Christ but alas, their lives fall short of their profession. They carry Bibles in their hands but probably have not Christ in their hearts. Progressive holiness entails Christians consciously and diligently work out their salvation synergistically with the Holy Spirit (Phil 2:12-13) as He works in their lives daily sanctifying them. To that extent that the Christian applies themselves to godly things and the means of grace, to that extent they will grow in holiness. In short, a holy person is someone who is more like God. A point worth noting however is that holiness is a result of inward transformation by the Holy Spirit rather than works of human effort or ingenuity as some attempt to do (Ephesians 2:8-10). But we should note that though one strives diligently towards absolute perfection this side of heaven they will never fully reach it – they still need grace in all areas of their life (1 John 1:8-10). So, in this life they won't be sinless, but walking by the Spirit they should sin less and less.

### **Why holiness important and importance of its pursuit**

It must be stated that the pursuit of holiness is compulsory for all true Christians with no special exceptions! From the time of conversion to the dying day, the Christian must pursue holiness. Christians develop holy desires. It bothers them when they are not as holy as they ought to be. In other words, every regenerate saint will labour to be holy. Holiness must be pursued because:

(1) Yahweh is Holy and therefore all who have dealings with Him must be holy (1 Peter 1:16): It logically follows that anything less than 100% holiness is unacceptable! Of course, for the believer Christ alone is his sanctification (1 Corinthians 1:30). Further, God commands all His people to be holy.

(2) It is for Christian's own good: If the Christian persists in sin and disobedience, God will punish, distance Himself or discipline them. Regenerate people are treated as children (Hebrews 12:6) and therefore must be like their God in their outlook towards life. Being personal, He has a relationship with his redeemed children in Christ. We may wonder in these days walk like Jesus did. How many walk worthy of their calling? How many are holy in the common and mundane things of life? How do they conduct themselves in their dealings with other people? How about their honesty and integrity in all spheres of life? The Christian lives an ethically holy life, consecrated to God.

(3) Holiness is required for effective service to The Ancient of Days (Daniel 7:9-10): The Holy Spirit richly empowers clean holy vessels for service. For how can He use those who live contrary to God's will? A consideration of those He has mightily used across history will confirm that they have been most consecrated to Him (2 Tim 2:21).

(4) Holiness is necessary for our assurance of salvation: Many remain in doubt and thus are not as effective as they should. Could it be that they have not progressed in holiness as they should? Those that forsake all things for Christ and live consistent holy lives are most assured. Their public and private lives match. They do not linger like Lot of old (Gen 19:16). Readers should note that the only sure evidence that one is regenerate is a holy life (2 Cor 5: 17)

(5) Holiness is for today as much as it was for the past and future: God's standard does not change as the post-modern mind is likely to think. Change is the currency of the times but the Christian must remain holy even within those changing seasons. The expression may vary but the principle remains. Dimensions for sinning have significantly increased as Paul warned (Romans 1:32; I Timothy 3:) but the Christian needs to watch and pray lest they be sifted by sin. One subtle way sin has crippled many a saint is their imprudent use of the internet at times. Though much good comes with the net and yet much spiritual harm could and does equally seep through. Circumspection is essential even there. Professor Fackson Banda once correctly quipped that Christians need what he termed '*cyber holiness*.' How apt that phrase!

## **Marks of a holy person**

How may we know that we are holy?" Only two suggestions will suffice:

The first mark is a growing hatred for sin (Ryle 1968). A holy person detests sin more each passing day. They strive to be like God as they wrestle with worldliness and its attendant effects, the flesh and the Devil (I John 2:15-17). The worst enemy is sin and like Paul often cry "O wretched man that I am!" (Rom 7:24) but in the same breath say "I press on" (Phil 3:12). The person fights and wrestles with sin daily. No cease fire is ever declared with sin! The full armour of

God is consistently worn all the days in this spiritual battle. Does the reader of this paper know anything of any inward conflict?

The second is a deepening love for God. Genuine Christians love God deeply and sincerely from the heart that they do all things for Him out of a joyful heart. Have you noticed those two people madly in love? Notice the sparkle in their eyes as they are with their dear one! Everything else is irrelevant at that point, not even the air they breathe! Notice how they talk about their love to other people! Something like this imperfect human love and a thousand times more is what floods the heart of the holy saint. Each life year is consecrated to the Lord and often times their minds are filled with holy things. They daily yearn to be with God in prayer. Their closet is never covered with dust layers, nay they visit it often and daily. Is it the roof top or the field? No hurdle will stand in their way. The Christians' love for God is far deeper than any mortal example.

Further, consistent daily Bible reading regime without coercion. The Bible is their love letter from God. Inward purity of life is their goal. Their walk at home and abroad is consecrated to God. They give no occasion to the flesh to indulge in evil things because they are ever grateful to God for having cleansed them from their past sins. Even if they have a terminal illness, they will love God still! In a nutshell, Christ is all in all in their lives and as such could give up everything they possess if they could be more like Christ.

What about inherent love for God's children, the saints? Does the Christian's life radiate Christ in the public domain? Does this holiness permeate all departments of daily life? What about the social, political and ecclesiastical arenas? Holiness beams out from the sanctified believer regardless of what station they find themselves in life. For them, the whole of life is worship to God (Romans 12:1-3).

### **Hindrance to Holiness**

One of the major hindrances to attaining a holy life is one's attitude towards sin. Subtly, humans tend to classify some sins as being "more serious" than others. While some sin is more serious to God, it must be asserted that all sin is heinous in His sight regardless of the nature or apparent 'magnitude' (1 John 5:17). Let not the Christian misunderstand Scripture or add a meaning the author never meant (Klein, Blomberg and Hubbard, 2004). Granted, some sins appear more 'public' than others but all sin is sin. Depending on one's view of sin, they may be lax or sensitively diligent against it. True Christianity is a fight of faith (1 Tim 6:12)! This fight is not waged with physical weapons but spiritual. Washer (2008) makes good case when he challenges the Church towards separation from the world. A low view of sin generally weds the Church to worldliness and sin. That said, the Christian therefore must diligently labour and apply themselves to the means of grace if they are to grow in holiness. The Christian must meditatively

read the Bible as they frequently pray, fellowship more and it is possible that certain things will change for the better.

The lingering question is, Are you holy?

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