

HASTENING AFTER HOLINESS

Way back in January, I started a series based on I Peter 1:16 entitled “Be ye holy, for I am Holy.” What is holiness? It is a separation from sin—and a separation unto God. We spent a considerable amount of time looking at the “separation-from-sin” side, particularly the sin of *pride* in the church.

--We can have the *wrong motive* for serving God within the church; namely, the praise of men!

--We can see pride in our life when we *become angry* for someone pointing out sin.

--And we can see know there is pride in our life because it *leads to prayerlessness*—we don’t ask God for *wisdom or spiritual* strength because we feel we have enough of our own and we don’t ask God *for mercy* because we don’t think we need forgiveness!

--We then looked at some *examples* of God’s holiness—and hatred for sin—by examining the sin of Moses striking the rock and Uzzah being struck dead by God for touching the ark of the covenant.

As stated earlier, though, holiness is not *just a separation from sin*—it is also a separation unto God! Not too long ago, we noted the high *cost of discipleship* that Jesus demands from His followers. He wants us to love Him more than our *families, our possessions*, and even our *own lives*. That is why we are to present our bodies *as a living sacrifice*, holy and acceptable unto God.

Last week we noted that those of us who have the *confident expectation* that Jesus will return—and will make us like Him when He *does return*—are *purifying* themselves. “Purifying” is not just about the *outer* man, though, it is also about the *inner* man. It is not just about *actions*; it is also about attitudes. It is not just about *the hands*; it is also about the heart.

How do we purify ourselves? In one sense *we can’t*! “Proverbs 20:9 “Who can say, I have made my heart clean, I am pure from my sin?” Rhetorical question, right? **NO ONE** can make their own heart clean! But the apostle John did write to us as believers about some things we *need to do* in order to purify ourselves.

First and foremost, we need a new heart—and that comes with being born again. Our sin nature can only produce sin! We *need God the Holy Spirit to reside in us* and produce the fruit of the Spirit. That is something we cannot do, but God can do that—and will do that—if we come to Him in repentance and faith.

But there are also things God wants us to do after we are His child. God through John reminded us that we are to **forsake sin...and obey God’s commandments...and come to Christ for daily cleansing!** 1 John 1:9 “If we confess our sins, He is faithful and just to forgive us our sins, and to cleanse us from all unrighteousness.” 1 John 1:7b “...and the blood of Jesus Christ His Son cleanseth us from all sin.”

This morning I want to look at another reason that God gives us to be holy and it is this: *holiness in us helps us—and others—see God*. Please take your Bibles and turn to Hebrews 12 and follow along as I read verses 12-17 (read). You probably already guessed that we will be focusing on vs 14—“Follow peace with all men, and holiness, without which no man shall see the Lord.”

Let’s notice first... **1. The command to pursue holiness**

Vs 14 “Follow peace with all men, and holiness...”

A. What it means to “follow”

“Follow” is translated from the Greek word “dee-o’-ko” and is used 45 times in the Greek NT. We know from the verse itself that it means more than just “following behind” someone or something. I’m sure once-upon-a-time some *spiritually minded farmer* named one of his oxen (or horses) “Peace”—and the other “Holiness”—so he could *follow* “Peace” and “Holiness” when he was plowing his field!

It means more than that, though, right? Here it means “to seek after eagerly; earnestly endeavor to acquire.” A one-word definition might be “pursue.” Here are a few examples where the same word is used: **1 Thess 5:15** “See that none render evil for evil unto any man; but ever **follow** that which is good, both among yourselves, and to all men.”

I Tim 6:11 “But thou, O man of God, flee these things; and **follow after** righteousness, godliness, faith, love, patience, meekness.”

II Tim 2:22 “Flee also youthful lusts: but **follow** righteousness, faith, charity, peace, with them that call on the Lord out of a pure heart.”

Pretty easy to see from all these verses—and vs 14 here in our text—that to “follow” means “to pursue after, to desire to acquire.”

It is also important to realize that “follow” is in the form of a **command**. It is **not optional**; it is **not being suggested** as a good idea. And let’s not forget that **God is doing** the commanding—not John! **God commands** us to pursue peace with all men—and holiness!

How **serious** are you **about obeying** what God says? I fear too often times we treat the commandments of God like we treat the laws of the government. We want to **fight against** and **resist** a tyrannical **government**—as we should! Why? Because Acts 5:29 says, “We ought to obey God rather than men.”

So if the **government** asks us to disobey God, we should disobey the government—not God! But I’m afraid that the “no one is going to tell me what to do” **attitude** that is so prominent in God-**haters** creeps into the thinking of God’s **children**!

--We will obey God’s commandments—**after we evaluate** whether or not they make **sense to us**.

--We will obey God’s commandments—if they are **not too costly or too inconvenient**.

--We will obey God’s commandments—if we see **the benefit**!

What an attitude! Do we really understand **who God is** if we operate under that kind of thinking?

I say, “NO!”

Ecclesiastes 12:13-14 “Let us hear the conclusion of the whole matter: Fear God, and keep His commandments: for this is the whole duty of man. ¹⁴For God shall bring every work into judgment, with every secret thing, whether it be good, or whether it be evil.”

When we started this series back in January, I said that I’m of the opinion that there is “no fear of God” in the eyes of the “man **on the street**” because there is no fear of God in **the people of the church**!

Again, I ask—how serious are you about **obeying** what God says? Our motivation is not to be **primarily fear**, though. According to Jesus, it should be **love for Him**! John 14:15 “If ye love me, keep my commandments.”

Two more things before we move on.

1) The command is in the **present tense**—meaning it is something we are to be **continually doing**. In other words, don’t just pursue holiness **once, then quit**. We are to be constantly doing it.

2) The command is in the **active voice**—meaning it involves **action on our part**. It is something **we do**—not something that is **done to us**.

Next... B. What is meant by holiness

We’ll look at pursuing “**peace** with all men” another time; for now, we are focusing on pursuing **holiness**. If we are going to pursue holiness, we obviously need to know what it **means**.

How have we **been defining** holiness? Separation from sin—and separation unto God!

What does holiness mean **here**? Basically, **the same thing**! It is “the process of making or becoming holy, being set apart, being consecrated.” To pursue holiness is to pursue **sanctification**—to pursue becoming more and more like Christ! In fact, the Greek word it comes from is sometimes translated “sanctification.”

I Thess 4:3 “For this is the will of God, even your **sanctification**, that ye should abstain from fornication:”

God’s will for us is that we be sanctified—that we be holy—that we be separated from sin and unto Him! One more verse. **Romans 6:22** “But now being made free from sin, and become servants to God, ye have your fruit unto **holiness**, and the end everlasting life.”

Is the fruit in your life holiness?

Stated another way, are we **known** for being holy? That’s God’s will...that’s His desire...that is what we are to pursue after. It is a command that we are to be actively and constantly striving to obey. Are you obeying it?

What happens if **we don't**? What are the consequences of our disobedience? The end of the verse says, "without which no man shall see the Lord." Does that mean that if you don't strive to be sin-free...and to be consecrated unto God...that you won't **see God**—meaning you won't get into heaven?

We know from numerous other passages that that is not what is meant. So what does it mean that we need to pursue holiness "without which no man shall see the Lord?"

The confusion is cleared up, I believe, when we look at **who** the command is **to**. Let's consider next, then...

2. Those who are commanded to pursue holiness

Who is God—through the writer of Hebrews—**commanding** to eagerly pursue and seek after holiness?

Believers—those who are already children of God! How do **we know** that?

Because he starts the chapter by **addressing believers** and he does not change who he is writing to before vs 14!

Vs 1 "Wherefore seeing **we** also are compassed about with so great a cloud of witnesses..."

Who is the "we"? The writer—and those he was writing to!

What does "compassed"—surrounded—by a cloud of witnesses mean? Some suggest that "a great cloud of witnesses" refers to people in heaven—"in the clouds"—who are watching us and cheering us on.

Here are two reasons that I believe that is **not what** is meant.

1) The meaning of the word "cloud." The English word "cloud" is found in our KJV Bibles 26 times. 25 of the 26 times it refers to a **literal** cloud and is translated from the Greek word "nef-el'-ay." The only time "cloud" does not come from "nef-el'-ay" is here in Hebrews 12:1! That, in my mind, is a pretty strong argument that this is **not** referring to a literal cloud or heaven!

Most commentators feel **cloud** is being used symbolically to mean "a great host of people" (Allen, 572).

2) A second reason I don't believe this means that the witnesses are **watching us** is because that **is not** what is being emphasized. **David Allen** in his commentary on Hebrews puts it like this: "The author's focus is on the importance of **current believers** learning from those who have **gone before us**, not on those who have gone before watching current believers" (572).

It is as if the writer is saying, 'Since we have this great host of examples that have lived by faith, "let us" run our race with the same faith and perseverance.' Enough on that, let's look at the other ref to believers:

Vs 1 says "run the race;" vs 2 says "looking unto Jesus." Both refer to believers.

Vs 7 "If ye endure chastening, God dealeth with you as with sons..." Only believers can be "sons."

Vs 9 "...shall **we** [you and me] not much rather be in subjection unto the Father of spirits, and live?"

The Father of spirits, of course, is God. This is again a reference to them being believers.

Vs 10 makes a similar statement, but the argument isn't quite as strong because the "our" and "we" are in italics—meaning they were supplied by the translators.

Vs 12 "Wherefore"—based on all these things I just wrote to you—you need to "lift up the hands which hang down, and the feeble knees; and vs 13 "make straight paths for **your** feet..."

The point I'm trying to make is this: the people who are commanded to pursue holiness are believers! The writer starts off addressing them in vs 1 and doesn't change who he is writing to before vs 14!

We have the command to pursue holiness—and those to whom the command is intended—us as believers!

Lastly, let's consider... **3. The consequences for failing to pursue holiness**

So what happens if we fail to obey this command? Does it mean that if a believer fails to pursue holiness, that they will not see the Lord—meaning they will not be allowed into heaven? No; it doesn't mean that. How do we know? Because both getting saved—and staying saved—is **God's doing**, not ours!

Who saves us from the penalty of our sins in the **first** place? **God does!** **Titus 3:5** "Not by works of righteousness which we have done, but according to His mercy He saved us..." He saved us—we did not save ourselves!

Who keeps us saved? **God does!** **Phil 1:6** "Being confident of this very thing, that He which hath begun a good work in you will perform it until the day of Jesus Christ:"

God began the good work in us—and will continue to perform that good work until we meet Christ and are made like Him!

So if the consequences for failing to obey the command to pursue holiness is **not** loss of salvation, what **are** the consequences? What does it mean “without which no man shall see the Lord”? In my opinion, two things:

A. Limits our sense of “closeness” to God

Here’s what I mean. There is a difference between a **relationship** and **closeness within** that relationship. I have 5 children—and my relationship with all of them in **one sense** is the same—I am **their father**. However, the **closeness** in those relationships vary from one child to the next. Simply put, I have a closer relationship with some of my children—and grandchildren, for that matter—than with the others.

The same is true in our relationship with God. Our **relationship** with God—being His child—is dependent on God. It is what **Jesus did** that allows that Father-child relationship to take place.

Ephesians 2:13 “But now in Christ Jesus ye who sometimes were far off are made nigh by the **blood of Christ.**”

Hebrews 10:19 “Having therefore, brethren, boldness to enter into the holiest by the **blood of Jesus,**”

Our relationship, then, is dependent on Christ shedding His blood for the penalty of our sins—**period!** But does **every** child of God have the same **closeness with** God? They don’t do, they? Although the relationship is the same—that of Father-child—the closeness...the **fellowship**...is different. Y? Because **of sin!**

Just as sin hinders closeness in a **human** relationship, it will certainly hinder our **fellowship with God!** **Isaiah 57:15** “For thus saith the high and lofty One that inhabiteth eternity, whose name is Holy; **I dwell** in the high and holy place, **with him also that is of a contrite and humble spirit...**” **God is close** to the humble!

Isaiah 59:2 “But your **iniquities have separated between you and your God,** and your sins have hid His face from you, that He will not hear.” **God is close** to those who avoid sin!

James 4:8 “Draw nigh to God, and He will draw nigh to you. Cleanse your hands, ye sinners; and purify your hearts, ye double minded.” **God draws near to those** who strive to have clean hands and pure hearts!

Any of us who have been saved for any length of time have experienced times of close, sweet, heart-to-heart fellowship with God—and times when we have not had that. What is the difference? I don’t think I’m going out on a limb to suggest that we **sense God** the most when we are **broken over our sin**—and striving more to be like Him!

Stated another way, we **see God** more—we **experience Him** more—we enjoy close fellowship more—when we pursue holiness. If we don’t pursue holiness, we will not see the Lord the way we could or should.

Not only do we limit our sense of closeness to God if we don’t pursue holiness, failure to pursue holiness also... B. Limits others from seeing God in us

Ever hear this before: “You may be the only Bible some person ever read.” Many of us have heard that, but do we take it to heart?

Ryle puts it like this: “Our lives will always be doing either good or harm to those who see them. They are a silent sermon which all can read.” (Holiness, pg 42).

How does the “silent sermon” of your life read? Is **good** coming from it? **Ryle wrote:** “I believe that far more is done for Christ’s kingdom by the holy living of believers than we are at all aware of. There is a reality about such living which makes men feel, and obliges them to think.... It makes religion beautiful, and draws men to consider it, like a lighthouse seen afar off” (pg 42).

How about you? Does the sermon of **your life** read like that? Does your light so shine among men that people see your good works—and glorify your Father in heaven—like Jesus taught in Matthew 5:16?

But there is **a harm** that can come from our life, too, isn’t there? To again **quote Ryle:** “I believe there is far more harm done by unholy and inconsistent Christians than we are aware of. Such men are among Satan’s best allies. They pull down by their lives what ministers build with their lips” (pg 43).

Again I ask, how about you? Jesus said to let our light shine before men, but He also said “Take heed therefore that the light which is in thee be not darkness.” (Luke 11:35).

How does the sermon of **your** life read? Is it doing **harm**—or **good**?

PRAY

So what would God have us do in light of His word?

1. First and foremost, you need to be born again. You will not see God—you will not get into heaven—if you are not born again. Those are Jesus' words, not mine. John 3:3 "Except a man be born again, he cannot see the kingdom of God."

2. If you are born again, though, you are a child of God. And God commands you to diligently seeking after holiness. Are you doing that?

If you are a child of God—but are not pursuing holiness—you are causing harm to the cause of Christ!

--Children and young people; are your Mom and Dad saved?

You can influence them toward Christ—or away from Him! Which are you doing?

--Wives—or husbands—with unsaved spouses. What kind of influence are you having?

May each of us commit today a renewed zeal to seek after holiness so our lives can be a sermon that God uses—and not the devil!