

INTRODUCTION

In Hebrews 12:14, the writer of Hebrews gives this sobering exhortation: “Pursue peace with all men, and the sanctification without which no one will see the Lord.”

Sanctification or “holiness,” as the ESV and AV uses is a pursuit of every believer.

At salvation, he is made holy through the sacrificial work of Christ on the cross, but through his new life he is to pursue that for which he has become.

The writer says he is to “pursue” not only peace (this refers to peace with all men) but also “the sanctification” or “holiness.”

Pursuing sanctification or holiness suggests two thoughts:

First, that diligence and effort are required; and second, that it is a lifelong task.

Think for a moment of this involving “diligence and effort.”

Some think that being holy or pursuing sanctification doesn't involve them--it's all God's responsibility.

It is true no one can attain any degree of holiness without God working in his life, but just as surely no one will attain it without effort on his own part.

God has made it possible for us to walk in holiness. But He has given to us the responsibility of doing the walking; He does not do that for us.¹

¹ Jerry Bridges, *The Pursuit of Holiness* (Colorado Springs: Navpress, 1978). 9.

Jerry Bridges is correct when he says, “We Christians greatly enjoy talking about the provision of God, how Christ defeated sin on the cross and gave us His Holy Spirit to empower us to victory over sin. But we do not as readily talk about our own responsibility to walk in holiness.”²

Yet Scripture is filled with such exhortations.

For example, Matthew 5:8 says, “Blessed are the pure in heart, for they shall see God.”

2 Corinthians 7:1 says, “Therefore, having these promises, beloved, let us cleanse ourselves from all defilement of flesh and spirit, perfecting holiness in the fear of God.”

1 Thessalonians 4:3 is even more specific than the previous two when it says, “For this is the

² Jerry Bridges, *The Pursuit of Holiness* (Colorado Springs: Navpress, 1978). 9.

will of God, your sanctification; that is, that you abstain from sexual immorality.”

Being pure in heart, cleansing ourselves from all defilement of flesh and spirit, and abstaining from sexual immorality is our responsibility.

God has given us the power over sin through the indwelling Holy Spirit and our responsibility is to “walk in the Spirit” (Gal.5:16), to be “filled with the Spirit” (Eph.5:18).

Pursuing holiness, as John MacArthur states is, “submitting to the Lord’s commands, doing His will, based on what is so clearly revealed in Scripture.”³

In other words, it is “obedience.”

³ John MacArthur, *The Pillars of Christian Character* (Wheaton, Illinois: Crossway Books, 1998). 21.

Why don't Christians talk about their responsibility to walk in holiness?

There are two primary reasons:

One, they are simply reluctant to face up to their responsibility, and two, they do not understand the proper distinction between God's provision and their own responsibility for holiness.

As Hebrews 12:14 states this is a pursuit.

It involves effort on our part that will go on until we see Jesus.

So then we need to learn how to "cultivate" holiness in our lives.

It a practical word, it involves killing sin in our lives.

It's more than just saying "No" to sin, it's being schooled in righteousness.

Titus 2:11-12 says, "For the grace of God has appeared, bringing salvation to all men, instructing us to deny ungodliness and worldly desires and to live sensibly, righteously and godly in the present age."

What does Paul refer to as the teacher of denying ungodliness and worldly desires?

What teaches us to live sensibly, righteously and godly in the present age?

It's the incarnation of the grace of God.

Who is the manifestation of God's grace? Jesus Christ.

He clearly taught by His words and example of what it meant to deny ungodliness and worldly desires and to live sensibly, righteously and godly.

Hebrews 4:15 says, “For we do not have a high priest who cannot sympathize with our weaknesses, but One who has been tempted in all things as we are, yet without sin.”

1 Peter 2:21-23 says, “For you have been called for this purpose, since Christ also suffered for you, leaving you an example for you to follow in His steps, who committed no sin, nor was any deceit found in His mouth; and while being reviled, He did not revile in return; while suffering, He uttered no threats, but kept entrusting Himself to Him who judges righteously.”

In Hebrews 12:14, the writer of Hebrews uses the word “sanctification” or “holiness” (hagiasmos) [to express] an action... [and it is used] as always proceeding from a holy person, and thus in the case of self-sanctification (as here) always presupposing the holiness that is obtained by Christ’s reconciliation in justification.

[In other words], the word denotes a process by which we become separated unto God in our entire life and conduct. ⁴

Think of a farmer.

A farmer plows his field, sows the seed, and fertilizes and cultivates—all the while knowing that in the final analysis he is utterly dependent on forces outside of himself.

⁴ R. C. H. Lenski, *The Interpretation of the Epistle to the Hebrews and of the Epistle of James* (Columbus, O.: Lutheran book concern, 1938). 443.

He knows he cannot cause the seed to germinate, nor can he produce the rain and sunshine for growing and harvesting the crop. For a successful harvest, he is dependent on these things from God.

Yet the farmer knows that unless he diligently pursues his responsibilities to plow, plant, fertilize, and cultivate, he cannot expect a harvest at the end of the season.⁵

You are the farmer.

Yes you depend on God to provide the harvest but you plow the field, sow the seed, fertilize and cultivate.

That's what I want us to talk about in the next few weeks---how to pursue holiness in our lives.

⁵ Jerry Bridges, *The Pursuit of Holiness* (Colorado Springs: Navpress, 1978). 9.

I don't want to use big words but to speak as practically as possible.

So when we have our discussion time at the end of the service, I want you to think practically as well.

Don't hide behind fancy words.

Talk specifically about holiness in your life as a pursuit.

Before we go any further, let's take our remaining time to define the word "holy" and the problems we face.

In seeking an adequate definition, R.C. Sproul, reveals that "the difficulties involved in defining holiness are vast [because] in the Bible the word holy is used in more than one way."⁶

⁶ R. C. Sproul, *The Holiness of God* (Wheaton, Ill.: Tyndale House Publishers, 1996).

As we will see in this study, the idea of being holy is to be morally blameless.¹

It is to be separated from sin and, therefore, consecrated to God.

The word signifies “separation to God, and the conduct befitting those so separated.”²⁷

That means holiness affects our attitude in all areas of our lives.

It addresses our speech, thought life, as well as our actions.

You may have a good day go bad.

¹ *Strong's Exhaustive Concordance of the Bible* (New York: Abingdon Press, 1890), p. 7 of the “Greek Dictionary of the New Testament.”

² W. E. Vine, *An Expository Dictionary of New Testament Words* (1940; single volume edition, London: Oliphants, Ltd., 1957), pp. 225-226.

⁷ Jerry Bridges, *The Pursuit of Holiness* (Colorado Springs: Navpress, 1978). 16.

That doesn't mean you stop pursuing holiness.

It means you need it all the more and now you're faced with living out who you are in Christ!

Jerry Bridges, in his book, "The Pursuit of Holiness" shares one of those experiences from his own life that I would like to share with you. I think this is a good example of some of the same kind of things you and I experience in our own lives.

He says, "The shrill ring of the telephone shattered the stillness of the beautiful, crisp Colorado morning. On the other end was one of those utterly impossible individuals God seems to have sprinkled around here on earth to test the grace and patience of His children.

He was in top form that morning—arrogant, impatient, demanding. I hung up the phone

seething inside with anger, resentment, and perhaps even hatred. Grabbing my jacket, I walked out into the cold air to try to regain my composure. The quietness of my soul, so carefully cultivated in my “quiet time” with God that morning, had been ripped into shreds and replaced with a volatile, steaming emotional volcano.

As my emotions subsided, my anger turned to utter discouragement. It was only 8:30 in the morning and my day was ruined. Not only was I discouraged, I was confused. Only two hours before, I had read Paul’s emphatic declaration, “For sin shall not be your master, because you are not under law, but under grace.” But despite this nice-sounding promise of victory over sin, there I was locked in the vise-like grip of anger and resentment.

“Does the Bible really have any answers for real life?” I asked myself that morning. With all my heart I desired to live an obedient, holy life; yet there I was utterly defeated by one phone call.

Perhaps this incident has a familiar ring to you. The circumstances probably differed, but your reaction was similar. Perhaps your problem was anger with your children, or a temper at work, or an immoral habit you can't overcome, or maybe several “besetting sins” that dog you day in and day out.

Whatever your particular sin problem (or problems), the Bible does have the answer for you. There is hope. You and I can walk in obedience to God's Word and live a life of holiness.”⁸

⁸ Jerry Bridges, *The Pursuit of Holiness* (Colorado Springs: Navpress, 1978). 14-15.

But in order for that to happen, we need to identify 3 basic problems:

The first problem is:

Our Attitude Toward Sin is More Self-Centered Than God-Centered

We are more concerned about our own “victory” over sin than we are about the fact that our sins grieve the heart of God.

When David finally came to the place of confessing his sin of adultery with Bethsheba and murdering her husband Uriah, he said in Psalm 51:4, “Against You, You only, I have sinned And done what is evil in Your sight...”

His eyes were now off himself and he finally saw that his sin grieved God.

W.S. Plumer said, “We never see sin aright until we see it as against God....All sin is against God in this sense: that it is His law that is broken, His authority that is despised, His government that is set at naught....Pharaoh and Balaam, Saul and Judas each said, ‘I have sinned’; but the returning prodigal said, ‘I have sinned against heaven and before thee’; and David said, ‘Against Thee, Thee only have I sinned.’”³

The second problem is:

We Have Misunderstood “Living By Faith” (Galatians 2:20) to Mean No Effort at Holiness is Required On Our Part

Some have even suggested that any effort on our part is “of the flesh” but that can be no further from the truth.

³ William S. Plumer, *Psalms* (1867; reprint edition, Edinburgh: The Banner of Truth Trust, 1975), p. 557.

If you look at Ephesians 4-6, you clearly learn that this is a practical response to the first three chapters Paul has just given on the believer's identity in Christ.

When we received Christ as Savior we became citizens of His kingdom and members of His family. Along with those blessings and privileges we also received obligations. The Lord expects us to act like the new persons we have become in Jesus Christ.

He expects His standards to become our standards, His purposes our purposes, His desires our desires, His nature our nature. The Christian life is simply the process of becoming what you are.⁹

When we are told to “walk in a manner worthy of the calling with which you have been

⁹ John MacArthur, *Ephesians* (Chicago: Moody Press, 1996). Eph 4:1.

called” (Eph.4:1), that is a call to action and responsibility.

That is seen in the next verse when he shows the Ephesians how they are to walk.

He says, “with all humility and gentleness, with patience, showing tolerance for one another in love, being diligent to preserve the unity of the Spirit in the bond of peace” (vv.2-3).

We must face the fact that we have a personal responsibility for our walk of holiness.

The third problem is:

We Do Not Take Some Sin Seriously

We have mentally categorized sins into that which is unacceptable and that which may be tolerated a bit.

In commenting on some of the more minute Old Testament dietary laws God gave to the children of Israel, Andrew Bonar said, “It is not the importance of the thing, but the majesty of the Lawgiver, that is to be the standard of obedience....Some, indeed, might reckon such minute and arbitrary rules as these as trifling. But the principle involved in obedience or disobedience was none other than the same principle which was tried in Eden at the foot of the forbidden tree. It is really this: Is the Lord to be obeyed in all things whatsoever He commands? Is He a holy Lawgiver? Are His creatures bound to give implicit assent to His will?”⁵

Are we willing to call sin “sin” not because it is big or little, but because God’s law forbids it?

⁵ Andrew Bonar, *A Commentary on Leviticus* (1846; reprint edition, Edinburgh: The Banner of Truth Trust, 1972), p. 218.

We cannot categorize sin if we are to live a life of holiness. God will not let us get away with that kind of attitude.¹⁰

CONCLUSION

As you think about your responsibility towards sin and your pursuit of being holy, do you see yourself in any of these problems we just mentioned?

Is your attitude toward sin more self-centered or is it God-centered?

What about your effort at killing sin?

Does living by faith involve no effort at holiness on your part?

¹⁰ Jerry Bridges, *The Pursuit of Holiness* (Colorado Springs: Navpress, 1978). 19.

And last, do you take all sin seriously?

Not just some but all?

Song of Solomon 2:15 (KJV) says it is “the little foxes that spoil the vines.”

It is compromise on the little issues that leads to greater downfalls. ¹¹

Before you can pursue holiness in your life, you have to be made holy and that is only possible by surrendering your life to Jesus Christ.

When you repent of your sin and turn to Him, He forgives you and gives you His Spirit. It is at that point you're made positionally holy before God.

¹¹ Jerry Bridges, *The Pursuit of Holiness* (Colorado Springs: Navpress, 1978). 19.

If you haven't repented and embraced Jesus Christ as Lord and Savior, I beg you to do so right now as we pray.

Let's pray.

LIFE APPLICATION

What did you think when Pastor Steve said our pursuit of holiness is a joint venture with God?

Have you ever seen yourself as not responsible for your holiness? If no, why?

What are you doing to pursue holiness in your life?

What kind of response did you have the last time someone was arrogant, impatient, and demanding toward you?

Have you had your “quiet time” interrupted by an argument with your spouse or kids? If yes, what did you do afterwards?

Do you see your attitude toward sin as being self-centered or God-centered?

Do you feel there are some sins you don't take as seriously as others? If yes, what can you do to change your attitude toward this?