

“The Pursuit of Holiness” (An Exposition of Hebrews 12:14)¹

For many people New Year's day presents a fresh start, an opportunity to make resolutions to change things in their lives, for self-improvement. And there is nothing wrong with that. For the believer in Christ, *every day* is another opportunity for repentance from sin. You may know that the very first of Martin Luther's *95 Theses* was that the whole life of the Christian was to be a life of repentance.

Well, in the spirit of Martin Luther's point that all of the Christian life is to be one of repentance, I would like us to focus our attention primarily on one thing this morning – *holiness*.

The subject of holiness has fallen on hard times in our day. When was the last time that you thought about holiness? Or heard a sermon on the subject? Or read a book about it? Frankly, if you were to go to a Christian bookstore, you would almost certainly find shelf after shelf of books on any number of subjects, including such things as finances, politics, psychology, raising children, successful living, and even Christian health or diet books (!). On top of it all, you will surely find *all kinds* of Christian fiction. *But books about holiness?* (The old saying about *finding a needle in a haystack* comes to mind.)

Even more troubling than the lack of *books* on holiness (or the *demand* for such books) is the lack of holiness that is evident in the lives of many of those who profess to know the Lord Jesus Christ. Why is that? Is the Bible somehow unclear about the holiness of God, or about his repeated commands that his redeemed people are to be holy? If repetition is for the sake of emphasis, then the Bible is loud and clear about the necessity of holiness. In his terrific book, *The Hole In Our Holiness*, Kevin DeYoung writes,

“There’s no question holiness is one of the central themes in the Bible. The word “holy” occurs more than 600 times in the Bible, more than 700 when you include derivative words like holiness, sanctify, and sanctification. You can’t make sense of the Bible without understanding that God is holy and that this holy God is intent on making a holy people to live with him forever in a holy heaven” (p.31).

So if you are a believer in Christ, and yet are neglecting holiness in the lifelong pursuit of following the Lord Jesus Christ, it is not for lack of instruction or emphasis in Scripture. The Bible makes it abundantly clear that *holiness is not an optional extra or add-on to the Christian life*. If anything, it is *the distinguishing mark of every true believer*. Quoting Leviticus 11:44, the Apostle Peter writes,

“As obedient children, do not be conformed to the passions of your former ignorance, but as he who called you is holy, you also be holy in all your conduct, *since it is written*, “You shall be holy, for I am holy.”” (1 Peter 1:14-16)

An unholy Christian is really a contradiction in terms. If you are a believer in Christ, you must make holiness your lifelong aim. Seek after holiness, even more than success or happiness. In many ways holiness is the measure of true success for a believer. *And no true Christian can be happy apart from sharing in the holiness of their heavenly Father*. As our text in Hebrews 12:14 tells us, **“without holiness no one will see the Lord”** (NIV).

¹ All Scripture quotations are from the English Standard Version (ESV) unless otherwise noted.

In his wonderful book entitled *Holiness*, J.C. Ryle writes the following about our sermon text:

“It suggests a question which demands the attention of all professing Christians: are we holy? Shall we see the Lord?” (p.33)

If you read this passage of Scripture without asking these things, you are doing yourself a great disservice. Ryle is right – our text suggests just such questions, and demands our attention and answer to them. In 2 Corinthians 13:5 the Apostle Paul himself presses just such a question upon us:

“Examine yourselves, to see whether you are in the faith. Test yourselves. Or do you not realize this about yourselves, that Jesus Christ is in you?—unless indeed you fail to meet the test!”

There can truthfully be no more important questions for us to have settled in our own hearts than these, and so I trust that if you are a believer in Christ, our time spent in this passage of God's holy Word will prove to be an encouragement to you in the end. And if the Spirit of Holiness within you uses it to move you to fresh repentance, all the better. If so, *it will do you no harm, but rather much good!*

And if you are not yet a believer in Christ, my prayer is that this Word of the Lord will serve as a wake-up call, even like a fire alarm in a burning building, so that the Spirit of God might awaken you to the true condition of your soul, and the danger that you are in if you remain in your sins. If this text makes you quite uncomfortable, but in the end leads you to repentance and faith in Christ, *it will have done you no harm, but rather much good!*

We do not have time to exhaust the subject of holiness this morning, or to deal with it comprehensively, but we will examine at least three (3) things about it together: **1.)** The *Necessity* of Holiness, **2.)** the *Way* of Holiness, and **3.)** the *Goal* of Holiness.

The Necessity of Holiness

The *first* thing that this text impresses upon us is *the necessity of holiness*. Note that the writer of the book of Hebrews here tells us that we are to “**strive for**” (ESV) or “**pursue**” (NKJV) holiness. If that is the case, then holiness is clearly *not* our natural condition. In other words, on our own none of us are holy. Not one. Not you, and not me. Ever since the Fall of mankind in Adam's fall into sin in the garden of Eden back in Genesis chapter 3, all of mankind has been by nature in a state or condition of sin and misery.

In Ephesians 2:1 the Apostle Paul describes it as being “**dead**” in our trespasses and sins. Outside of Christ, left to ourselves we are all – each and every one of us – dead in sin, and positively *un-holy*. Romans 3:1 puts it this way - “**None is righteous, no, not one.**” And so if you are yet outside of Christ, there is no striving after holiness possible for you until you repent from your sin and turn to Christ by faith.

Outside of Christ you have no true holiness or righteousness with which to stand before an infinitely holy God. And make no mistake – do not deceive yourself – our text makes it abundantly clear that “**without holiness, no one will see the Lord**” (NIV). No one. Do you feel the weight of your debt of sin? Then turn to Christ by faith – come to Him and you will find forgiveness and life!

The Way of Holiness

The *second* thing that our text would press upon us is *the way of holiness*. If you are already a believer in Christ by God's grace, this verse should teach you that holiness in the life of a Christian doesn't just happen; it is not automatic. Again we are told to **“strive for”** or **“pursue”** (NKJV) it. In other words, it requires *effort* on our part.

The Greek word there is **διωκω**, which can also mean to “chase” or even to “persecute.” It is the same word that Paul uses in Galatians 1:13 when he speaks of his former life outside of Christ:

“For you have heard of my former life in Judaism, how I persecuted the church of God violently and tried to destroy it.”

We are to chase after holiness, or pursue it. It is as if holiness were the lead car or the lead horse in a race. It is ever before us, for us to strive after as our goal. It is the same language that is used by the writer of Hebrews earlier in this very same chapter where in Hebrews 12:1-2 he writes,

“Therefore, since we are surrounded by so great a cloud of witnesses, let us also lay aside every weight, and sin which clings so closely, and let us run with endurance the race that is set before us, looking to Jesus, the founder and perfecter of our faith, who for the joy that was set before him endured the cross, despising the shame, and is seated at the right hand of the throne of God.”

And we should be clear on one thing – the holiness spoken of here in our text is *not* the holiness of *justification*, which is (as the *Shorter Catechism* puts it) “an act of God's free grace, wherein He pardons all our sins, and accepts us as righteous in His sight, only for the righteousness of Christ imputed to us, and received by faith alone” (Q.33).

A.W. Pink writes,

“The “holiness” referred to in our text is *not* imputed holiness, for we cannot be exhorted to “follow after” that! No, it is personal and practical holiness, which is not attained by standing still, but by an earnest, diligent, persistent pursuit after the same.”²

Pink is right. We cannot be exhorted to **“strive for”** the imputed righteousness of justification. If you are a believer in Christ, you have been justified completely and “perfectly in this life.”³ There is no improving upon it. It is a one-time **“act** of God's free grace.”

No, the **“holiness”** spoken of in our text is that of *sanctification*, which, in contrast to justification, is “the *work* of God's free grace, whereby we are renewed in the whole man after the image of God, and are enabled more and more to die unto sin, and live unto righteousness.”⁴ It is by the free grace of God. It is every bit a part of the salvation that God gives to us in Christ. And it is the *ongoing* work of God in our lives by His Holy Spirit, in which He *enables* us to repent of our sins and walk according to His will more and more. It is something we can and should grow in. *Brothers and sisters in Christ, make growth in holiness your aim in 2017. Make that your resolution – resolve to grow in holiness!*

² *Exposition of Hebrews*, p.1000

³ *Westminster Larger Catechism* Q.77

⁴ *Westminster Shorter Catechism* Q.35

The Goal of Holiness

The *third* and *last* thing that our text places before us is *the goal of holiness*. Now here it is easy to get tripped up, and to go astray in our understanding of what the Scriptures are saying. Look again at Hebrews 12:14, which says:

“Strive for peace with everyone, and for the holiness without which no one will see the Lord.”

Now that is certainly to be taken as a *warning*, isn't it? The Scriptures are chock full of such warnings, and God gives them to us for our good, so we should be careful to pay attention to them. If you profess to be a believer in Christ, but your life is marked by a consistent pattern and trajectory of ungodliness and sin, then you have good reason to question the genuineness of your faith. In 1 Corinthians 6:9-11 Paul writes,

“Or do you not know that the unrighteous will not inherit the kingdom of God? Do not be deceived: neither the sexually immoral, nor idolaters, nor adulterers, nor men who practice homosexuality, nor thieves, nor the greedy, nor drunkards, nor revilers, nor swindlers will inherit the kingdom of God. And such were some of you. But you were washed, you were sanctified, you were justified in the name of the Lord Jesus Christ and by the Spirit of our God.”

Struggling with sin is one thing – all true Christians do that! But living in sin, and being at home in it is quite another matter! Make no mistake - without holiness, you will *not* see the Lord.

But, taken positively, our text really does present us with the *goal* of the life of holiness for the believer – *seeing the Lord!* Listen to the words of 1 John 3:1-3, which says,

“See what kind of love the Father has given to us, that we should be called children of God; and so we are. The reason why the world does not know us is that it did not know him. Beloved, we are God's children now, and what we will be has not yet appeared; *but we know that when he appears we shall be like him, because we shall see him as he is. And everyone who thus hopes in him purifies himself as he is pure.*”

Holiness is essentially a matter of *family likeness*. To be holy is to reflect in some small way the image of our heavenly Father, and of Christ our Lord as well. When Jesus appears at His return, **“we shall see him as he is,”** and so we shall be made like him! And what does John add there at the end? That **“everyone who thus hopes in him purifies himself as he is pure.”** Everyone who has this hope in Christ – the hope of glory, the hope of being conformed to the image of Christ, **“purifies himself”** even as Jesus is pure! If that is your hope, you will not be content to wait for the beginnings of it!

This is not *legalism*; it is not *salvation by works*, much less earning heaven by means of holiness – this is *anticipation*! This is faith and hope in Christ in action! This is love for Christ shed abroad in our hearts by the gospel! As Jesus says in the Beatitudes in Matthew 5:8, **“Blessed are the pure in heart, for they shall see God.”**

May the blessed hope of seeing the Lord spur us on in our pursuit of holiness. And may the hope of *being like Jesus when we see Him as He is* lead us to purify ourselves even as He is pure, as we await His return in glory. - Amen