

A Hunger for Holiness - Possibility

REVIEW: For the last several weeks we have been looking at the topic of holiness. First we looked at our problem with holiness. We often times don't take holiness very seriously. As a result our lives are not always marked by the obedience that they should be, it can affect our view of heaven (not really being a holy place), and evangelism can turn into a numbers game because we just want someone to pray the prayer, and we never speak of a changed life that seeks God. We also looked at both our need for holiness, and that it is why we were redeemed - to be holy, and holiness is necessary for our redemption. We then started to zero in on the target by looking at what holiness is not, and what it is. Finally we looked at the motivation for holiness - the commands of Scripture.

TRAN: Today we are going to look at how our obedience is pleasing to God and and that holiness, really is possible.

INTRO: I have been working through a process of changing our church over to what I am convinced is a more biblical, and efficient form or church government. To say that the process is moving slow would be an understatement. And that is not altogether bad. Changing a church's form of government rapidly can cause disaster.

In all the reading of books and the theology of the church, the one area that comes to the forefront is the character of the people put into leadership. God was very specific about the requirements for those that wish to lead HIS church.

It has always been my experience that most people that are considered for eldership or even deacons, feel inadequate when they read the lists that Paul gave us in 1 Timothy 3 and Titus 1. Unfortunately, some people seem to turn those into goals or lofty ideals that they will never reach. And in some respects you understand that. When I read the list of character requirements in those passages I have to admit: there are times I still have a temper, I can be quarrelsome at times, when it says "blameless" I almost have to laugh because I live with myself.

TRAN: We all seem to understand this. No one is perfect. But why do we think the qualifications for elders mean perfection. God was not expecting little Messiahs for every church, but people that exemplify what it means to be a follower of Christ. But that is my point, too often we confuse holiness with perfection. Which leads to an unbiblical conclusion that holiness is not possible. It's one thing to be humble about our holiness (let's face it, I would be very cautious about someone coming to share their stories of how holy they are), but it is another thing to act like holiness is unattainable.

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- I. I will state it plainly, holiness is possible
 - A. If we do not understand that, if we do not believe that, then any pursuit of holiness is just foolish
 1. We won't really pursue holiness if we think that we can't attain it
 2. And there are many of us that think this way - oh we disguise it well
 - a) We say things like, "No matter how hard I try, I can't love God with all my heart. My heart is desperately wicked."
 - b) Sounds humble, and even biblical - but ask yourself, "Why would God ask us to love Him with all of our hearts if He knew it was impossible."
 - B. When we act like holiness is out of our reach, we actually do damage to God's Word and how it describes people
 1. Luke 1:5-6 - Zechariah and Elizabeth
 - a) How many believe that they were perfect, and without sin?
 - b) It says that they followed all of God's commands - could that include keeping the law of the time in how to atone for their sins?
 - c) I would think so - when they became aware of their sin, they followed God's law - the point is they were obedient, even when they sinned, they followed God's command
 2. Job 1:8 - Job was "blameless and upright"
 - a) Again, do we believe that he was perfect and sinless?
 - b) While I am not sure you would call it sin, later in the book, Job gets yelled at by God - "Stand there like a man, and I will now question you!"
 3. What about David - "a man after God's own heart" is what he is called
 - a) We all know what David did
 - b) Slept with another man's wife, getting her pregnant, tried to cover it up by getting her husband to sleep with his wife, and when he refused out of a sense of duty to the military, David had Uriah killed
 - (1) Does that sound like a man after God's own heart to you?
 4. What I am driving at here is that the Bible describes these folks as "blameless" "upright" "righteous" "people after His heart" and yet they were not perfect people
 - a) It indicates that while we may view ourselves as imperfect people, we can be holy, we can be righteous, we can be blameless
 5. What God expects from us is that our lives are marked by things like: love, joy, peace, patience, etc.
 - a) Rather than His followers being know for sexual immorality, idolatry, theft, greed, etc.
 - b) God does expect that we will be holy

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- (1) And He created us for good works (Eph. 2:10)
 - (2) “for it is God who works in you to will and to act in order to fulfill his good purpose.” - Phil. 2:13
 - (a) He gives you the power and ability to be holy
- II. If holiness is so obviously possible in the Bible, why do we find it difficult to believe that we can be holy - beyond just being declared holy by God
- A. I think one of the first reasons is this false humility that has taken hold in modern day may very well be an overreaction to the so called “holy rollers” - those folks that act like they have the Christian life all figured out, and you can see their holiness coming a mile away
1. Basically the modern day version of the Pharisees
 2. They have all the external issues covered so that they APPEAR to be holy
 3. And these are the two extremes: Pharisee on one hand, and thinking we are incapable of holiness on the other
 - a) The problem is, both are unbiblical
 - b) Jesus dealt a great deal with the attitude and self-righteousness of the Pharisees, so I will simply refer you to the gospels to see what He said about their behavior
 - c) Today I am just zeroing in on what seems like the pendulum swinging too far back the other way in saying that we can't really be holy
- B. Another big reason for the pendulum swing is, as we hinted at before, we equate obedience and perfection
1. When God called us to walk in a manner worthy of our calling, if that means we never lose our temper, never lust, never covet, never do something with mixed motives, then of course, holiness is impossible
 2. If we are to be filled with every virtue with no room to grow, than pleasing God is impossible
 3. Expecting the holiness = perfection is not the answer
 4. So let's think about this
 - a) Most of us don't struggle with much of the “do not” commands in the Bible
 - (1) Some of them, probably
 - (2) But few of us have to place “Do not murder” into our schedules
 - b) The other commands of all that we should do - those can be rough
 - (1) It seems like there is not enough time to be the dad you want to be
 - (a) Or the husband, or the wife
 - (b) We feel like we do not pray enough

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- (c) We don't exemplify the character we should in being loving, and joyful
- (2) And if we do have a day like that, it probably means we are in heaven
- c) But God is not looking for our good works to be flawless
 - (1) If that were true, we would never have heard David called "a man after God's heart"
- 5. The fact is that our sanctification
 - a) And by that I do NOT mean our positional sanctification - that is when God has set us apart - that is when God makes us holy in His sight because of the righteousness of Christ that we received by grace through faith
 - b) I mean our practical sanctification - the working out of living up to what we are - living out God's commands
 - c) Our sanctification will always be imperfect in this life
 - (1) We will always face the corruption of sin in this world
 - d) However, it is by the Spirit of God that we will grow in sanctification and grace
 - (1) Our good works are accepted by God, not because our actions are perfect in God's sight
 - (2) Our good works are accepted by God because God is pleased through Christ to accept our sincere obedience, even though our obedience still contains weaknesses and imperfections
 - (a) Much of this has been laid out in the Westminster Confession of Faith
 - e) So God works, by His grace in us to bring about obedience
 - f) But it is also His grace that makes our imperfections in obedience acceptable in His sight
- 6. Consider this, since we have talked about Ephesians 2 a lot this year
 - a) The fact that God accepts our actions of obedience, even though flawed sometimes is incredible
 - b) Especially when you consider that it comes from a heart that was DEAD in sin before
 - c) "That you and I have any law-abiding willing and doing is a miracle of God's grace." - Kevin DeYoung

III. "Our righteousness is as filthy rags"

- A. Turn to Isaiah 64:6 - "6 All of us have become like one who is unclean, and all our righteous acts are like filthy rags; we all shrivel up like a leaf,"
 - 1. This is a verse that many people cite in order to prove their point that even our best actions are like filthy rags in God's sight

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2. If you study and read this in context, the “righteous acts” are the rituals Israel did without sincere faith and obedience to God
 - a) They were the things they did because “that’s what you do”
 - (1) We can name all kinds of those that creep in the church today
 - (a) Reciting the Lord’s Prayer
 - i) Is it a good thing? Of course
 - ii) Unless you do it because, “That’s what you do when you go to church”
 - (b) Making the sign of the cross
 - i) It began as a sincere desire in asking the Lord to protect your heart
 - ii) But you do it because that is what you do in church...
 - (2) These are the kinds of acts that Isaiah was referring to
 - b) Isaiah is filled with God telling Israel, “I’m not impressed with your actions because they are not coming from a sincere heart to follow Me”
 - c) So we should not think that every righteous deed is an insult to God, and unacceptable in His sight
 - (1) John Piper puts it this way, “It is gloriously true that none of God’s people, before or after the cross, would be accepted by an immaculately holy God if the perfect righteousness of Christ were not imputed to us. But that does not mean that God does not produce in those “justified” people and experiential righteousness that is not “filthy rags.”
 - (2) He goes on to say, this righteousness “is required, not as the grounds for our justification (which is the righteousness of Christ only), but as evidence of our being truly justified children of God.”
 - (a) Which is what we say often - we are not saved BY our good works
 - (b) We are saved TO good works
- B. So let’s look at a few verses that show us that our actions do please God
 1. Colossians 1:9-10 - when we are filled with His knowledge we can live a life that pleases Him in every way
 2. Romans 12:1 - offering ourselves to God is “holy and pleasing”
 3. Colossians 3:20 - The parents will love me and the kids will hate me for this one - Obeying mom and dad pleases God
 4. 1 Timothy 2:1-3 - Praying and submitting to governing authorities pleases God
 5. 1 Timothy 5:4 - taking care of family pleases God

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6. Hebrews 13:16 - sharing with others pleases God
 7. 1 John 3:22 - Keeping His commands pleases God
 - a) Are we seeing a pattern developing
 - b) God is pleased with our actions
 - c) Our actions are not all filthy rags - we do please God when we obey - even if we do it imperfectly
- C. When we think this way, that holiness is impossible, we paint a picture of God that He is hard and unmoved by our heart-felt attempts at obedience
1. It is the exact opposite of the Prodigal Father
 2. What we need to understand is that God is more like Brandon's Father
 - a) Read "Brandon's Mess" from Hot Illustrations for Youth Talks
 - b) That is our Father - Even though we messed things up, He sees our sincere love and effort at pleasing Him
- IV. Two other things we need to deal with that we often get confused from what the Bible does say
- A. First is the idea that every sin is the same to God
1. Taking this idea too far leads to some problems
 - a) Some people, out of a sense of humility think they have no right to judge others because "every sin is the same to God"
 - b) Some Christians use it to dodge the tough questions and social issues - e.g. "Yes, homosexuality is a sin, but it is no worse than any other sin."
 - c) When we see all sins as the same, we are less likely to fight against any sin
 - (1) Why stop sleeping with my girlfriend when if I just look at her and lust after her its all the same
 2. The problem with this idea that all sins are the same to God is that it is partial correct
 - a) James 2:10 - If you fail to keep part of the law, you have broken the entire law
 - (1) Any sin committed against a holy God deserves punishment
 - (2) However, please understand that this is talking in a judicial sense, not in some sense of a ranking of sin
 - b) R.C. Sproul says "The idea of gradation of sin is important to keep in mind so we understand the difference between sin and gross sin."
 3. All sins are in need of forgiveness from God, but the Bible does teach that some sins are more offensive than others
 - a) Think about the OT law. God made distinction for intentional sin, and unintentional sin
 - (1) There were different penalties for different sins

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- (2) That points to the fact that some sins were of greater offense than others
- (3) Numbers 15:29-30
- (4) So basically, say a choice word or two when you stub your toe on the way to the bathroom in the middle of the night is still sin, but flipping God off with bold intentionality - more offensive
- b) Jeremiah 32:35 - sacrificing children to a false god, far worse than yelling at your kid when you had a bad day
- c) Jesus told the disciples that it would be more bearable for Sodom and Gomorrah on the day of judgement than for people that refuse to welcome them in and hear their message
 - (1) That is a gradation of punishment
- 4. It may seem like a good thing or a humble thing to say all sin is the same
 - a) But we lose a measure of motivation to seek holiness
 - b) We lose ability to hold each other accountable
 - (1) Next thing you know, the elder who took a second look at the woman at the mall is no longer able to discipline someone cheating on his wife without a care in the world
 - c) Our own legal system differentiates punishments for offenses - surely God, the God of the universe understands that too
- B. The last thing we have to deal with is taking our standing in Christ too far and thinking we can never displease God
 - 1. Seems logical doesn't it - we have been saved, justified, sanctified, and as the Gospel Revolution taught us, "There is nothing I can do to cause God to love me more, and nothing I can do to cause God to love me less."
 - a) So we're covered right?
 - b) Not like that - it's not a free pass
 - 2. But please understand the difference between condemnation, and discipline
 - a) Romans 8:1 - There is therefore no condemnation for those that are in Christ Jesus
 - (1) If you have placed your faith in Jesus Christ, you will NEVER face condemnation
 - b) You will face discipline
 - (1) God will not have His children acting like bunch of fools
 - (2) He will step in and deal with our disobedience if we continue to ignore Him and pursue sinful behavior
 - 3. Think of these scriptures

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- a) Revelation 2:4 - Jesus had something against the church that He loved
- b) Hebrews 12:7 - God treats us as his children and disciplines us
 - (1) Simply because He disciplines means He can become displeased with our behavior
 - (2) This is where several people in recent years regarding current social issues spin off into theological error
 - (a) God will always love us, and is always for us
 - (b) But love does not mean that He will affirm every action we take as good
 - i) Love demands doing what is in our best interest
 - ii) Even when we don't see what that best interest is
- 4. So we are joined in union with Christ the moment we place our faith in Him
 - a) When we sin, that union is never in broken
 - b) But our communion with God is
- 5. Just like a parent
 - a) Any good parent will always love their child, because they are their child - that's all the reason they need
 - b) But, the child can do things that displease the parent
 - (1) For some children it just takes the disapproving frown to put them back into line
 - (2) For others, they need the rod of discipline
- 6. God will always love His true children - but with that love comes correction as it is needed

V. Conclusion

- A. So how is holiness possible
- B. Paul gives us the hint when he tells the Corinthians to examine themselves
 - 1. We examine ourselves - daily
 - 2. We confess our sins when we are aware of them - keeping short accounts with God
 - 3. We ask God to reveal sins we may not see as sins
 - a) And we take seriously what God shows us
- C. It is a character, a lifestyle that we seek of holiness
 - 1. We should neither walk around feeling as if we are sinless
 - 2. Nor should we walk around feeling guilty
 - 3. When we seek a lifestyle of holiness, we should be confident because we are seeking a lifestyle of obedience to God