

Perfecting Holiness

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In the New Testament, it is the writings of Paul that have the most to say about salvation by grace through faith. However, 2 Corinthians 7:1 reveals that the appearance of God's grace in our lives marks the beginning of a spiritual process, not its end. Once we receive the promise that God makes to His people, our work begins. This text tells us that with God's help, it is our responsibility to wage war against the sin in our lives, to perfect our holiness in His fear.

For a number of different reasons, this is a passage that is hard to face. First, many people have such a vague, non-Biblical understanding of holiness that this text doesn't make sense. Second, others don't want to hear that our salvation places a weighty responsibility on our shoulders. They would prefer to put themselves on spiritual autopilot rather than striving daily to become more like Christ. Finally, even some brethren who acknowledge the implications of the upward call don't want to seek God's will in everything. They want to give Him 100 percent in some areas, but hold things back for themselves in other areas. Let's consider these things this morning as we study perfecting holiness.

What Is Holiness?

As we embark on this study, it is necessary first of all to define what holiness is. I'm not aware of a passage that supplies us with a dictionary-like definition, but when we consider the way that the word is used in Scripture, we come to understand that holiness is being **DEDICATED TO GOD'S PURPOSES**. Look, for example, at Acts 3:21. This is a telling description. Most people think of holiness as an indefinable spiritual glamor, so when God says these prophets were holy men, maybe it means that they glowed in the dark like they'd spent too much time working at a nuclear power plant. That's not it at all. Holiness is not some weird abstraction. It's a very down-to-earth, concrete concept. We see in this very verse what made these prophets holy. God wanted them to say something. They said it. They did His will and carried out His purpose. As a consequence of those actions, they were holy people, consecrated to Him. In the same way, anyone today who uses his life to carry out God's will is a holy person. It's that simple.

However, we can't embark on this journey of holiness by ourselves. Instead, our holiness **BEGINS WITH CHRIST'S DEATH**. Paul comments on this in Colossians 1:21-22. If, like the angels in heaven, we made the commitment at the beginning of our lives to serve God and never wavered from that purpose, we could be holy on our own. In reality, though, every one of us messes our holiness up. Either we do something that is contrary to God's commandments, or we don't do something that He did command. By that decision to sin, we show that we don't really belong to God. None of us have the power on our own to rewind our lives, to reload an older saved game from before we messed up. Once we make the decision to become unholy, we are stuck with being unholy.

The only exception is in Christ. Jesus is the spiritual reset button. The record of our sins, of our choice to turn aside from God's will, is washed away in His blood. Nor is this a function that He only performs at the moment of our baptism. Instead, any time we sin and repentantly return, we can find forgiveness through Him. He gives us a second chance, a third chance, and a hundredth chance at holiness. Without Him, it would be impossible.

However, our holiness isn't only a product of the grace of Jesus. Instead, it is also **PRODUCED BY RIGHTEOUSNESS**. Look at the way that Paul phrases things in Romans 6:19. As Paul says earlier in the chapter, everybody is a slave of something. Either we are slaves of sin, or we are slaves of righteousness, and if we don't know right away which one we are, that surely means that we have unwittingly made the devil our master. When we give ourselves over to Satan's corruption, the result is lawlessness. We become spiritual outlaws, as far as we could possibly be from dedication to God's will. On the other hand, we can also choose to give ourselves over to righteousness. We can conform our lives so closely to the standard of God's word that we are truly its willing slaves. The result of this, not surprisingly, is holiness. To put things another way, holiness is strategy, and righteousness is tactics. When we daily make righteous decisions, one by one, the cumulative result of those righteous decisions is that we become holy people.

As we said earlier, this wouldn't be possible without Jesus. Without Christ in our lives, it's already too late. We have already blown it. Jesus gives us a second chance, but the point of that second chance is not so that we can scurry back over to our favorite sin, wallow around in it, and then scurry back to get washed clean by His blood again. Instead, God expects us to learn from His word and our mistakes, so that the second time around, we make the right decision so that we don't need to be forgiven. As we do that, we complete the work of holiness that Christ has begun in us.

Our holiness must be **ALL-ENCOMPASSING**. Peter points this out in 1 Peter 1:14-16. Holiness isn't merely strategy. Holiness has to be THE strategy. The purpose of our lives has to be becoming holy people. When we roll out of bed in the morning, the question on our minds can't be, "What am I going to do at work today?" It can't be, "What time is my favorite show coming on tonight?" It has to be, "What can I do today to dedicate my life to God?" There's nothing wrong with those other things. Work has its place. TV has its place. However, their place is not to usurp what should be the central role of God in our lives. Nor are there any areas of those lives that are exempt from the call to

holiness. I suspect that every one of us has parts of our lives that we struggle to conform to God's will. However, the things that we least want to give to Him are the things that we most need to surrender.

Finally, we must recognize that holiness is **NECESSARY**, at least if we don't want to spend eternity in torment. Consider how the Hebrews writer puts things in Hebrews 12:14. This holiness isn't something that God zaps us with and hooray! We're holy! Instead, it is something that we must pursue. We need to chase down holiness with the same zeal that a rabid Bears fan chases down season tickets. Holiness has to be the thing that we want. Here's why: When we are so dedicated to God's purposes, we're actually dedicated to God. We are using our lives to make the statement that more than anything else, we want to be with Him forever. If that is truly our desire, we will certainly receive it. However, if it isn't, we won't. People who got wet in a baptistery once but don't pursue holiness aren't going to heaven.

Jesus' Standard.

During the second portion of our study this morning, and in preparation for the Lord's Supper, we're going to consider Jesus' standard with respect to holiness. For our text, we're going to take about the second half of Matthew 5. This portion of the text begins with Jesus' call to **A HIGHER RIGHTEOUSNESS**. This appears in Matthew 5:20. As we said earlier, holiness is strategy and righteousness is tactics. Jesus here is talking about the Pharisees' tactical problems that led to their strategic problems. Overall, the Pharisees weren't interested in how much they could give to God. They were concerned with how little they could get away with giving. They wanted to live their lives their way as much as they could, and only live for God just enough to avoid eternal punishment.

The problem that the Pharisees had, and the problem that many Christians have today, is that they dramatically underestimated God. If our spiritual goal is to give God the minimum instead of dedicating the maximum to Him, don't we think He's smart enough to see through that? Do we honestly believe that He's going to be fooled by all the little rules and excuses and fabrications that we make up? Are we going to be able to mount some legalistic defense of our souls on the Day of Judgment, and say, "God, I did X, Y, and Z on the spiritual checklist! You have to let me in!"? If we think that way, it will be reflected in the kind of righteousness we pursue, and that righteousness won't be enough for God.

After this opening statement, Jesus gets down to cases. If holiness is truly our strategy, it will change our tactics with respect to **ANGER**. Consider Matthew 5:21-22. Jesus here begins his emphasis of what will be a repeated theme. When we have problems with sinful actions in our lives, the real problem isn't those actions per se. Instead, it's the sinful heart that found its expression in action. If, for whatever reason, we are afraid to engage in the action, but we nurture the sin in our hearts, the basic problem is still present. It's like going out weeding and ripping the leaves off a dandelion, but leaving the root in the ground. We haven't killed the dandelion. We've just inconvenienced it, and it will be back.

This is particularly true with respect to ungodly anger. As Jesus points out, the most extreme expression of such anger is murder. However, that doesn't mean that some lesser expression, or even ungodly anger that isn't expressed at all, is any more righteous than murder. Note that anger isn't necessarily unholy. After all, when Jesus cleansed the temple, He was angry. However, when we are angry on our own behalf rather than God's, that always violates His will.

A similar analysis applies to **LUST**. Jesus comments on this in Matthew 5:27-28. As we all know, there are many negative earthly consequences that are associated with adultery, some generally true, some specific to our situation. For instance, my mentor Max Dawson has been known to say that if he hears that any of his ex-trainees is unfaithful to his wife, Max will pay that ex-trainee a visit, and he will do something to that ex-trainee that I am not going to describe from the pulpit! I've talked about this with some of the other men who have passed through the Dowlen Road program. We're not totally sure that Max is joking. There are consequences, but if we let those consequences deter us from adultery but not from lust, we're missing the most important piece of the analysis. The wrath of God will be poured out on the lustful no less than on the adulterer, and if we are afraid of anything, we should be afraid of that!

Conversely, if we allow lust to run wild in our hearts, even if we never allow it expression in adultery, we have still completely defeated God's plan for us. Lustful people are not holy people, and we need to remember that before we start clicking around on the Internet or daydreaming about some attractive member of the opposite sex to whom we are not married. I've read marriage-enrichment articles before that argued that a little lust in marriage is innocuous or even beneficial, that it helps to spice things up once you've been married for a few years. I'm certain that those articles are wrong, but even if they aren't, that's still not advice that the Christian can take. Our life goal is not having pleasurable marriages. Our life goal is being holy, and being unholy in one area will keep us from holiness in any area.

Next in line, we're going to pass over divorce, if only because I'm pretty sure that nobody here is actually in an unscriptural marriage, and move on to **OATHS**. Let's look at Matthew 5:33-37. Really, what's under discussion here isn't the swearing of oaths or not-swearing of oaths. It's honesty. In the time of Jesus, many Jews sought to deceive others by swearing oaths that they didn't feel bound to keep. Jesus' solution was to command His followers to swear no oaths at all, but not because there is something morally suspect about an oath per se. After all, God Himself swears oaths. Instead, Jesus wants us to understand that every word out of our mouths should be utterly trustworthy, utterly reliable, and that our character should be so obvious that no one would ever feel the need to ask us to swear an oath. If, by

contrast, we hold Pharisaically to a prohibition against oaths, but feel free to lie to and deceive others regardless, we have missed the point that Jesus was making. If we are truly holy people, our mouths belong to God too.

Following this, Jesus addresses the subject of **VENGEANCE**. Read with me from Matthew 5:38-39. When we study this text, the discussion often turns into a debate about whether Christians have the right to self-defense. Let me suggest that though such a debate may be interesting, it really misses the main point for us. I haven't had anybody try to physically attack me since high school, but I have had plenty of people since then say and do things that I found insulting or emotionally hurtful. The question isn't really whether we should turn the other cheek in a hypothetical situation that will probably never happen to us, but whether we should take revenge for the wrongs that we do suffer. Here, and in Romans 12-13, God's will is quite clear. Retribution is God's business, not ours. We need to leave it in His hands, whether in this life, through the mechanism of police, courts, and so on, or in the life to come, when God will surely judge everyone. Life is not about defending ourselves ferociously from every threat real or imagined. Instead, it's about being holy as He is holy. It is about dedicating ourselves to His service, and no one can ever take that away from us. As long as we can still do that, what happens to the things we own or even the bodies we possess is immaterial.

Finally, Jesus discusses the objects of our **LOVE**. Here, we're going to look at Matthew 5:43-45. In some ways, of all the texts that we've looked at in this section, this is the one where the call to holiness is most obvious. One of God's most conspicuous character traits is His love, and He always seeks to express that love in the way He treats everyone. Even the most disgusting sinner, even the most hateful atheist, benefits from the love of God, even though they will never thank Him for it. If holiness is being dedicated to God's purpose, we too should be bent on expressing His love to the people in our lives who don't deserve it and will never thank us for it. We don't do this in the hope that our loving behavior will cause them to change their ways. We do it because that's what God does. This makes no sense in worldly terms and may well never produce any worldly benefit, but it is what we will do if we desire to be holy.

In just a moment, before we partake of the Lord's Supper, let's allow the words of our Lord to lead our minds in two directions. First, they should remind us that Jesus isn't OK with minimum-seeking. If we want to be holy, it can't be only our actions that belong to God. Our thoughts and our desires have to be His too. That standard of absolute submission to His will must be the standard that we use to consider ourselves.

Second, though, we should be thankful that we have such a God, whose perfect holiness and perfect love expressed themselves in sending His own Son to die for us. It is in Jesus that our holiness begins, and it is in Him that we find the inspiration to love our enemies as He loved us when we were His. Let's think of these things as we partake.

Pursuing Holiness

Finally, this morning, we're going to explore what we have to do to pursue holiness. What do we do when we look at our lives and realize that those lives are not wholly devoted to Him? As we saw earlier, that's a serious problem. Thankfully, though, it's not an insoluble one. If we want to be holy people, we certainly can be.

This highway to holiness begins when we **SEEK GOD'S HELP**. Paul explains why this is important in Philippians 4:13. Even though in context Paul is speaking of enduring poverty, his words apply to any spiritual endeavor, and they should encourage all of us. Maybe we have let the devil sink his claws into us. Maybe we do have a chronic spiritual problem, with lust, anger, any of the other things we've talked about, or any of the things that we haven't. Maybe our sin of choice has such control over our lives that we don't see how we can possibly get rid of it. If that's the truth about where we are, it's not an invitation to despair. It's an invitation to prayer. We might be right. That sin might be too much for us to handle, but it's not too much for God to handle. God wants us to be holy, and He will help us.

Once we've enlisted the Lord on our side, we have to **TAKE EVERY THOUGHT CAPTIVE**. Read with me from 2 Corinthians 10:4-5. This is not something that people in our society want to do. We prefer to believe instead that we are the slave of our thoughts and our feelings, that if we start developing a romantic attachment to somebody else's spouse, for instance, there's nothing we can do about that. Not true. Medical issues aside, we have the ability to control what goes on between our ears. If we find ourselves nurturing ungodly anger toward our brother, or we find ourselves dwelling on lustful thoughts, that's happening for one reason only. We have allowed those thoughts to flourish because for whatever reason, we enjoy having them and want to have them. We are taking thoughts that should belong to God and giving the devil free rein with them instead. As long as our thoughts don't belong to God, we can't be holy people.

When that's our situation, we have to go to war inside our heads. As soon as we sense our thoughts heading down the same familiar sinful track, we need to wrench our minds around until we're thinking about something else. Even more than that, we must train ourselves to hate sin and to hate the thoughts that lead us to sin. In a mental environment that is hostile to evil thoughts, only good thoughts can remain, and holy thoughts lead to holy lives.

Third, if we want to be holy, we have to learn to **RUN WITH ENDURANCE**. Consider with me Hebrews 12:1. Holiness isn't like a two-week crash diet to fit into a wedding dress. It has to be a lifelong pursuit, not only in terms of the overall goal, but in terms of the specific righteous things we need to do to become holy people. Unholiness is easy. People manage to be unholy all the time without even having to work at it. Holiness is hard, because as long as even one

area of our lives belongs to the devil, we aren't actually holy. He doesn't try to wreck our holiness by hitting us where we have no interest in sin. He attacks us where we are spiritually vulnerable, and it is in those vulnerable areas, in the sins that we would surely practice if we didn't love God, that we have to fight the good fight, week in, week out. Yes, this might be the five hundredth time today that we want to be mad because our kid did some randomly destructive thing, but so what? The only one who hands out excuses for sin is the devil, and they certainly aren't going to help us with God. In times like that, when we are tempted over and over again, is when our holiness, or lack thereof, is revealed.

Finally, we must **LOOK TO JESUS**. The Hebrews writer continues his thought in Hebrews 12:2. We've already discussed looking to Jesus for help. By contrast, this passage discusses looking to Jesus for His example. With God's help, Jesus lived His life as a perfectly holy man, and the record of that life teaches us how we can be holy too. In His days on earth, Jesus had a lot to deal with. God's will required Him to abandon every earthly possession, to live the life of a homeless man. The devil tempted Him every way he knew how. Most of the people whom His society considered righteous hated Him and opposed Him every chance they got. Even His own family turned against Him. Best of all, Jesus knew from the very beginning that He was going to die young, crucified by godless hands for a crime He didn't commit. I don't think any of us face the same challenges to our holiness that Jesus did, and yet Jesus triumphed. If He made it through, as long as we keep battling, we are going to make it through too. If we are determined to be holy, the day will come when we will live forever with the Holy One. Like Jesus, we too will be victorious.