

HOLINESS: PREREQUISITE FOR ANSWERED PRAYER

By Dave Butts

Holiness might be considered a strange topic by many to be addressed at the beginning of the third millennium after Christ. In our culture today, it's almost a forgotten topic. It is given brief consideration but not taken seriously by many. The reason lies in the fact that many aren't living holy lives and have very little to say to others about holiness.

I want to say at the outset to those who may get uncomfortable about the topic of holiness, that the doctrine of grace and freedom in Christ are absolutely true. But when those absolutely essential doctrines are taught without the balancing view of God's holiness and the intended holiness of the believer, we swing way out of balance. Most Christians today could testify that they would have avoided a great deal of harm in their lives had they been taught more of holiness and practiced more of it in their lives.

Let's lay it out very clearly. God not only commands us to be holy, but He has provided for us a way to holiness and therefore leaves us without excuse. We cannot blame our society or culture for our unholiness. Believers in New Testament times were in a society as immoral as can be imagined.... yet were taught and expected to be holy.

Listen to the commands of God's unchanging Word:

"Since we have these promises, dear friends, let us purify ourselves from everything that contaminates body and spirit, perfecting holiness out of reverence for God" (2 Cor. 7:1).

"Make every effort to live in peace with all men and to be holy; without holiness no one will see the Lord" (Heb.12:14).

"For it is written: Be holy, because I am holy" (1 Peter 1:16).

"Since everything will be destroyed in this way, what kind of people ought you to be? You ought to live holy and godly lives" (2 Peter 3:11).

"For God did not call us to be impure, but to live a holy life" (1 Thessalonians 4:7).

Since I have been given a ministry of prayer, I typically write concerning prayer. This article too, is ultimately about prayer. We will not have powerful, effective prayer lives until we get serious about living a life of holiness. God's Word teaches us that God does not normally answer the prayers of those who are not walking in holiness:

"If I had cherished sin in my heart, the Lord would not have listened" (Psalm 66:18).

"Your sins have hidden his face from you, so that he will not hear" (Isaiah 59:2).

“Who may ascend the hill of the Lord? Who may stand in his holy place? He who has clean hands and a pure heart, who does not lift up his soul to an idol or swear by what is false. He will receive blessing from the Lord and vindication from God, his Savior. Such is the generation of those who seek him, who seek your face, O God of Jacob” (Psalm 24:3-6).

Regardless of our prayer skills or lack of, we will not become a mighty people of prayer until we begin to develop a passion for the holy life. I believe that the scriptures we have just looked at show us the way to live a life of holiness. The key to our holiness is nothing less than the holiness of God Himself. We are to be holy because He is holy! Look at what the scriptures say of His holiness:

“Who among the gods is like you, O Lord? Who is like you--majestic in holiness, awesome in glory, working wonders?” (Exodus 15:11).

“And they were calling to one another: Holy, holy, holy is the Lord Almighty; the whole earth is full of his glory” (Isaiah 6:3).

“Who will not fear you, O Lord, and bring glory to your name? For you alone are holy. All nations will come and worship before you, for your righteous acts have been revealed” (Revelation 15:4).

Holy . . . set apart . . . different . . . unique . . . perfect. That’s the God we worship.

The key to our holiness is to remember that we worship a Holy God. And He has called us to be holy, as He is holy. How can that be? How is it even possible that we sinful creatures can even aspire to holiness? It’s because God says so!

It’s really a matter of family characteristics. It is our Father’s nature to be holy. Christians have been born again into God’s family. His genetic structure for holiness has been given to us because of Jesus. When Jesus became Savior and Lord of our lives, we experienced the new birth. The Holy (and I really mean Holy) Spirit came to dwell within us. We still have much of the sin nature within us, but there is also a new nature--a new genetic code if you will--a code of holiness that comes straight from our heavenly Father. Holiness then, becomes a possibility, where before it was an impossibility.

The problem arises when we leave it here at the level of theological truth. If we’re not careful we can end up believing that our holiness consists only of the imputed righteousness that comes from Jesus. That can lead us to worry less about sin, because after all . . . we’re forgiven in Jesus and made right through His death and resurrection.

This however, is not where God leaves us--a holiness that is not a real holiness at all. Instead you find in scripture the truth that holiness can never be accomplished by any of us by just trying hard. Jesus’ death is absolutely essential for us to experience the new birth and new life in Christ; and it is His righteousness that is now at work in us . . . AND it IS at work in us! God’s Word is clear that He expects us to long for and strive for practical holiness in lifestyle.

The Apostle Paul wrote in 2 Corinthians 7:1 that we are, “perfecting holiness out of reverence for God.” To perfect holiness means to work on it or to strive for it. The motive Paul gives for doing this is out of reverence for God. Developing holiness is wanting to be like our heavenly Father. There’s no

greater compliment to a Dad, than when a son or daughter wants to be like him. We give God pleasure as we long for and strive for holiness--to be like our Heavenly Father.

The author of Hebrews writes in Hebrews 12:14, *"Make every effort...to be holy."* This is not just a passive acceptance of something. This striving for holiness is not to be confused with your salvation. You accepted Christ's gift of salvation by faith...but now there is effort involved if you want to live a holy life. Paul would say it this way: *"work out your salvation with fear and trembling"* (Philippians 2:12). Why with fear and trembling? Because we are doing this under the eye of a Holy God.

Without Jesus, there is no possibility of holiness for us. With Jesus, we have been born again into the family of God and God's holiness has been placed within us. Now we strive with everything within us to live out that life of holiness as we keep our eyes on our Holy God.

Peter said it this way in 1 Peter 3:10-12: *"Whoever would love life and see good days must keep his tongue from evil and his lips from deceitful speech. He must turn from evil and do good; he must seek peace and pursue it."* And then Peter turns to answered prayer: *"For the eyes of the Lord are on the righteous and his ears are attentive to their prayer, but the face of the Lord is against those who do evil."*

So how do we live holy lives? We make the Word of God our foundation. We strive to do what it says and to flee from all that it forbids. We keep our mouths from gossip, and our hands from mischief. We seek to do good and not harm. Paul wrote these practical words to the Thessalonians: *"Live in peace with each other. And we urge you brothers, warn those who are idle, encourage the timid, help the weak, be patient with everyone. Make sure that nobody pays back wrong for wrong, but always try to be kind to each other and to everyone else. Be joyful always; pray continually; give thanks in all circumstances, for this is God's will for you in Christ Jesus"* (1 Thessalonians 5:13-18).

God is waiting for His people to pray! But the prayers that He hears come from the lips of a holy people--a people set apart and dedicated to God.

Dave Butts is the chairman of [America's National Prayer Committee](#) and the co-founder and president of [Harvest Prayer Ministries](#). His popular prayer guide, *Asleep in the Land of Nod* has been used by hundreds of churches to help their congregations pray for revival.

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