

The Pursuit of Holiness

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The subject of holiness is much maligned in our world. People who seek purity are often accused of thinking they are “holier than thou.” Yet, Christians are to change their behaviors morally and ethically by pursuing holiness in their hearts.

In his second letter to the church at Corinth, Paul urged saints to pursue holiness: “Since we have these promises, beloved, let us cleanse ourselves from every defilement of body and spirit, bringing holiness to completion in the fear of God” (2 Cor. 7:1).

The saints at Corinth were in the early stages of development as Christians. They were in the process of renouncing paganism and embracing a new life in Christ. This was a struggle. Yet, by the grace of God, they could be transformed. Pursuing holiness takes thought, painstaking sacrifice, and the formation of new behaviors.

1. Defining holiness. Before we can pursue holiness, we must first know what it is. Holiness is not self-righteousness. Holiness is a characteristic of God. He is separate from everything earthly and human. He is morally and ethically pure. Therefore, being holy relates to becoming like God. But in what ways can we become like God?

We cannot become God. We are human. We cannot attain His power. We will never become His equal. However, we can aspire to His moral and ethical nature. In fact, we must. If we do not, we will never be welcomed into His presence. By pursuing holiness in our lives, we become set apart in the world from those who are not seeking holiness. Once we are devoted to God, we can begin to serve His purposes.

2. Holiness and the Gospel. How do we become set apart in the world to serve the purposes of God? We must obey God’s commands of consecration. For example, the priests of Israel had to follow commands of ordination before they could minister to the spiritual needs of the people. Likewise, we must obey divine commands of consecration to become holy. We must obey the Gospel.

The Gospel is how God helps us to become holy. The Gospel cleanses and purifies our hearts and minds. The Gospel remits our sins. The Gospel enables us to serve the purposes of God in the world. Peter wrote, “But you are a chosen race, a royal priesthood, a holy nation, a people for his own possession, that you may proclaim the excellency of him who called you out of darkness into his marvelous light” (2 Pet. 2:9).

3. Holiness requires the mind. The Gospel renews our minds and properly trains our conscience. Paul frequently wrote about the importance of our minds. He told the saints at Rome to be transformed by the renewal of their minds (Rom. 12:1-2). He told the saints at Ephesus to be renewed in the spirit of their minds (Eph. 4:23).

Unless and until our minds are renewed by the Gospel, our attitudes and behaviors will not be transformed. We will never become holy. We must fill our minds with the word of God to make changes in our lives.

4. Holiness demands the surgical removal of sin. Pursuing holiness is not an abstract process. It is a focused procedure. For example, if we are sick or in pain, we will go to the doctor. We expect the doctor to give a diagnosis and provide a treatment plan to make us well. Similarly, we must appeal to the Great Physician to diagnose specific sins (Mark 2:17).

When we are convicted of sin, we must take responsibility. We must confess our sins to God. John wrote, “If we say we have no sin, we deceive ourselves, and the truth is not in us. If we confess our sins, he is faithful and just to forgive us our sins and to cleanse us from all unrighteousness” (1 John 1:8-9).

Dealing with our sin is arguably the most difficult part of pursuing holiness. This requires that we look honestly into our hearts. Paul commanded to, “Put to death therefore what is earthly in you” (Col. 3:5a). Then, he named sins which are often present in our lives: “sexual immorality, impurity, passion, evil desire, and covetousness, which is idolatry” (Col. 3:5b).

Sin estranges us from a relationship with God and discredits us from serving the purposes to which we were once consecrated. Therefore, sin must be surgically removed from our lives. We cannot think of sin in general terms. We must specifically identify the attitudes and or behaviors that are obstructing us from a holy life. We must kill, mortify, and put to death that sin.

5. Adopt the characteristics of true holiness. Sin obstructs the pursuit of holiness. Once sin is identified and removed through repentance, we can begin to adopt the true characteristics of holiness. These traits are most clearly observed in Christ. The nature of God is shown through Christ. Paul puts this together in Ephesians:

Assuming that you have heard about him and were taught in him, as the truth is in Jesus, to put off your old self, which belongs to your former manner of life and is corrupt through deceitful desires, and to be renewed in the spirit of your minds, and to put on the new self, created after the likeness of God in true righteousness and holiness (Eph. 4:21-24).

Conclusion

As Paul explained to the saints at Corinth, God has promised to be our Father. We can become part of His family; however, we must make a choice. We must decide to obey Him. We must pursue holiness.

When we obey the Gospel, our pursuit of holiness does not end. Rather, the pursuit begins. Paul says we are to perfect holiness in the fear of God. This means we are to improve our character. We do this by daily renewing our minds, surgically removing our sin, and adopting the character of Christ as our own.