

KEVIN DEYOUNG

THE

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*Filling the Gap between Gospel Passion
and the Pursuit of Godliness*

“This book is vintage DeYoung—ruthlessly biblical.”

John Piper, Pastor for Preaching and Vision, Bethlehem Baptist Church,
Twin Cities, Minnesota

“My heart resonated deeply when I first heard Kevin speak on this subject. His message is a wake-up call to God’s people—timely, prophetic, and desperately needed in our day. As a gifted theologian and thinker, Kevin tackles many of the biblical intricacies and nuances of true holiness. As a pastor, he evidences sincere compassion and concern for the condition of the flock. As a fellow pilgrim, he gets to the heart of ways of thinking and living that keep us from reflecting our holy God in this dark world. As a servant and lover of Christ, he holds out a vision of the beauty and power of personal holiness.”

Nancy Leigh DeMoss, author, *Revive Our Hearts* radio host

“Holiness was once a central component of following Christ. But for many today, the Christian life is little more than a celebration of cheap grace and pseudo-liberty, with a high tolerance for sin. In this well-written and much-needed book, Kevin DeYoung thoughtfully points us to an unpopular yet strangely liberating truth—that God is holy and expects *us* to be holy. With no hint of legalism or drudgery, Kevin offers a balanced and engaging view of law and grace. Kevin DeYoung is one of my favorite writers, and this book demonstrates why. I repeatedly said ‘Yes!’ as I turned these pages. I’m convinced that Christ-followers desperately need to read, discuss, and live out the timely, God-exalting message of *The Hole in Our Holiness!*”

Randy Alcorn, founder and director, Eternal Perspective Ministries;
author, *If God Is Good and Heaven*

“Grace is too amazing to save us from sin’s guilt only to leave us under its cruel tyranny. In this book, Kevin DeYoung reminds us that the gospel is the ground of our justification and sanctification. At the same time, he reminds us of the many exhortations in Scripture to pursue godliness as the fruit of our union with Christ in the power of the Spirit. *The Hole in Our Holiness* offers important reflections on a crucial topic in the ongoing conversation about the joys and struggles of the Christian life.”

Michael Horton, Professor of Theology, Westminster Seminary
California; author, *The Christian Faith: A Systematic Theology for
Pilgrims on the Way*

“One might expect a book about holiness to be heavy on finger-pointing, leaning toward legalism, and embarrassingly out-of-touch. But *The Hole in Our Holiness* is none of those things. Instead, Kevin DeYoung gets specific about what Spirit-infused, gospel-driven effort toward holiness looks like. Going way past ‘try harder’ and ‘believe better,’ this book implants in readers not just a longing to be holy but real hope that it could happen.”

Nancy Guthrie, author of the Seeing Jesus in the Old Testament Bible study series

“J. C. Ryle wrote his classic *Holiness* out of a concern that ‘practical holiness and entire consecration to God are not sufficiently attended to by modern Christians in this country.’ It is with the same prescient concern and pastoral insight that my friend Kevin DeYoung has written what I consider to be the modern equivalent, urging a new generation of Christians to obey God’s command to ‘be holy, for I am holy.’ May *The Hole in Our Holiness* do for our time what *Holiness* did in a previous age: promote gospel-centered holiness in Christians and churches around the world.”

C. J. Mahaney, Sovereign Grace Ministries

“The strength of this book lies in its biblical understanding that all great renewal is founded upon knowing the goodness and holiness of God. We are commanded to be holy because he is holy, and only in Christ can we be trained accordingly: ‘For the grace of God has appeared bringing salvation to all people, training us to renounce ungodliness and worldly passions, and to live self-controlled, upright, and godly lives in the present age’ (Titus 2:11). I pray that Kevin’s words would be read widely and that the church might be known as a people ‘zealous for good works’ upon seeing the Father’s holiness and Christ’s redeeming work.”

John M. Perkins, President, John M. Perkins Foundation for Reconciliation and Development

“I have loved being under Kevin’s teaching during my college years, specifically on this matter of holiness. This is indispensable reading material for all who desire a life of piety. Though we are fallen people, Kevin points us to our potential for godliness and how our progress in this area is of the utmost importance. Get your highlighter ready!”

Kirk Cousins, former starting quarterback, Michigan State University; quarterback, Washington Redskins

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KEVIN DEYOUNG

 **CROSSWAY**
WHEATON, ILLINOIS

The Hole in Our Holiness: Filling the Gap between Gospel Passion and the Pursuit of Godliness

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To the elders and pastors at
University Reformed Church,
with gratitude for their hard work
and their pursuit of holiness.

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Chapter One

MIND THE GAP

I've never understood the attraction of camping. Although I have plenty of friends and relatives who are avid campers, it's always seemed strange to me that someone would work hard all year so they can go live outside for a week. I get the togetherness stuff, but why do it in tents with community toilets? As an adventure, I sort of understand camping. You strap a pack on your back and go hike God's creation. Cool. But packing up the van like Noah's ark and driving to a mosquito infested campground where you reconstitute an inconvenient version of your kitchen and your bedroom just doesn't make sense. Who decided that vacation should be like normal life, only harder?

Every year our church advertises "family camp." Every year my wife wants to go, and every year we surprisingly end up in some other state during our church's allotted week. As best I can tell, the appeal of family camp is that the kids, unbothered by parental involvement, run around free and dirty sunup to sundown—a sort of *Lord of the Flies* for little Michiganders. But as appealing as it sounds to have absentee offspring and downtime with my friends, there must be a cleaner, less humid way to export the children for a week (isn't that what VBS is for?). And even if the kids have a great time, the weather holds up, no one needs stitches, and the seventeenth hot dog tastes as good as the first, it will still be difficult to get all the sand out of my books.

I know there are a lot of die-hard campers in the world. I

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don't fault you for your hobby. It's just not my thing. I didn't grow up camping. My family wasn't what you'd call "outdoorsy." We weren't against the outdoors or anything. We often saw it through our windows and walked through it on our way to stores. But we never once went camping. We didn't own a tent, an RV, or Fifth Wheel. No one hunted. No one fished. Even our grill was inside (seriously, a Jenn-Air; look it up).

I've been largely ignorant of camping my whole life. And I'm okay with that. It's one more thing I don't need to worry about in life. Camping may be great for other people, but I'm content to never talk about it, never think about it, and never do it. Knock yourself out with the cooler and collapsible chairs, but camping is not required of me, and I'm fine without it.

HOLINESS IS THE NEW CAMPING

Is it possible you look at personal holiness like I look at camping? It's fine for other people. You sort of respect those who make their lives harder than they have to be. But it's not really your thing. You didn't grow up with a concern for holiness. It wasn't something you talked about. It wasn't what your family prayed about or your church emphasized. So, to this day, it's not your passion. The pursuit of holiness feels like one more thing to worry about in your already impossible life. Sure, it would be great to be a better person, and you do hope to avoid the really big sins. But you figure, since we're saved by grace, holiness is not required of you, and frankly, your life seems fine without it.

The hole in our holiness is that we don't really care much about it. Passionate exhortation to pursue gospel-driven holiness is barely heard in most of our churches. It's not that we don't talk about sin or encourage decent behavior. Too many sermons are basically self-help seminars on becoming a better you. That's mor-

alism, and it's not helpful. Any gospel which says only what you *must do* and never announces what Christ *has done* is no gospel at all. So I'm not talking about getting beat up every Sunday for watching *SportsCenter* and driving an SUV. I'm talking about the failure of Christians, especially younger generations and especially those most disdainful of "religion" and "legalism," to take seriously one of the great aims of our redemption and one of the required evidences for eternal life—our holiness.

J. C. Ryle, a nineteenth-century Bishop of Liverpool, was right: "We must be holy, because *this is one grand end and purpose* for which Christ came into the world. . . . Jesus is a complete Saviour. He does not merely take away the guilt of a believer's sin, he does more—he breaks its power (1 Pet. 1:2; Rom. 8:29; Eph. 1:4; 2 Tim. 1:9; Heb. 12:10)."¹ My fear is that as we rightly celebrate, and in some quarters rediscover, all that Christ has saved us *from*, we are giving little thought and making little effort concerning all that Christ has saved us *to*. Shouldn't those most passionate about the gospel and God's glory also be those most dedicated to the pursuit of godliness? I worry that there is an enthusiasm gap and no one seems to mind.

WHO SAYS?

How do I know there is a hole in our holiness? Well, I don't. Who can possibly assess the state of the evangelical church or the church in North America, let alone the church around the globe? I could give you statistics about pastoral meltdowns or figures about the worldliness of the average churchgoer. You've probably seen them before and paid little attention. Anyone can say anything with statistics. Seventy-three percent of registered voters know that.

¹J. C. Ryle, *Holiness: Its Nature, Hindrances, Difficulties, and Roots* (Moscow, ID: Charles Nolan, 2011), 49 (emphasis mine).

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So I make no claim to have scientifically proven that Christians are neglecting the pursuit of holiness. But I'm not the first to think there is something missing in the contemporary church scene. In his book *Rediscovering Holiness*, J. I. Packer claims that present-day believers find holiness passé.² He cites three pieces of evidence: (1) We do not hear about holiness in preaching and books. (2) We do not insist upon holiness in our leaders. (3) We do not touch upon the need for personal holiness in our evangelism. These observations sound right to me.

But if you don't want to take Packer's word for it, think about these three diagnostic questions based on three passages of Scripture:

1. Is Our Obedience Known to All?

In most of Paul's letters he gives his churches a lot of encouragement. He usually begins by saying something like, "I'm so thankful for you. You guys are awesome. I think about you all the time, and when I do, it makes me praise God." He's a proud spiritual papa. But he wasn't passing out "My Christian is an honor roll saint at the Apostolic School for the Gifted" bumper stickers. He didn't have to. Others noticed for themselves. In Romans 16:19, for example, Paul says, "your obedience is known to all." Granted, reputations can be wrong (Rev. 3:1), and the Romans had their own issues to work out. But this commendation at the end of Romans forces us to ask the question: Is obedience what your church is known for? Is it what other Christians think of when they look at your life? Is this even what you would want to be known for? "Creativity" or "relevance" or "world-changer" might sound better than boring old obedience.

²J. I. Packer, *Rediscovering Holiness: Know the Fullness of Life with God* (Ventura, CA: Regal, 2009), 31–32.

I'm challenged by the Puritans in this regard. I know you might hear "Puritan" and imagine a perpetual party-pooper who "has a sneaking suspicion that someone somewhere is having a good time."³ But the real Puritans were not like that. They enjoyed God's good gifts while at the same time pursuing godliness as among God's greatest gifts. That's why one theologian described Puritanism as a Reformed holiness movement.⁴ They were fallible but Bible-believing Christians passionate in their pursuit of God and godliness. Puritan spirituality was not focused on spiritual gifts, or experience for its own sake, or losing oneself in a mysterious cloud of unknowing. Puritan spirituality was about growing in holiness. It was about Christians becoming visible saints. That's why they defined theology as "the doctrine of living to God" (William Ames) or "the science of living blessedly forever" (William Perkins).⁵ Their passion and prayer was for holiness. Can we honestly say our lives and our churches are marked by the same pursuit?

2. *Is Our Heaven a Holy Place?*

In Revelation 21 we get a stunning glimpse of the new heaven and new earth. While most Christians are naturally curious about this recreated world, the Bible doesn't actually give a lot of specifics. But what we do know is what we really need to know. The new Jerusalem is glorious—it shines with the radiance of God's presence. The new Jerusalem is safe—there is no more suffering, no more chaotic sea, and no more closed gates (because there are no more enemies). And most importantly for our purposes, the new

³Attributed to H. L. Mencken.

⁴Richard Lovelace, "Afterword: The Puritans and Spiritual Renewal," in *The Devoted Life: An Invitation to the Puritan Classics*, ed. Kelly M. Kopic and Ronald C. Gleason (Downers Grove, IL: InterVarsity Press, 2004), 301.

⁵*Ibid.*

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Jerusalem is holy—not only has the bride been purified but the dimensions of the city suggest that heaven is a reconstituting of the Holy of Holies.

In some popular conceptions of the afterlife, God's love gets reduced to unconditional affirmation. But in truth, God's love is always a holy love and his heaven is an entirely holy place. Heaven is for those who conquer, for those who overcome the temptation to abandon Jesus Christ and compromise their faith (Rev. 21:7; see also Revelation 2–3). “But,” Revelation 21:8 goes on to say, “as for the cowardly, the faithless, the detestable, as for murderers, the sexually immoral, sorcerers, idolaters, and all liars, their portion will be in the lake that burns with fire and sulfur, which is the second death.” No matter what you profess, if you show disregard for Christ by giving yourself over to sin—impenitently and habitually—then heaven is not your home.

Do you know why so many Christians are caving on the issue of homosexuality? Certainly cultural pressure plays a big role. But our failure to really understand the holiness of heaven is another significant factor. If heaven is a place of universal acceptance for all pretty nice people, why should anyone make a big deal about homosexuality here on earth? Many Christians have never been taught that sorcerers and murderers and idolaters and everyone who loves and practices falsehood will be left outside the gates of heaven (Rev. 22:15). So they do not have the guts (or the compassion) to say that the unrepentantly sexually immoral will not be welcomed in either, which is exactly what Revelation 21–22 teaches.

Because God's new world is free from every stain or hint of sin, it's hard to imagine how we could enjoy heaven without holiness. As J. C. Ryle reminds us, heaven is a holy place. The Lord of heaven is a holy God. The angels are holy creatures. The inhabit-

ants are holy saints. Holiness is written on everything in heaven. And nothing unholy can enter into this heaven (Rev. 21:27; Heb. 12:14). Even if you could enter heaven without holiness, what would you do? What joy would you feel there? What holy man or woman of God would you sit down with for fellowship? Their pleasures are not your pleasures. Their character is not your character. What they love, you do not love. If you dislike a holy God now, why would you want to be with him forever? If worship does not capture your attention at present, what makes you think it will thrill you in some heavenly future? If ungodliness is your delight here on earth, what will please you in heaven, where all is clean and pure? You would not be happy there if you are not holy here.⁶ Or as Spurgeon put it, “Sooner could a fish live upon a tree than the wicked in Paradise.”⁷

3. *Are We Great Commission Christians?*

Here’s a quick quiz: summarize the Great Commission Jesus gives at the end of Matthew 28. If you don’t know what that is, go ahead and look it up. But if you know what I’m talking about, think of your two-sentence summary. Don’t quote the verses; just put them in your own words. What does Jesus commission us to do in the Great Commission?

You may have said, “He sends us into the world to evangelize.” Or maybe you said, “He wants us to preach the gospel to the nations.” Or perhaps you said something about making disciples. Those aren’t wrong answers. But do you recall Jesus’ precise instructions? “Go therefore and make disciples of all nations, baptizing them in the name of the Father and of the Son and of the Holy

⁶This paragraph is a summary of Ryle, *Holiness*, 53.

⁷This quote comes from Spurgeon’s commentary on Psalm 1:5 in *The Treasury of David*, which can be found online in numerous places, including <http://www.spurgeon.org/treasury/ps001.htm>.

Spirit, *teaching them to observe all that I have commanded you*” (Matt. 28:19–20a). The word “observe” means more than “take notice of.” It means “obey.” We aren’t asking the nations to look at Jesus’ commands like an interesting Rembrandt. We are teaching the nations to follow his commands. The Great Commission is about holiness. God wants the world to know Jesus, believe in Jesus, *and* obey Jesus. We don’t take the Great Commission seriously if we don’t help each other grow in obedience.

And yet, how many of us usually think of holiness when we think of mission work? How easy it is to be content with leading people to make decisions for Christ instead of focusing on making disciples of Christ. Of course, this doesn’t mean we are merely trying to make good people who live like Jesus. The Great Commission would mean nothing and accomplish nothing were it not for the fact that the one who issued it has “all authority in heaven and on earth” (Matt. 28:18). It is only by trusting in him and being forgiven by his substitutionary sacrifice that we are even capable of walking in his ways. You can’t make good fruit grow from bad trees. The demands of Jesus cannot be separated from his person and work. Whatever holiness he requires is as the fruit of his redeeming work and for the display of his personal glory.⁸ But in all this necessary nuance, do not miss what many churches have overlooked: Jesus expects obedience from his disciples. Passing on the imperatives of Christ is at the heart of the Great Commission.

WHY SO HOLEY?

Everything up to this point begs the question “Why?” Or better yet, “Where?” Where did we get this hole in our holiness? If God’s

⁸These last two sentences paraphrase John Piper, *What Jesus Demands from the World* (Wheaton, IL: Crossway, 2006), 23.

mission in the world is to save unholy people and to sanctify those he saves, if God justifies the ungodly through faith alone and then promises to make the faithful godly, if the Holy One of Israel is in the business of making a holy people for himself—then why does it seem unlikely that any of us are part of a denomination or ministry network or affiliation of friends that has recently been described as any kind of “holiness movement”? Remember, the Puritans (*pure*-itans) did not invent that name for themselves. Their opponents coined the term because they thought the Puritans were so intensely focused on being, well, pure. The pursuit of holiness does not occupy the place in our hearts that it did in theirs. More critically, a concern for holiness is not obvious in our lives like it’s obvious in the pages of Scripture. So why is that? Where did the hole come from?

For starters, it was too common in the past to equate holiness with abstaining from a few taboo practices such as drinking, smoking, and dancing. Godliness meant you avoided the no-no list. Younger generations have little patience for these sorts of rules. In some cases they don’t agree with the rules (e.g., about movies, dancing, gambling). In other instances the rules just seem easy to manage. I know when I was growing up it seemed like holiness meant no alcohol, no drugs, and no sex. I wouldn’t have known how to get drugs if I tried. Beer smelled bad. And there sure as shootin’ wasn’t a long line of girls itching to get close to me. So I felt pretty good.

Related to this first reason is the fear that a passion for holiness makes you some kind of weird holdover from a bygone era. As soon as you share your concern about swearing or about avoiding certain movies or about modesty or sexual purity or self-control or just plain godliness, people look at you like you have a moralistic dab of cream cheese on your face from the 1950s. Believers

get nervous that their friends will call them legalistic, prudish, narrow-minded, old fashioned, holier-than-thou—or worst of all, a fundamentalist.

Another reason for the hole is that our churches have many unregenerate persons in them. While I don't want genuine Christians to walk away from this book questioning their assurance, I do anticipate (and hope) that some professing believers will come to see they haven't really put their trust in Christ. One reason God's holy people do not pursue holiness is that they have not yet been born again by the Holy Spirit. Some pollsters and pundits look at the worldliness of the church and conclude that being born again doesn't make a difference in how people live. We should come to the opposite conclusion; namely, that many churchgoers are not truly born again.⁹ As A. W. Tozer put it, "Plain horse sense ought to tell us that anything that makes no change in the man who professes it makes no difference to God either, and it is an easily observable fact that for countless numbers of persons the change from no-faith to faith makes no actual difference in the life."¹⁰

Our culture of cool is also partly to blame. To be cool means you differentiate yourself from others. That often means pushing the boundaries with language, with entertainment, with alcohol, and with fashion. Of course, holiness is much more than these things, but in an effort to be hip, many Christians have figured holiness has *nothing* to do with these things. They've willingly embraced Christian freedom but without an equal pursuit of Christian virtue.

Among more liberal Christians, the pursuit of holiness can be suspect because labeling any behavior as "ungodly" feels judgmental.

⁹See John Piper, *Finally Alive* (Fearn, Ross-shire, UK: Christian Focus, 2009).

¹⁰A. W. Tozer, *The Best of A. W. Tozer, Volume 1* (Grand Rapids, MI: Baker, 1978), 168.

tal and intolerant. If we are to be “without spot or blemish” (see Eph. 5:27), we need to discern what sort of attitudes, actions, and habits are pure and what sort are impure. This sort of sorting gets you in trouble with the pluralism police.

Among conservative Christians there is sometimes the mistaken notion that if we are truly gospel-centered we won’t talk about rules or imperatives or moral exertion. We are so eager not to confuse indicatives (what God has done) and imperatives (what we should do) that we get leery of letting biblical commands lead uncomfortably to conviction of sin. We’re scared of words like diligence, effort, and duty. Pastors don’t know how to preach the good news in their sermons and still strongly exhort churchgoers to cleanse themselves from every defilement of body and spirit (2 Cor. 7:1). We know legalism (salvation by law keeping) and antinomianism (salvation without the need for law keeping) are both wrong, but antinomianism feels like a much safer danger.

Then there’s the reality that holiness is plain hard work, and we’re often lazy. We like our sins, and dying to them is painful. Almost everything is easier than growing in godliness. So we try and fail, try and fail, and then give up. It’s easier to sign a petition protesting man’s inhumanity to man than to love your neighbor as yourself. It’s one thing to graduate from college ready to change the world. It’s another to be resolute in praying that God would change you.

And finally, many Christians have simply given up on sanctification. I frequently hear from believers who doubt that holiness is even possible. And it’s not just because the process is difficult. It’s because we imagine God to be difficult. If our best deeds are nothing but filthy rags (Isa. 64:6, KJV), why bother? We are all hopeless sinners. We can do nothing to please God. No one is really humble or pure or obedient. The pursuit of holiness is just bound to make

us feel guilty. So we figure all we can really do is cling to Christ. We are loved because of the imputed righteousness of Christ, but personal obedience that pleases God is simply not possible. The truly super-spiritual do not “pursue holiness”; they celebrate their failures as opportunities to magnify the grace of God.

BUT HE (MAY) HAVE THIS AGAINST YOU

I see a growing number of Christians today eager to think about creative ways to engage the culture. It’s not hard to find Christians fired up about planting churches and kingdom work. You can even find lots of believers passionate about precise theology. Yes and Amen to all that. Seriously. There’s no need to tear down what is good and true just because something else good and true may be missing. Jesus commended the churches in Revelation where they were faithful and then challenged them where they were in spiritual danger. I have no interest in making anyone feel bad for being passionate about Bach, bass fishing, or Herman Bavinck. There are a hundred good things you may be called to pursue as a Christian. All I’m saying is that, according to the Bible, holiness, for every single Christian, should be right at the top of that list. We need more Christians on our campuses, in our cities, in our churches, and in our seminaries who will say with Paul, “Look carefully then how you walk” (Eph. 5:15).

Is it possible that with all the positive signs of spiritual life in your church or in your heart, there is still a sad disregard for your own personal holiness? When was the last time we took a verse like, “Let there be no filthiness nor foolish talk nor crude joking, which are out of place, but instead let there be thanksgiving” (Eph. 5:4) and even began to try to apply this to our conversation, our movies, our YouTube clips, our television and commercial intake? What does it mean that there must not be even a hint of immoral-

ity among the saints (v. 3)? It must mean something. In our sex-saturated culture, I would be surprised if there were not at least a few hints of immorality in our texts and tweets and inside jokes. And what about our clothes, our music, our flirting, and the way we talk about people who aren't in the room? If the war on poverty is worth fighting, how much more the war on your own sin? The fact of the matter is, if you read through the instructions to the New Testament churches you will find few explicit commands that tell us to take care of the needy in our communities and no explicit commands to do creation care, but there are dozens and dozens of verses that enjoin us, in one way or another, to be holy as God is holy (e.g., 1 Pet. 1:13–16).

Let me say it again: I do not wish to denigrate any of the other biblical emphases capturing the attention of churches and Christians today. I know it makes a more exciting book if I say everyone else has missed the boat. That's not the case, however. The sky is not falling, and it won't until Jesus falls from it first. But we don't have to pretend everything else is wrong to recognize we don't have everything right. There is a gap between our love for the gospel and our love for godliness. This must change. It's not pietism, legalism, or fundamentalism to take holiness seriously. It's the way of all those who have been called to a holy calling by a holy God.

WHAT DOES IT MEAN TO BE HOLY?
WHY SHOULD WE CARE?
AND HOW CAN WE CHANGE?

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KIRK COUSINS, *NFL quarterback, Washington Redskins*

CHRISTIAN LIVING