

Chapter One

Holiness Is for You

For sin shall not be your master, because you are not under law, but under grace.

Romans 6:14

The shrill ring of the telephone shattered the stillness of the beautiful, crisp Colorado morning. On the other end was one of those utterly impossible individuals God seems to have sprinkled around here on earth to test the grace and patience of His children.

He was in top form that morning—arrogant, impatient, demanding. I hung up the phone seething inside with anger, resentment, and perhaps even hatred. Grabbing my jacket, I walked out into the cold air to try to regain my composure. The quietness of my soul, so carefully cultivated in my “quiet time” with God that morning, had been ripped into shreds and replaced with a volatile, steaming emotional volcano.

As my emotions subsided, my anger turned to utter discouragement. It was only 8:30 in the morning and my day was ruined. Not only was I discouraged, I was confused. Only two hours before, I had read Paul’s emphatic declaration, “For sin shall not be your master, because you are not under law, but under grace.” But despite this nice-sounding promise of victory over sin, there I was locked in the viselike grip of anger and resentment.

“Does the Bible really have any answers for real life?” I asked myself that morning. With all my heart I desired to live an obedient, holy life; yet there I was utterly defeated by one phone call.

Perhaps this incident has a familiar ring to you. The circumstances probably differed, but your reaction was similar. Perhaps your problem was anger with your children, or a temper at work, or an immoral habit you can’t overcome, or maybe several “besetting sins” that dog you day in and day out. Whatever your particular sin problem (or problems), the Bible does have the answer for you. There is hope. You and I can walk in obedience to

God's Word and live a life of holiness. In fact, as we will see in the next chapter, God expects every Christian to live a holy life. But holiness is not only expected; it is the promised birthright of every Christian.

Paul's statement is true. Sin shall not be our master.

The concept of holiness may seem a bit archaic to our current generation. To some minds the very word *holiness* brings images of bunned hair, long skirts, and black stockings. To others the idea is associated with a repugnant "holier than thou" attitude. Yet holiness is very much a scriptural idea. The word *holy* in various forms occurs more than six hundred times in the Bible. One entire book, Leviticus, is devoted to the subject, and the idea of holiness is woven elsewhere throughout the fabric of Scripture. More important, God specifically commands us to be holy (see Leviticus 11:44).

The idea of exactly how to be holy has suffered from many false concepts. In some circles, holiness is equated with a series of specific prohibitions—usually in such areas as smoking, drinking, and dancing. The list of prohibitions varies depending on the group. When we follow this approach to holiness, we are in danger of becoming like the Pharisees with their endless lists of trivial do's and don'ts, and their self-righteous attitude. For others, holiness means a particular style of dress and mannerisms. And for still others, it means unattainable perfection, an idea that fosters either delusion or discouragement about one's sin.

All of these ideas, while accurate to some degree, miss the true concept. To be holy is to be morally blameless.^[1] It is to be separated from sin and, therefore, consecrated to God. The word signifies "separation to God, and the conduct befitting those so separated."^[2]

Perhaps the best way of understanding the concept of holiness is to note how writers of the New Testament used the word. In 1 Thessalonians 4:3-7, Paul used the term in contrast to a life of immorality and impurity. Peter used it in contrast to living according to the evil desires we had when we lived outside of Christ (1 Peter 1:14-16). John contrasted one who is holy with those who do wrong and are vile (Revelation 22:11). To live a holy life, then, is to live a life in conformity to the moral precepts of the Bible and in contrast to the sinful ways of the world. It is to live a life characterized by the "[putting] off of your old self, which is being corrupted by its deceitful desires . . . and [putting] on the new self, created to be like God in true righteousness and holiness" (Ephesians 4:22, 24).

If holiness, then, is so basic to the Christian life, why do we not experience it more in daily living? Why do so many Christians feel constantly defeated in their struggle with sin? Why does the Church of Jesus Christ so often seem to be more conformed to the world around it than to God?

At the risk of oversimplification, the answers to these questions can be grouped into three basic problem areas.

Our first problem is that *our attitude toward sin is more self-centered than God-centered*. We are more concerned about our own “victory” over sin than we are about the fact that our sins grieve the heart of God. We cannot tolerate failure in our struggle with sin chiefly because we are success-oriented, not because we know it is offensive to God.

W. S. Plumer said, “We never see sin aright until we see it as against God. . . . All sin is against God in this sense: that it is His law that is broken, His authority that is despised, His government that is set at naught. . . . Pharaoh and Balaam, Saul and Judas each said, ‘I have sinned’; but the returning prodigal said, ‘I have sinned *against heaven* and before thee’; and David said, ‘Against Thee, Thee only have I sinned.’”^[3]

God wants us to walk in *obedience*—not victory. Obedience is oriented toward God; victory is oriented toward self. This may seem to be merely splitting hairs over semantics, but there is a subtle, self-centered attitude at the root of many of our difficulties with sin. Until we face this attitude and deal with it, we will not consistently walk in holiness.

This is not to say God doesn’t want us to experience victory, but rather to emphasize that victory is a by-product of obedience. As we concentrate on living an obedient, holy life, we will certainly experience the joy of victory over sin.

Our second problem is that *we have misunderstood “living by faith”* (Galatians 2:20) to mean that no effort at holiness is required on our part. In fact, sometimes we have even suggested that any effort on our part is “of the flesh.”

The words of J. C. Ryle, Bishop of Liverpool from 1880 to 1900, are instructive to us on this point: “Is it wise to proclaim in so bald, naked, and unqualified a way as many do, that the holiness of converted people is by faith only, and not at all by personal exertion? Is it according to the

proportion of God's Word? I doubt it. That faith in Christ is the root of all holiness . . . no well-instructed Christian will ever think of denying. But surely the Scriptures teach us that in following holiness the true Christian needs personal exertion and work as well as faith."^[4]

We must face the fact that we have a personal responsibility for our walk of holiness. One Sunday our pastor in his sermon said words to this effect: "You can put away that habit that has mastered you if you truly desire to do so." Because he was referring to a particular habit which was no problem to me, I quickly agreed with him in my mind. But then the Holy Spirit said to me, "And you can put away the sinful habits that plague you if you will accept your personal responsibility for them." Acknowledging that I did have this responsibility turned out to be a milestone for me in my own pursuit of holiness.

Our third problem is that *we do not take some sin seriously*. We have mentally categorized sins into that which is unacceptable and that which may be tolerated a bit. An incident that occurred just as this book was nearing completion illustrates this problem. Our office was using a mobile home as temporary office space, pending the delayed completion of new facilities. Because our property is not zoned for mobile homes, we were required to obtain a variance permit to occupy the trailer. The permit had to be renewed several times. The last permit renewal expired just as the new facilities were completed, but before we had time to move out in an orderly manner. This precipitated a crisis for the department occupying the trailer.

At a meeting where this problem was discussed, the question was asked, "What difference would it make if we didn't move that department for a few days?" Well, what difference would it make? After all, the trailer was tucked in behind some hills where no one would see it. And legally we didn't have to move the trailer; just vacate it. So what difference would it make if we overstayed our permit a few days? Isn't insistence on obeying the letter of the law nit-picking legalism?

But the Scripture says it is "the little foxes that ruin the vineyards" (Song of Songs 2:15). It is compromise on the little issues that leads to greater downfalls. And who is to say that a little ignoring of civil law is not a serious sin in the sight of God?

In commenting on some of the more minute Old Testament dietary laws God gave to the children of Israel, Andrew Bonar said,

It is not the importance of the thing, but the majesty of the Lawgiver, that is to be the standard of obedience. . . . Some, indeed, might reckon such minute and arbitrary rules as these as trifling. But the principle involved in obedience or disobedience was none other than the same principle which was tried in Eden at the foot of the forbidden tree. It is really this: Is the Lord to be obeyed in *all* things whatsoever He commands? Is He a holy Lawgiver? Are His creatures bound to give implicit assent to His will?^[5]

Are we willing to call sin “sin” not because it is big or little, but because God’s law forbids it? We cannot categorize sin if we are to live a life of holiness. God will not let us get away with that kind of attitude.

These three problems will be addressed in greater detail in subsequent chapters of this book. But before moving on, take time to settle these issues in your heart, right now. Will you begin to look at sin as an offense against a holy God, instead of as a personal defeat only? Will you begin to take personal responsibility for your sin, realizing that as you do, you must depend on the grace of God? And will you decide to obey God in all areas of life, however insignificant the issue may be?

As we move on, we will first consider the holiness of God. This is where holiness begins—not with ourselves, but with God. It is only as we see His holiness, His absolute purity and moral hatred of sin, that we will be gripped by the awfulness of sin against the Holy God. To be gripped by that fact is the first step in our pursuit of holiness.