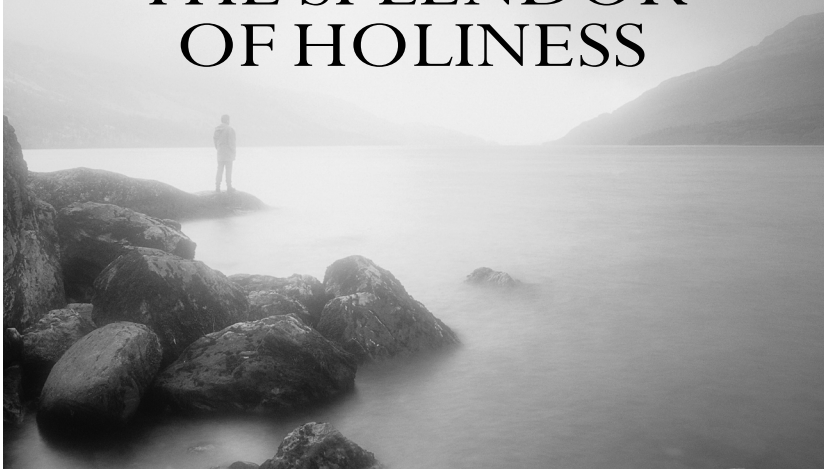


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THE SPLENDOR OF HOLINESS



*How little people know who
think that holiness is dull.*

*When one meets the
real thing . . . it is irresistible.*

✻

—C. S. LEWIS¹

✻



Holiness isn't exactly an easy subject to "sell." It's not one of the top ten topics people look for in a Christian bookstore; there aren't a lot of hit songs about holiness; and I can count on two hands the number of messages I recall hearing on the theme.

"Holiness" is discussed in theology classes, but rarely in dinner table conversations. "Holy" is an adjective we apply to "Bible," "Communion," and "the night Christ was born." But how many contemporary Christians are really interested in devoting serious thought or discussion to holiness?

We don't mind talking about holiness as an abstract concept. But if that concept gets too personal or starts to interfere with our lifestyle, we can quickly become uncomfortable.

Part of the problem may be that the word *holiness* has picked up some baggage that most people—understandably—don't find particularly desirable. Does “holiness” conjure up any of these images in your mind?

- ❖ Somber, straitlaced people with outdated hair and clothing styles
- ❖ An austere, joyless lifestyle based on a long list of rules and regulations
- ❖ A monk-like existence—“holy” people talk in hushed tones, spend hours a day in prayer, always have their nose in the Bible or a spiritual book, fast frequently, hum hymns under their breath, and have no interest in “normal” life activities
- ❖ People with a judgmental attitude toward those who don't accept their standards
- ❖ An unattainable ideal that has more to do with the sweet by-and-by than the real world, which is right here, right now

Holiness. When you put it that way . . . who wants it?! Sounds about as appealing as drinking salt water.

Holiness may not be at the top of our list of

things to talk about, but let me remind you that those in heaven never stop talking about it! I believe we need to “reclaim” true holiness—to see it in all its beauty, as it is revealed in the Word of God.

I was blessed to grow up in a home where holiness was emphasized and taken seriously, while being presented as something wonderfully desirable and attractive.

From earliest childhood, I remember thinking that holiness and joy were inseparably bound to each other.

My dad longed to be “as pure as the driven snow” and challenged us to aspire to the same standard. He was deeply disturbed by sin—whether his own, ours, or others’. At the same time, my dad was a happy man; he actually *enjoyed* his life in Christ.

Prior to his conversion in his mid-twenties, he had been a freewheeling gambler in mad pursuit of happiness and thrills. When God reached down and redeemed him, his lifestyle changed dramatically—he no longer desired the earthly “treasures” with which he had been trying to fill

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the empty places of his heart. Now he had found “the pearl of great price” he had been lacking for so many years. He loved God’s law and never considered holiness burdensome—he knew that *sin* was the real burden, and he never got over the wonder that God had mercifully relieved him of that burden through Christ.

The eighteenth-century theologian Jonathan Edwards was compelled by a similar vision of holiness. In his memoirs, written at the age of thirty-five, he spoke of the fascination and attractiveness that thoughts of holiness held for him.

It appeared to me, that there was nothing in it but what was ravishingly lovely; the highest beauty and amiableness—a *divine* beauty; far purer than any thing here upon earth; and that every thing else was like mire and defilement in comparison of it.²

Likewise, A. W. Tozer saw the need to challenge the misconceptions often associated with holiness.

What does this word *holiness* really mean? Is it a negative kind of piety from which so many people have shied away?

No, of course not! Holiness in the Bible means

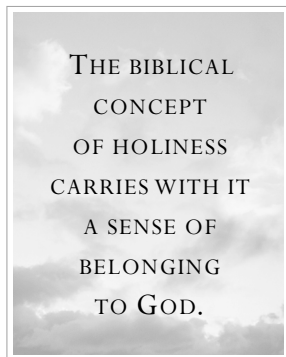
moral wholeness—a positive quality which actually includes kindness, mercy, purity, moral blamelessness and godliness. It is always to be thought of in a positive, white intensity of degree.³

The beauty of holiness, as it shines forth in the Scripture, is seen in two related but distinct facets.

SET APART

The word *holy* comes from a root that means “to cut, to separate.” It means “to be set apart, to be distinct, to be different.”

Throughout the Scripture, we find that God set apart certain things and places and people for Himself; they were consecrated for His use. They were not to be used for common, ordinary, everyday purposes; they were *holy*. For example,



THE BIBLICAL
CONCEPT
OF HOLINESS
CARRIES WITH IT
A SENSE OF
BELONGING
TO GOD.

- * God set apart one day out of the week and called it “a *holy Sabbath* to the Lord” (Exodus 16:23).

- ✿ The Israelites were required to set apart the first portion of their income as a *holy tithe* (Leviticus 27:30).
- ✿ God set apart a particular room where He would meet with His people; He called it “the *holy place*” (Exodus 26:33).

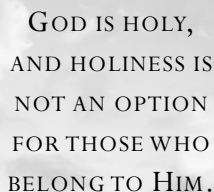
In the Old Testament, the nation of Israel was set apart by God to be a “holy nation” (Exodus 19:6). That didn’t mean their *conduct* was holy or that they were inherently more upright than others who were not set apart. God called them “holy” because He had set them apart from other nations, and with that distinction and privilege came the obligation to live holy lives.

Not only were the Israelites set apart *by* God—they were also set apart *for* God. “I the Lord am holy and have separated you from the peoples, *that you should be mine*,” God told His people (Leviticus 20:26). The biblical concept of holiness carries with it a sense of belonging to God, much as a mother might claim, “These children are *mine*.”

In the New Testament, God set apart a new body comprised of both Jews and Gentiles. He called it the *church*. The Greek term *ekklesia* means “a called-out assembly.” The church is not a building or merely an institution; it is a body of

believers who have been called out of this world and set apart for God's holy purposes.

I remember first discovering as a child something of what it meant to be “set apart” for and by God. Based on their understanding of the heart and ways of God, my parents established what they felt to be wise practices and limitations for our family. At times, we would complain, “*But everybody else . . . !*” My parents’ response was along these lines: “You don’t belong to ‘everybody else’—you belong to God!” They convinced us there was something really special about being set apart for God rather than being squeezed into the world’s mold.



GOD IS HOLY,
AND HOLINESS IS
NOT AN OPTION
FOR THOSE WHO
BELONG TO HIM.

I learned early on that to be “set apart” is not a punishment; it is not an attempt on God’s part to deprive us or to condemn us to a cheerless, joyless lifestyle. It is a priceless privilege—it is a call

- ❖ to belong, to be cherished, to enter into an intimate love relationship with God Himself, much as a groom declares his intent to set his bride apart from all other women to be his beloved wife

- ✿ to fit into the grand, eternal plan of our redeeming God for this universe
- ✿ to experience the exquisite joys and purposes for which we were created
- ✿ to be freed from all that destroys our true happiness

MORALLY CLEAN

The second facet of holiness has to do with being pure, clean, free from sin. In this sense, to be holy is to reflect the moral character of a holy God.

If you've ever tried to wade through the book of Leviticus, you may have found yourself wondering, *Why did God bother to give all those detailed instructions about cleansing and ceremonial purity?*

God intended those regulations to be an object lesson to the children of Israel—and to us. He wants us to understand that He is holy, and that holiness is not an option for those who belong to Him. He wants us to know that He is concerned with every detail and dimension of our lives. He wants us to understand the blessings of holiness and the consequences of unholy living.

When we come to the New Testament, we find that God's standard has not changed. Over

and over again, Jesus and the New Testament authors call us to a life of absolute purity:

You therefore must be perfect, as your heavenly Father is perfect. (Matthew 5:48).

Keep yourself pure. (1 Timothy 5:22)

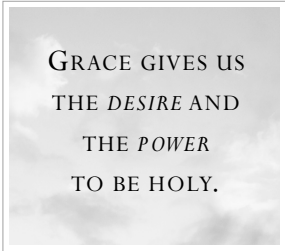
Awake to righteousness, and do not sin. (1 Corinthians 15:34 NKJV)

Let everyone who names the name of the Lord depart from iniquity. (2 Timothy 2:19)

Abhor what is evil; hold fast to what is good. (Romans 12:9)

Holiness is not just for some select few spiritual giants; it is not just for pious people who sit around all day with nothing to do but “be holy.”

Holiness is for moms who battle a sense of uselessness and discouragement and who are tempted to escape into self-pity, romance novels, antidepressants, or the arms of an attentive man. It is for students who



GRACE GIVES US
THE *DESIRE* AND
THE *POWER*
TO BE HOLY.

are constantly bombarded with pressure to conform to the world and to indulge in ungodly forms of entertainment. It is for lonely widows, divorcees, and singles who are struggling to stay sexually abstinent. It is for husbands and wives who wrestle with bitterness toward mates who have abused or abandoned them. It is for men who are tempted to cheat on their expense reports or their wives or to abdicate their spiritual leadership in the home.

“*Everyone* who names the name of the Lord” is called to live a holy life!

We’re going to explore *how* we can be holy, but it’s important to realize that God would not command us to do anything without also enabling us to do it. He knows we cannot possibly be holy apart from Him. That’s why He has made provision for us to overcome sin through the cross of Christ. That’s why He has sent His Spirit to live in our hearts. And that’s why He has given every believer a supernatural resource called *grace* that gives us the *desire* and the *power* to be holy.

THE FRUIT OF RELATIONSHIP

True holiness is cultivated in the context of a relationship with God. His love for us moves us

to reject all lesser loves and all the fleeting delights sin can offer.

As our love for Him grows, we are motivated to aspire to holiness. The fact that He is our Father and we are His beloved children makes us long to be close to Him and compels us to avoid anything that could cause a breach in the relationship.

Yes, holiness involves adherence to a standard, but the obedience God asks of us is not cold, rigid, and dutiful. It is a warm, joyous, loving response to the God who loves us and created us to enjoy intimate fellowship with Him. It is the overflow of a heart that is deeply grateful to have been redeemed by God from sin. It is not something we manufacture by sheer grit, determination, and willpower. It is motivated and enabled by the Holy Spirit who lives within us to make us holy.

EXTREME HOLINESS

The congregation of the Gustaf Adolph Evangelical Lutheran Church, located in a small town in northern Maine, learned just how dangerous a little bit of impurity can be. On Sunday, April 27, 2003, the church council gathered after services to discuss the installation of a new

heater. Several in the group stopped by the kitchen to grab a cup of coffee on the way into the meeting. Within hours more than a dozen people were gravely ill, and within days one man had died.

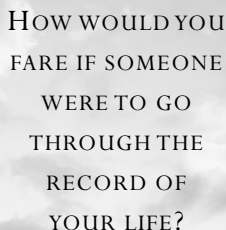
Investigators discovered that a man with a vendetta had dropped a handful of powdered arsenic in the church's coffee urn. No one had noticed the small amount of poison—until its consequences became apparent. Like the bit of leaven that leavens a whole lump of dough, tolerating “just a little sin” in our lives can be deadly.

The makers of Ivory soap pride themselves on their product being “99 $\frac{44}{100}$ % pure.” When it comes to holiness, however, if it's only 99 $\frac{44}{100}$ % pure, it's not pure.

A commitment to be holy is a commitment to be clean through and through—to have no unholy part. True holiness starts on the inside—with our thoughts, attitudes, values, and motives—those innermost parts of our hearts that only God can see. It also affects our outward and visible behavior: “Be holy in *all your conduct*” (1 Peter 1:15).

This passion for purity is what I saw in my dad's example that made holiness so compelling to me as a young person. Of course, he often failed (and was willing to admit it when he did); but he

sought to live a life that was morally upright and completely above reproach: in the way he ran his business, used his time, conducted himself with members of the opposite sex, treated family members and employees, talked about other people, responded to his critics, spent his money, and honored the Lord's Day; in his work habits, leisure activities, and entertainment choices—what he read and listened to and watched. He so loved God that he wanted holiness to characterize every area of his life.



HOW WOULD YOU
FARE IF SOMEONE
WERE TO GO
THROUGH THE
RECORD OF
YOUR LIFE?

He believed, as did Helen Roseveare, a missionary surgeon in (then) Congo, that “there must be nothing, absolutely nothing, in my daily conduct that, copied by another, could lead that one into unholiness.”⁴

I have a friend whose ninety- and ninety-two-year-old parents recently moved out of the house where they had lived for fifty years. My friend spent an entire month sorting through a lifetime of their accumulated “stuff”—correspondence, financial data, clippings, photos, and on and on. “It was a complete record of their lives,” my friend reflected.

After poring through the massive collection of memorabilia and paperwork, this son observed with a sense of wonder, *“There was not one single thing in my parents’ belongings that was inconsistent with their profession of their relationship with Christ!”*

*HOLINESS AND JOY
ARE INSEPARABLE
COMPANIONS.*

How would you fare if someone were to go through the record of your life—all your possessions, the books and magazines you’ve read, your CD and DVD collections, checkbooks, tax returns, journals, daily planners, phone bills, correspondence, past e-mails, a record of all your Internet activity?

What if the person could also review a photographic replay of the choices you’ve made when you thought no one was watching? Add to that a script of your thought life . . . your attitudes . . . your secret motives.

Does the thought of such “extreme holiness” seem burdensome to you? If so, you may never have considered that *holiness* and *joy* are inseparable companions.

THE JOY OF HOLINESS

What words do you associate with “holiness”?

Would *gladness* be one of those words?

Think about it the other way around. When you think of things that make you *glad*, do you think of *holiness*?

Surprising as it may seem, *holiness* and *gladness* really do go hand-in-hand.

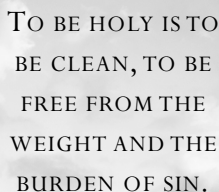
In both the Old and New Testaments we find a wonderful description of the Lord Jesus that makes this connection:

You have loved righteousness and hated wickedness; therefore God, your God, has anointed you with the oil of gladness beyond your companions.

—Hebrews 1:9; see Psalm 45:7

We might picture someone who has a passionate love for holiness and an intense hatred for sin as being joyless, uptight, and rigid.

In fact, nothing could be further from the truth. The result of Jesus' holy life was overflowing gladness—gladness surpassing that of anyone else around Him. It was true of Jesus. And it will be true of anyone who, like Jesus, loves righteousness and hates evil.



TO BE HOLY IS TO
BE CLEAN, TO BE
FREE FROM THE
WEIGHT AND THE
BURDEN OF SIN.

I remember the first time I heard Calvin Hunt share his story. For years, this young man lived an irresponsible, destructive lifestyle as a crack cocaine addict. Then he encountered the irresistible, transforming grace of Christ. To this day, Calvin exudes irrepressible joy as he testifies of the purifying work of God in his life and then lifts up his powerful tenor voice and sings what has become his trademark song, *“I’m clean! I’m clean! I’m clean!”*

Why do we make holiness out to be some austere obligation or burden to be borne, when the fact is that to be holy is to be clean, to be free from the weight and the burden of sin? Why would we cling to our sin any more than a leper would refuse to part with his oozing sores, given the opportunity to be cleansed of his leprosy?

To pursue holiness is to move toward joy—joy infinitely greater than any earthly delights can offer.

To resist holiness or to be halfhearted about its pursuit is to forfeit true joy and to settle for something less than that God-intoxication for which we were created.

Sooner or later, sin will strip and rob you of everything that is truly beautiful and desirable. If you are a child of God, you were redeemed to enjoy the sweet fruit of holiness—to walk in one-

ness with your heavenly Father, to relish His presence, to rejoice in His mercy, to know the joy of having clean hands, a pure heart, and a clear conscience, and, one day, to stand before Him unashamed.

Why settle for anything less?

NOTES

1. C. S. Lewis, *Letters to an American Lady*, ed. Clyde S. Kilby (Grand Rapids: Eerdmans, 1967), 19.
2. *Memoirs of Jonathan Edwards*, Works of Jonathan Edwards, vol. 1 (Edinburgh: Banner of Truth Trust, rept. 1974), xiv.
3. A. W. Tozer, *I Call It Heresy* (Harrisburg, Pa.: Christian Publications, 1974), 63.
4. Helen Roseveare, *Living Holiness* (Minneapolis: Bethany House, 1986), 173.