

Holiness - J. C. Ryle

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HOLINESS

by J. C. Ryle (1816-1900)

"Without holiness no one will see the Lord." --Hebrews 12:14

Our text for today opens up a subject of deep importance. That subject is practical holiness. It suggests a question that demands the attention of all professing Christians-Are we holy? Will we see the Lord? That question can never be out of season. The wise man tells us, there is "a time to weep and a time to laugh, a time to be silent and a time to speak," (Eccl 3:4, 7) but there is no time, no, not a day, in which a man ought not to be holy. Are we? That question concerns all ranks and situations of men and women. Some are rich and some are poor-some educated and some uneducated-some masters, and some servants; but there is no rank or state in life in which a man or woman ought not to be holy. Are we? I ask to be heard today about this question. How does our account stand between our souls and God? In this hurrying, bustling world, let us stand still for a few minutes and consider the matter of holiness. I know I could have chosen a subject more popular and pleasant. I am sure I could have found one easier to handle. But I feel deeply I could not have chosen one more seasonable and more profitable to our souls. It is a solemn thing to hear the Word of God saying, "Without holiness no one will see the Lord." I will endeavor, by God's help, to examine what true holiness is, and the reason why it is so needful. In conclusion, I will try to point out the only way in which holiness can be attained in a plain and practical manner.

I. First, then, let me try to show what true practical holiness is-what sort of persons are those whom God calls holy.

A man may go to great lengths, and yet never reach true holiness. It is not knowledge-Balaam had that: nor great profession-Judas Iscariot had that: nor doing lots of things-Herod did that: nor zeal for certain matters in religion-Jehu had that: nor morality and outward respectability of conduct-the rich young ruler had that: nor taking pleasure in hearing preachers-the Jews in Ezekiel's time had that: nor keeping company with godly people-Joab and Gehazi and Demas had that. Yet none of these was holy! These things alone are not holiness. A man or woman may have any one of them, and yet never see the Lord.

What then is true practical holiness?

It is a hard question to answer. I don't mean that there is any lack of Scripture on the subject. But I fear lest I should give a defective view of holiness, and not say all that ought to be said; or lest I should say things about it that ought not to be said, and therefore cause harm. Let me, however, try to draw a picture of holiness, that we may see it clearly before the eyes of our minds. Only let it never be forgotten, when I have said everything, that my explanation will be nothing but a poor imperfect outline at the best.

a) Holiness is the habit of agreeing with the mind with God, in accordance as we find His mind described in Scripture.

It is the habit of agreeing with God's judgment-hating what He hates-loving what He loves-and measuring everything in this world by

the standard of His Word. The person who most completely agrees with God is the one who is the most holy person.

b) A holy person will endeavor to turn away from every known sin, and to keep every known commandment.

They will have a decided bent of mind toward God, a hearty desire to do His will-a greater fear of displeasing Him than of displeasing the world, and a love for all His ways. They will feel what Paul felt when he said, "In my inner being I delight in God's law" (Ro 7:22-note), and what David felt when he said, "I consider all your precepts right, I hate every wrong path" (Ps119:128-note).

c) A holy person will strive to be like our Lord Jesus Christ.

They will not only live the life of faith in Him, and draw from Him all their daily peace and strength, but they will also strive to have the mind that was in Him, and to be "conformed to His likeness" (Ro 8:29-note. See also "[Example of Christ](#)"). It will be their aim to bear with and forgive others, just as Christ forgave us-to be unselfish, just as Christ did not please Himself-to walk in love, just as Christ loved us-to be meek and humble, even as Christ made Himself nothing and humbled Himself. They will remember that Christ was a faithful witness for the truth-that He did not come to do His own will-that it was His food and drink to do His Father's will-that He would continually deny Himself in order to minister to others-that He was meek and patient in spite of undeserved insults-that He thought more of godly poor men than of kings-that He was full of love and compassion to sinners-that He was bold and uncompromising in denouncing sin-that He did not seek the praise of men, when He might have had it-that He went about doing good-that He was separate from worldly people-that He prayed continually-that He would not even let His nearest relatives stand in His way when God's work was to be done. These things a holy person will try to remember. By them they will endeavor to shape their course in life. They will lay to heart the saying of John, "Whoever claims to live in him must walk as Jesus did" (1Jn 2:6); and the saying of Peter, that "Christ suffered for you, leaving you an example, that you should follow in his steps" (1Pe 2:21-note). Happy is the person who has learned to make Christ his "everything," both for salvation and example! (See "[Union w/ Christ](#)" - see also in Christ and in Christ Jesus and in Christ) A great deal of time would be saved, and a great deal of sin prevented, if men and women would often ask themselves the question, "What would Christ have said and done, if He were in my place?"

d) A holy person will pursue meekness, endurance, gentleness, patience, kindness, and control of their tongue.

They will put up with a lot, tolerate a great deal, overlook a lot, and be slow to talk of demanding their rights. We see a clear example of this in the behavior of David when Shimei cursed him-and of Moses when Aaron and Miriam spoke against him (2Sa 16:10; Nu 12:3).

e) A holy person will pursue self-control and self-denial.

They will labor to subdue the desires of their body-to crucify their flesh with all of its affections and lusts-to curb their passions-to restrain their worldly inclinations, lest at any time they break loose. Oh, what a word of warning is that of the Lord Jesus to the Apostles, "Be careful, or your hearts will be weighed down with dissipation, drunkenness and the anxieties of life" (Lk 21:34); and that of the Apostle Paul, "I beat my body and make it my slave so that after I have preached to others, I myself will not be disqualified for the prize" (1Cor 9:27).

f) A holy person will pursue love and brotherly kindness.

They will endeavor to observe the golden rule of doing to others as they would have others do to them, and speaking as they would want others to speak to them. They will be full of affection towards their brothers and sisters in Christ-towards their bodies, their property, their characters, their feelings, and their souls. "He who loves his fellowman," says Paul, "has fulfilled the law" (Ro 13:8-note). They will detest all lying, slandering, backbiting, cheating, dishonesty, and unfairness, even in the smallest things. They will strive to adorn their religion in all of their outward demeanor, and to make it lovely and beautiful in the eyes of everyone around them. Sadly, what condemning words are found in the 13th chapter of 1 Corinthians, and the Sermon on the Mount, when laid alongside the conduct of many professing Christians!

g) A holy person will pursue a spirit of mercy and benevolence towards others.

They will not stand idle all day long. They will not be content with simply not harming others-they will try to do good to others. They will strive to be useful in their day and generation, and to lessen the spiritual needs and misery of those around them, as far as they can. Dorcas was such a person "always doing good and helping the poor," which she did,-not merely planning to do it or just talking about it, but she actually did it. Paul was another such person, stating: "I will very gladly spend for you everything I have and expend myself as well," he says, "If I love you more, will you love me less" (Acts 9:36; 2Co 12:15).

h) A holy person will pursue purity of heart.

They will dread all filthiness and uncleanness of spirit, and seek to avoid everything that might draw them into it. They know their own heart is like tinder, and will diligently keep clear of the sparks of temptation. Who will dare to talk of strength when David can

fall? There are many hints to be gleaned from the ceremonial law. Under it the man who only touched a bone, or a dead body, or a grave, or a diseased person, at once became unclean in the sight of God. And these things were pictures and figures. Few Christians are ever too watchful and too particular about this point.

i) A holy person will pursue the fear of God.

I do not mean the fear of a slave, who only works because they are afraid of punishment, and would be idle if they did not dread discovery. Rather, I mean the fear of a child, who wishes to live and move, as if they were always in their father's sight, because he loves them. What a noble example Nehemiah gives us of this! When he became Governor at Jerusalem he might have invoke taxation on the Jews, requiring money from them for his support. The former Governors had done so. There was no one to blame him if he did. But he says, "But out of reverence for God I did not act like that" (Neh 5:15).

j) A holy man will pursue humility.

They will desire, in humility, to consider others better than themselves. They will see more evil in their own heart than in any other in the world. They will understand something of Abraham's feeling, when he says, "I am nothing but dust and ashes;"-and Jacob's, when he says, "I am unworthy of all the kindness and faithfulness you have shown your servant;"-and Job's, when he says, "I am unworthy;"-and Paul's, when he says, "I am the worst of sinners." Bradford, that holy and faithful martyr of Christ, would sometimes sign his letters with these words, "A most miserable sinner, John Bradford." Good old Mr. Grimshaw's last words, when he lay on his deathbed, were these, "Here goes an unprofitable servant."

k) A holy man will pursue faithfulness in all the duties and relationships in life.

They will try, not merely to fulfill their duties and responsibilities, as well as others who have no care or concern for their souls, but even better, because they have higher motives, they will try to be of more help than the others. Those words of Paul should never be forgotten, "Whatever you do, work at it with all your heart, as working for the Lord,"-"Never be lacking in zeal, but keep your spiritual fervor, serving the Lord" (Col 3:23-note; Ro 12:11-note). Holy persons should aim at doing everything well, and should be ashamed of allowing themselves to do anything poorly if they can help it. Like Daniel, they should seek to give no "basis for charges against themselves, "unless it has something to do with the law of their God" (Da 6:5). They should strive to be good husbands and good wives, good neighbors, good friends, good citizens, good in private and good in public, good in the place of business and good in their homes. Indeed, holiness is worth little, if it does not bear this kind of fruit. The Lord Jesus puts a searching question to His people, when He says, "What are you doing more than others?."

l) Last, but not least, a holy person will pursue spiritual mindedness.

They will endeavor to set their affections entirely on things above, and to hold very loosely the things of earth. They will not neglect the daily business of their life; but the first place in their mind and thoughts will be given to the life to come. They will aim to live like those whose treasure is in heaven, and to pass through this world like a stranger and pilgrim traveling to their home. To commune with God in prayer, in the Bible, and in the assembly of His people-these things will be the holy person's principal enjoyments. They will value every thing and place and company, in the same proportion as it draws them nearer to God. They will enter into something of David's feeling, when he says, "My soul clings to you." "You are my portion, O LORD" (Ps 63:8-note; Ps 119:57-note).

Such is the outline of holiness. Such is the character that is pursued by those who are called "holy." Such are the main features of a holy man and a holy woman.

But here let me say, I trust no one will misunderstand me. I am fearful that my meaning will be mistaken, and that the description I have just given of holiness will discourage some tender conscience. I wouldn't willingly make one righteous heart sad, or throw a stumbling block in any believer's way.

I don't say for a moment that holiness shuts out the presence of indwelling sin-No, far from it. It is the greatest mystery of a holy person that they carry around with them a "body of death;"-that often when they want to do good "evil is right there with them"; that the "old self" is clogging all their movements, and, as it were, trying to draw them back at every step they take (Ro 7:21-note). But it is the quality of a holy person that they are not at peace with indwelling sin, as others are. They hate it, mourn over it, and long to be free from its company. The work of sanctification within them is like the wall of Jerusalem-the building goes forward "even in times of trouble" (Dan 9:25-note).

Neither do I say that holiness comes to ripeness and perfection all at once, or that these graces I have touched on must be found in full bloom and strength before you can call a person holy-No, far from it. Sanctification is always a progressive work. Some persons' graces are like the sprout of a plant, some like the almost grown plant, and some are like the fully mature plant with fruit. All must have a beginning. We must never despise "the day of small things." And sanctification at the very best is an imperfect work. The history of the holiest saints that ever lived will contain many a "however", and "nevertheless" and "although", before you reach the

end. The gold will never be without some dross-the light will never shine without some clouds, until we reach the heavenly Jerusalem. The blazing sun of our solar system itself has spots on his face. The holiest men and women have had many blemishes and defects when compared with the holy standard of the Word of God. Their life is a continual warfare with sin, the world, and the devil; and sometimes you will see them not overcoming, but overcome. The flesh is always fighting against the spirit, and the spirit against the flesh, and "we all stumble in many ways." (Gal 5:17-note; Jas 3:2). But still, for all this, I am sure that to have the type of character that I have weakly drawn is the heart's desire and prayer of all true Christians. They press on towards it, even though they do not reach it. They may not attain it, but they always aim at it. It is what they strive and labor to be, if it is not what they are. And boldly and confidently I say, that true holiness is a great reality. It is something in a man and a woman that can be seen, and known, and marked, and felt by all those around them. It is light: if it exists, it will show itself. It is salt: if it exists, its savor will be perceived. It is a precious perfume: if it exists, its presence will be apparent.

I am sure we would all be ready to make allowance for some backsliding, for some occasional deadness in professing Christians. I know a road may lead from one point to another, and yet have many a twist and curves; and a person may be truly holy, and yet be detoured by many weaknesses. Gold is not any less gold because it is mixed with an alloy, nor light any less light because it is faint and dim, nor grace any less grace because it is young and weak. But after every allowance, I cannot see how any person deserves to be called "holy", who willfully allows themselves to continue in habitual sins, and are not humbled and ashamed because of them. I dare not call anyone "holy" who makes a habit of willfully neglecting known duties, and willfully doing what he knows God has commanded them not to do. Owen said it best, "I do not understand how a man can be a true believer to whom sin is not the greatest burden, sorrow, and trouble." Such are the leading characteristics of practical holiness. Let us examine ourselves and see whether we are acquainted with it. Let us test our own selves.

II. Let me try, in the next place, to show some reasons why practical holiness is so important.

Can holiness save us? Can holiness do away with sin-cover iniquities-become a payment for transgressions-pay our debt to God? No: not a bit. God forbid that I should ever say so. Holiness can do none of these things. The holiest saints are all "worthless servants". Our purest works are no better than filthy rags, when tried by the light of God's holy law. The white robe which Jesus offers, and faith puts on, must be our only righteousness-the name of Christ our only confidence-the Lamb's book of life our only title to heaven. With all our holiness we are no better than sinners. Our best things are stained and tainted with imperfection. They are all more or less incomplete, wrong in the motive or defective in the performance. "No child of Adam will be declared righteous in his sight by observing the law. "For it is by grace you have been saved, through faith - and this not from yourselves, it is the gift of God - not by works, so that no one can boast" (Eph 2:8-note, Ep 2:9-note).

Why then is holiness so important? Why does the Apostle say, "Without holiness no one will see the Lord"? Let me give you a few reasons.

a) For one thing, we must be holy, because the voice of God in Scripture plainly commands it.

The Lord Jesus says to His people, "Unless your righteousness surpasses that of the Pharisees and the teachers of the law, you will certainly not enter the kingdom of heaven" (Matthew 5:20-note). "Be perfect, therefore, as your heavenly Father is perfect" (Mt 5:48-note). Paul tells the Thessalonians, "It is God's will that you should be sanctified" (1Th 4:3-note). And Peter says, "Just as he who called you is holy, so be holy in all you do; for it is written: 'Be holy, because I am holy.'" (1Pet 1:15-note, 1Pe 1:16-note). "In this, "law and Gospel agree." (Leighton).

b) We must be holy, because this is one grand end and purpose for which Christ came into the world.

Paul writes to the Corinthians, "Jesus died for all, that those who live should no longer live for themselves but for him who died for them and was raised again" (2Cor 5:15). And to the Ephesians, "Christ loved the church and gave himself up for her to make her holy, cleansing her" (Eph 5:25, 26-note) And to Titus, "Jesus gave himself for us to redeem us from all wickedness and to purify for himself a people that are his very own, eager to do what is good" (Titus 2:14-note). In short, to talk of men and women being saved from the guilt of sin, without being at the same time saved from its dominion in their hearts, is to contradict the witness of all Scripture. Are believers said to be elect?-it is "through the sanctifying work of the Spirit." Are they predestined?-it is "to be conformed to the likeness of God's." Are they chosen?-it is "to be holy and blameless." Are they called?-it is "a holy calling." Are they afflicted?-it is that they may "share in his holiness." Jesus is a complete Savior. He does not merely take away the guilt of a believer's sin, He does more-He breaks the power of sin (1Pet 1:2-note; Ro 8:29-note; Eph 1:4-note; Heb 12:10-note).

c) We must be holy, because this is the only sound evidence that we have a saving faith in our Lord Jesus Christ.

James warns us there is such a thing as a dead faith-a faith which goes no further than the profession of the lips, and has no influence on a person's character (Jas 2:17-note). True saving faith is a very different kind of thing. True faith will always show itself by its fruits-it will sanctify, it will work by love, it will overcome the world, it will purify the heart. I know that people are fond of talking about deathbed evidences of salvation. They will rest on words spoken in the hours of fear, and pain, and weakness, as if they

might take comfort in them about their friends that are dying. But I am afraid in ninety-nine cases out of a hundred such evidences cannot be depended on. I suspect that, with rare exceptions, men and women die just as they have lived. The only safe evidence that we are one with Christ, and Christ in us, is a holy life. They that live in the Lord are generally the only people who die in the Lord. If we would die the death of the righteous, let us not rest in slothful desires only; let us seek to live His life. It is a true saying, "That the state of a man or woman is nothing, and their faith is unsound, if their hope of glory does not purify their heart and life" (Traill).

d) We must be holy, because this is the only proof that we love the Lord Jesus Christ with sincerity.

This is a point on which Jesus has spoken most plainly, in the fourteenth and fifteenth chapters of John. "If you love me, you will obey what I command."-"Whoever has my commands and obeys them, he is the one who loves me."-"You are my friends if you do what I command" (Jn 14:15, 21, 23; 15:14).-It would be difficult to find any clearer words than these, and woe to those who neglect them! Surely that person must be in an unhealthy state of soul who can think of all that Jesus suffered, and yet cling to those sins for which that suffering was undergone. It was sin that wove the crown of thorns-it was sin that pierced our Lord's hands, and feet, and side-it was sin that brought Him to Gethsemane and Calvary, to the cross and to the grave. Our hearts must be cold if we do not hate sin and labor to get rid of it, though we may have to cut off our right hand and pull out our right eye to do so.

e) We must be holy, because this is the only sound evidence that we are true children of God.

Children in this world are normally like their parents. Some, doubtless, are more so, and some less-but it is seldom that you cannot trace a kind of family likeness. And it is much the same with the children of God. The Lord Jesus says, "If you were Abraham's children, then you would do the things Abraham did."-"If God were your Father, you would love me" (Jn 8:39, 42). If men and women have no likeness to the Father in heaven, it is vain to talk of their being His "sons and daughters." If we know nothing of holiness we may flatter ourselves as we please, but we do not have the Holy Spirit living in us: we are dead, and must be brought to life again-we are lost, and must be found. "Those who are led by the Spirit of God," they, and they only, "are sons [and daughters] of God" (Ro 8:14-note). We must show by our lives the family we belong to. We must let people see by our pure conversation that we are indeed the children of the Holy One, or our claim to be God's children is nothing but an empty claim. "Do not say, that you have royal blood in your veins, and are born of God, unless you can prove your pedigree by having the courage to be holy" (Gurnall).

f) We must be holy, because this is the best way to do good to others.

We cannot live to ourselves only in this world. Our lives will always be doing either good or harm to those who see them. They are a silent sermon which all can read. It is indeed sad when they are a sermon for the devil's cause, and not for God's. 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 people feel, and obliges them to think. It carries a weight and influence with it, which nothing else can give. It makes Christianity beautiful, and draws men and women to consider it, like a lighthouse seen from a distance. The Day of Judgment will prove that many besides husbands have been "won over without words" by the conduct of a holy life (1Pet 3:1-note). You may talk to persons about the doctrines of the Gospels, and few will listen, and still fewer understand. But your life is an argument that none can avoid. There is a meaning about holiness which even the most uneducated can understand. They may not understand justification, but they can understand love, kindness, and purity.

I believe there is far more harm done by unholy and inconsistent Christians than we are aware of. Such men and women are among Satan's best allies. They pull down, by their lives, what ministers build with their lips. They cause the chariot wheels of the Gospel to bog down. They supply the children of this world with a never-ending excuse for remaining as they are. "I cannot see the use of all this Christianity," said an irreligious businessman not long ago; "I observe that some of my customers are always talking about the Gospel, and faith, and election, and the blessed promises, and so forth; and yet these very people think nothing of cheating me out of money, when they have an opportunity. Now, if people who claim to be Christians can do such things, then I don't see what good there is in Christianity." I grieve to have to say such things, but I fear that Christ's name is all too often blasphemed because of the lives of Christians. Let us take heed lest the blood of souls should be required at our hands. May the Lord deliver us from the murder of souls by inconsistency and a careless Christian walk! Oh, for the sake of others, if for no other reason, let us strive to be holy!

g) We must be holy, because our present happiness depends a lot on it.

We cannot be reminded of this too often. Sadly, we are apt to forget that there is a close relationship between sin and sorrow, holiness and happiness, sanctification and comfort. God has so wisely ordered it, that our happiness and our holiness are linked together. He has mercifully provided that even in this world it will be to a person's best interest to be holy. Our justification is not by works-our calling and election are not according to our works-but it is vain for anyone to suppose that he will have a active sense of his justification, or an assurance of his calling, so long as he neglects good works, or does not strive to live a holy life. "We know that we have come to know Jesus if we obey his commands." "This is how we know that we belong to the truth, and how we set our hearts at rest" (1 Jn 2:3; 3:19). A believer may just as soon expect to feel the sun's rays on a dark and cloudy day, as to feel strong

comfort and happiness in Christ while he does not completely follow Him. When the disciples deserted the Lord and fled, they escaped danger, but they were miserable and sad. But when, a little while later, they confessed Him boldly before men, they were cast into prison and beaten; but we are told "The apostles rejoiced because they had been counted worthy of suffering disgrace for the Name [of Jesus]" (Acts 5:41). Oh, for our own sakes, if there were no other reason, let us strive to be holy! They that follow Jesus most fully will always follow Him most happily.

h) Lastly, we must be holy, because without holiness on earth we will never be prepared to enjoy heaven.

Heaven is a holy place. The Lord of heaven is a holy Person. The angels are holy creatures. Holiness is written on everything in heaven. The book of Revelation expressly says, "Nothing impure will ever enter [heaven], nor will anyone who does what is shameful or deceitful" (Rev 21:27-note). I solemnly appeal to everyone who listens to this sermon, How will we ever be at home and happy in heaven, if we die unholy? Death works no change. The grave makes no alteration. Each person will rise again with the same character in which they breathed their last breath. Where will our place be if we are strangers to holiness now? Suppose for a moment that you were allowed to enter heaven without holiness. What would you do? What possible enjoyment could you feel there? To which of all the saints would you join yourself, and by whose side would you sit down? Their pleasures are not your pleasures, their tastes not your tastes, their character not your character. How could you possibly be happy, if you had not been holy on earth? Now perhaps you love the company of the flippant and the careless, the worldly-minded and the greedy, the drinkers and the pleasure-seekers, the ungodly and the wicked. None of them will be in heaven. Now perhaps you think the saints of God are too strict and particular, and serious. You rather avoid them. You have no delight in their company. Well, let me tell you-there will be no other company in heaven. Now perhaps you think praying, and reading of the Scriptures, and singing of hymns is boring and gloomy, and stupid work-a thing to be tolerated now and then, but not enjoyed. You believe that Sunday worship is a burden and a drain; you couldn't possibly spend more than a small part of it in worshipping God. But remember, heaven is a never-ending Sunday. The inhabitants there never rest day or night, they constantly are saying, "Holy, holy, holy, Lord God Almighty," and singing the praise of the Lamb. How could an unholy man or woman find pleasure in an occupation such as this?

Do you think you that such a person would delight to meet David, and Paul, and John, after a life spent in doing the very things they spoke against? Would he take sweet counsel with them, and find that they had much in common with him?-Think, above all, that he would rejoice to meet Jesus, the Crucified One, face to face, after cleaving to the sins for which Jesus died, after loving Jesus' enemies and despising Jesus' friends? Would he stand before Him with confidence, and join in the cry, "This is our God; we trusted in him, let us rejoice and be glad in his salvation" (Isa 25:9). Don't you think that the tongue of an unholy man would cleave to the roof of his mouth with shame, and his only desire would be to be quickly depart! He would feel like a stranger in an unknown land, a black sheep in the middle of Christ's holy flock. The voices of Cherubim and Seraphim, the songs of Angels and Archangels and all the company of heaven, would be a language which he could not understand. The very air would seem to be an air that he could not breathe. I do not know what others may think, but to me it seems clear that heaven would be a miserable place to an unholy man. It cannot be anything else. People may say, in a vague way, "they hope to go to heaven;" but they do not know what they are saying. There must be a certain "fitness for the inheritance of the saints in light." Our hearts must be somewhat in tune. To reach the holiday of glory, we must pass through the training school of grace. We must be heavenly-minded, and have heavenly tastes, in the life that now is, or else we will never find ourselves in heaven, in the life to come.

And now, before I go any further, let me say a few words by way of application.

1) For one thing, let me ask everyone who hears this sermon, Are you holy? Listen, I pray, to the question I put to you this day. Do you know anything of the holiness of which I have been speaking?

I do not ask whether you attend your church regularly-whether you have been baptized, and received the Lord's Supper-whether you have the name of Christian-I ask something more than all this: Are you holy, or are you not?

I do not ask whether you approve of holiness in others-whether you like to read the lives of holy people, and to talk of holy things, and to have holy books on your table-whether you mean to be holy, and hope you will be holy some day-I ask something further: Are you yourself holy this very day, or are you not?

And why do I ask so directly, and press the question so strongly? I do it because the Scripture says, "Without holiness no one will see the Lord." It is written, it is not my idea-it is the Bible, not my private opinion-it is the word of God, not the word of man-"Without holiness no one will see the Lord" (Hebrews 12:14-note).

Sadly, what penetrating, probing words these are! What thoughts come across my mind, as I speak them! I look at the world, and see the greater part of it living in wickedness. I look at professing Christians, and see the vast majority having nothing of Christianity but the name. I turn to the Bible, and I hear the Spirit saying, "Without holiness no one will see the Lord."

Surely it is a text that ought to make us consider our ways, and search our hearts. Surely it should raise within us solemn thoughts, and send us to prayer.

You may try to put me off by saying “you feel a lot, and think a lot about these things: far more than many others.” I answer, “This is not the point. The poor lost souls in hell think about these words too! The great question is not what you think, and what you feel, but what you DO.”

You may say, “It was never meant that all Christians should be holy, and that holiness, such as I have described, is only for great saints, and people with special gifts.” I answer, “I cannot see that in Scripture. I read that everyone who has hope in Christ purifies himself” (1 John 3:3)-“Without holiness no one will see the Lord.”

You may say, “It is impossible to be holy and to do our duty in this life at the same time: the thing cannot be done.” I answer, “You are mistaken. It can be done. With Christ on your side nothing is impossible. Many Christians before have done it: David, and Obadiah, and Daniel, and the servants of Nero’s household, are all examples that prove it.”

You may say, “If I were that holy I would be very different than other people.” I answer, “I know that. It is just what you ought to be. Christ’s true servants were always different than the world around them-a separate nation, a special people-and you must be also, if you would be saved!”

You may say, “At this rate very few will be saved.” I answer, “I know it. It is precisely what we are told in the Sermon on the Mount.” The Lord Jesus said so thousands of years ago. “Small is the gate and narrow the road that leads to life, and only a few find it” (Matthew 7:14-note). Few will be saved, because few will take the trouble to seek salvation. Men will not deny themselves the pleasures of sin and their own way for a little season. They turn their backs on an “inheritance that can never perish, spoil or fade.” “You refuse to come to me to have life” (John 5:40).

You may say, “These are hard sayings: the way is very narrow.” I answer, “I know it. So says the Sermon on the Mount.” The Lord Jesus said so thousands of years ago. He always said that men must take up the cross daily, and that they must be ready to cut off their hand or foot, if they would be His disciples. It is in religion as it is in other things, “there are no gains without pains.” That which costs nothing is worth nothing.

Whatever we may think fit to say, we must be holy, if we would see the Lord. Where is our Christianity if we are not? We must not merely have a Christian name, and Christian knowledge; we must have a Christian character also. We must be saints on earth, if ever we want to be saints in heaven. God has said it, and He will not go back on His word: “Without holiness no one will see the Lord.” “The Pope’s calendar only makes saints of the dead, but Scripture requires holiness in the living” [Jenkyn]. That godly preacher Owen said, “Do not let men deceive themselves; sanctification is a qualification that is indispensable for those who are saved by the Lord Christ. He leads no one to heaven except those whom He sanctifies on the earth. This living Head will not admit any dead members.”

Surely we needn’t wonder that Scripture says “You must be born again” (John 3:7). Surely it is clear as the noonday sun that many professing Christians need a complete change-new hearts, new natures-if they are ever to be saved. Old things must pass away-they must become new creations. “Without holiness no one,” no matter who they are, “will see the Lord.”

2) Let me, for another thing, speak a little to believers. I ask you this question, “Do you think you feel the importance of holiness as much as you should?”

I admit I fear the attitude of the times about this subject. I really doubt whether it holds that place which it deserves in the thoughts and attitudes of some of the Lord’s people. I would humbly suggest that we are apt to overlook the doctrine of growing in grace (2Pet 3:18-note, 1Peter 2:1-note, 1Pe 2:2, 3-note), and that we do not sufficiently consider how very far a person may go in a profession of Christianity, and yet have no grace, and be dead in God’s sight. I believe that Judas Iscariot seemed very much like the other Apostles. When the Lord warned them that one would betray Him, no one said, “Is it Judas?” We had better think more about the Churches of Sardis and Laodicea than we do.

I have no desire to make an idol of holiness. I do not wish to dethrone Christ, and put holiness in His place. But I must candidly say, I wish holiness was more thought of in this day than it seems to be, and I therefore take this opportunity to press the subject on all believers who are listening to this sermon. I fear it is sometimes forgotten that God has married together **justification** and **sanctification**. They are distinct and different things, beyond question, but one is never found without the other. All justified people are sanctified, and all sanctified are justified. What God has joined together let no man dare to put asunder. Don’t tell me of your **justification**, unless you have also some **marks of sanctification**. Do not boast **Christ’s work for you**, unless you can show us the **Spirit’s work in you**. Do not think that Christ and the Spirit can ever be divided. I do not doubt that many believers know these things, but I think it good for us to remember them. Let us prove that we know them by our lives. Let us try to keep in view this text more continually: “Make every effort to...be holy; without holiness no one will see the Lord.”

I must frankly say I wish there was not such an excessive sensitivity on the subject of holiness as I sometimes perceive in the minds

of believers. A man might really think it was a dangerous subject to handle, because it is touched so cautiously! Yet surely when we have exalted Christ as “the way, the truth, and the life,” we cannot err in speaking strongly about what should be the character of His people. Rutherford said it well, “The way that says that a person doesn’t need works and sanctification, is not the way of grace. Believing and doing are blood-friends.”

I say it with all reverence, and it must be said-I sometimes fear if Christ were on the earth now, there would be many who would think His preaching was legalistic; and if Paul were writing his Epistles, there are those who would think he had better not write the latter part of most of them as he did. But let us remember that the Lord Jesus did preach the Sermon on the Mount, and that the Epistle to the Ephesians contains six chapters and not four. I grieve to feel obliged to speak in this way, but I am sure there is a cause.

That great preacher, John Owen, used to say, in the 17th century, that there were people whose whole religion seemed to consist in going about complaining of their own sinfulness, and telling everyone that they themselves could do nothing about it. I am afraid that today the same thing might be said with truth of some of Christ’s professing people. I know there are texts in Scripture which warrant such complaints. I do not object to them when they come from people who walk in the steps of the Apostle Paul, and fight a good fight, as he did, against sin, the devil, and the world. But I never like such complaints when I see evidence for suspecting, as I often do, that they are only a cloak to cover spiritual laziness, and an excuse for spiritual sloth. If we say with Paul, “What a wretched man I am!” let us also be able to say with him, “I press on toward the goal.” Let us not quote his example in one thing, and then not follow him in another” (Romans 7:24-note; Philippians 3:14-note). I do not set up myself to be better than other people, and if anyone asks, “What are you, that you speak in this way?” I answer, “I am a very poor creature indeed.” **But I say that I cannot read the Bible without desiring to see many believers more spiritual, more holy, more heavenly-minded, more whole-hearted than they are in the present day. I want to see among believers more of a pilgrim spirit, a more determined separation from the world, a conversation more evidently in heaven, a closer walk with God-and therefore I have spoken as I have.** Is it not true that we need a higher standard of personal holiness in this day? Where is our patience? Where is our zeal? Where is our love? Where are our works? Where is the power of Christianity to be seen, as it was in the past? Where is that unmistakable tone which used to distinguish the saints of old, and shake the world? Truly our silver has become dross, our wine mixed with water, and our salt has very little savor. We are all more than half asleep. The night is far spent, and the day is at hand (Ro 13:11-note, Ro 13:12-note, Ro 13:13, 14-note). Let us wakeup, and sleep no more. Let us open our eyes wider than we have done before. “Let us throw off everything that hinders and the sin that so easily entangles.”-“Let us purify ourselves from everything that contaminates body and spirit, perfecting holiness out of reverence for God” (Heb 12:1-note; 2Cor 7:1-note). “Did Christ die,” says Owen, “and will sin live? Was He crucified in the world, and will we love the world? Oh, where is the spirit of him, who by the cross of Christ was crucified to the world, and the world to him!”

III. Let me, in the last place, offer a word of advice to all who desire to be holy.

Do you want to be holy? Do you want to become a new creation? Then you must begin with Christ. You will do nothing at all, and make no progress until you feel your sin and weakness, and run to Him. He is the root and beginning of all holiness, and the way to be holy is to come to Him by faith and be joined to Him. Christ is not only wisdom and righteousness to His people, but sanctification also. Men sometimes try, first of all, to make themselves holy, and they make sad work of it. They toil and labor, and make many resolutions, and make many changes; and yet, like the woman with the issue of blood, before she came to Christ, they feel that “instead of getting better they grew worse” (Mark 5:26). They run in vain, and labor in vain; and little wonder, for they are beginning at the wrong end. They are building up a wall of sand; their work runs down as fast as they throw it up. They are bailing water out of a leaky vessel: the leak gains on them, not they on the leak. No man can lay any other foundation of “holiness” than that which Paul laid, even Christ Jesus. “Apart from Christ we can do nothing” (John 15:5). It is a strong but true saying that, “Wisdom without Christ is damning folly-righteousness without Christ is guilt and condemnation-holiness without Christ is filth and sin-redemption without Christ is bondage and slavery” [Traill’s].

Do you want to attain holiness? Do you feel today a real heart desire to be holy? Do you want to be a partaker of the divine nature? Then go to Christ. Wait for nothing. Wait for nobody. Do not delay. Do not even think about trying to make yourself ready. Go and say to Him, in the words of that beautiful hymn-

*“Nothing in my hand I bring,
Simply to Thy cross I cling;
Naked, flee to Thee for dress;
Helpless, look to Thee for grace.”*

There is not a brick nor a stone laid in the work of our sanctification until we go to Christ. Holiness is His special gift to His believing people. Holiness is the work He carries on in their hearts, by the Spirit whom He puts within them. He is appointed a “Prince and Savior that he might give repentance and forgiveness of sins.”-“To all who received him, to those who believed in his name, he gave

the right to become children of God" (Acts 5:31; John 1:12). Holiness does not come from blood-parents cannot give it to their children: nor from the will of man-ministers cannot give it you by baptism. Holiness comes from Christ. It is the result of vital union with Him (see "[Union With Christ](#)" - see also in Christ and in Christ Jesus and in Christ). It is the fruit of being a living branch of the True Vine. Then go to Christ and say, "Lord, save me not only from the guilt of sin, but send the Spirit, whom you promised, and save me from its power. Make me holy. Teach me to do your will."

Do you want to continue to be holy?

Then remain in Christ. He Himself says, "Remain in me, and I will remain in you-If a man remains in me and I in him, he will bear much fruit" (John 15:5). God was pleased to have all his fullness dwell in Christ-a fullness for all a believer's wants. He is the **Physician** to whom you must go to each day, if you want to stay well. He is the **Manna** which you must daily eat, and the **Rock** of which you must daily drink. **His arm** is the arm on which you must daily lean, as you come up out of the wilderness of this world. You must not only be rooted, you must also be built up in Him (Col 2:7-note). Paul was a man of God-a holy man-a growing, thriving Christian-and what was the secret of it all? He was one to whom Christ was "all in all". He was always "looking to Jesus". "I can do everything," he says, "through Christ who gives me strength." "I no longer live, but Christ lives in me. The life I live in the body, I live by faith in the Son of God." Let us go and do likewise (Heb 12:2-note; Phil 4:13-note; Gal 2:20-note).

May all of you know these things by experience, and not by hearsay only. May we all feel the importance of holiness, far more than we have ever done yet! May our years be holy years with our souls, and then they will be happy ones! Whether we live, may we live to the Lord; or whether we die, may we die to the Lord; or if He comes for us, may we be found in peace, without spot, and blameless! Amen.

(Editorial Note: Bolding and Scripture links added)

See Related Work by J C Ryle "[We Must Be Holy](#)", "[Suppose An Unholy Man Went to Heaven](#)"

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