

Holiness Is Possible

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Date: 06 July 2014

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[0:00] We are in the middle of a series on holiness, and I hope it's not been discouraging to you. I know in some senses it's been a rather heavy last couple of weeks, but I hope it's not discouraging to you, but encouraging you to holiness.

Christ loves holiness. We just said it in our memory verse, and it was in our memory verse last week. John Flavel, the Puritan pastor, said, So in love is Christ with holiness that he will buy it with his own blood.

So we do need to feel the weight of holiness because it's important to Jesus Christ. Jesus purchased holiness with his own blood, and God the Father loves holiness.

He chose us in him before the creation of the world to be holy and blameless in his sight. And as a father, God afflicts his children with a rod.

Why? Because he wants us to be holy. He wants us to be holy. William Gurnall, the Puritan, says it so well.

[1:16] God would not rub so hard if it were not to fetch out the dirt that is ingrained in our natures. God loves purity so well, he would rather see a hole than a spot in his child's garments.

So why is God so vigorous sometimes in his discipline of us? It's because he loves holiness.

Holiness is for our good. Well, today, this is good news.

And this is hopefully to be very encouraging for us. Our lesson is called Holiness is Possible.

Holiness is possible. And if we're going to strive to be holy, if we're going to make every effort, like Hebrews says, to be holy, then we must see that it is possible.

We're not on a wild goose chase. We're not chasing a mirage. But holiness is possible. And praise God, it is possible. It is possible. So, our first point.

We have a few points, and our first point is the longest, and it's this. There is a false humility that says holiness is not possible.

[2:27] That's a long point. There is a false humility that says holiness is not possible. Now, by false humility, I'm not talking about hypocrisy.

I'm not talking about pretending to be holy. I'm not talking about a Pharisee putting on humility like a mask. Jesus talked about those kinds of people that when they fast, they make themselves look so sad.

They're putting on a mask of humility. I'm not talking about that kind of false humility. I'm talking rather about a humility that comes not from the love of man and the love of praise of men, but from a misunderstanding, from a reduction of the gospel.

It's a false humility that comes from not seeing the full power of the gospel. It's a false humility, and we need to understand this.

It's a false humility that talks a lot about freedom and talks a lot about grace, but it's still in the chains of legalism and fear.

[3:37] It talks a lot about freedom and grace, but at its heart, there's something of legalism and fear and uncertainty. It's a false humility that seems to make a lot of grace, but in the end, it doesn't make enough of it.

It's a very subtle, it's a very subtle problem. And you're going to find this as I talk about it. It's going to be like, well, isn't that right?

But it goes underneath the words to the heart of the matter. And maybe this is a false humility that you're falling into. And this is what it sounds like.

This is what this false humility sounds like. And you're going to need to listen carefully. I am a spiritual failure. This is what it sounds like. I am a spiritual failure.

But praise God, Jesus came to save spiritual failures like me. I cannot obey God's commands for one nanosecond. I never truly love God with all my heart or my neighbor as myself.

[4:48] Even my righteous deeds are like filthy rags. If you could see my heart, you'd see that my sins are as bad as anyone else's or worse. I'm a spiritual screw-up through and through, unfaithful to my faithful God.

But the good news is, God has saved me because of Christ's death and resurrection. I am his adopted child, forgiven and clean. Nothing I ever do can make God love me any more or any less than he already loves me in Christ.

Even though I continue to sin, I can never disappoint my heavenly Father. For he looks at me and sees the righteousness of his beloved Son.

What unspeakable good news. Now, first, before we go into what might be off about that.

And I'm going to ask you to think about that and kind of tell me where that might be going a little astray. Let's just say this.

[5:54] As a general statement about sinfulness and grace, it's true. It's beautiful. I think it's sort of a general kind of statement.

If Pastor John and I were to sit down with someone and we were interviewing them for membership, if they said something like this, I think, I don't want to speak for him, but I think we would say, wow, they understand the gospel.

It's not works, it's grace. It's not me, it's Jesus. I think, at least initially, we would say, this is a good starting place, a good general statement.

It's not about me, it's about Christ. Now, so maybe in a general sense, it might be okay. But there are some things that aren't quite true when you dig deeper, when you get down to the particulars. What do you think? What do you think? What might be a little bit off here? Hold on. Okay. Yeah, Tom? Or Steve?

[7:07] Well, like you said, it's a little bit reductionistic. There's nothing about new creation or a new heart or sanctification or growth in holiness.

It leaves all that out. But so, as the gospel found me, so I still am. And that should not be accurate. Yeah.

There. Very good. Thank you. That's excellent. And then I would add that there's a sense of guilt. They don't realize they really, if they are authentic Christians, then they haven't realized that they have been totally forgiven.

Okay. There's something. Yeah. Is there anything else that we could say is a little bit off? Well, let's talk about that.

He said, all my deeds are filthy rags. Let me ask you, what book of the Bible is that founded? Isaiah. Isaiah.

[8:11] Who was that written about? Do you know? Back slidden Israel. Unrepentant Israel. They love their sin.

And we have to understand this. They love their sin. But they were trying to keep God happy on the side with a few deeds. That's what was going on there. This was not written about people genuinely trying to please God.

Genuinely seeking God. And when it says, all our righteous deeds are filthy rags, that's talking about unrepentant Israel. Back slidden Israel. But when a Christian who's been born again, who has a new heart, a new spirit, when we are still saying that, that's this false humility that I'm talking about.

That's just not true if you're a Christian. The Bible doesn't talk about a Christian's good works as filthy rags. Are they imperfect?

Yes. But are they filthy and disgusting in God's sight? No. And this false humility that says, oh, all my deeds are filthy rags, even though I'm a Christian, that spirit kills holiness.

[9:36] It kills holiness. Why even bother trying to be holy if everything I do is nasty in God's sight? It's like cooking.

If all I do is I go into the kitchen and I cook up something nasty that my family hates, well, after a while I'm going to stop cooking. So this whole idea of all my deeds are filthy rags, as a Christian saying that, that's this false humility that I'm talking about.

Secondly, is it true that all my sins and I am just as bad as them or I am worse?

Is that true? Does God make no difference in our lives? No discernible difference at all? Or has God written his law in our hearts as part of the new covenant in Christ's blood, and he makes us to be different, and genuinely we begin to act differently?

Sins that we once lived in, we no longer live in. Doesn't the Bible teach that God works in us to will and to do according to his good purpose?

[10 : 55] We have new powers. We have new desires. We've been born again. God is living in us. And so when you say, I'm no different than I was before, is that really true?

And if we say that, aren't we saying that God doesn't save us from the power of sin in any way now, but he just, salvation is just salvation from hell.

So it doesn't make any difference now in my life, but it will make a big difference when I go to heaven and I don't go to hell. Is that just what salvation is? No.

You see, to just say that I am worse than everyone else, that's this false humility that if you're a genuine Christian, it isn't quite true either.

And again, it's a false humility that kills holiness. If I can't be any different than anyone else in the world, then why bother trying to be different?

[11 : 59] And then there's the statement that is where he said, I can, we can never, I can never disappoint God, the father. He'll never love me anymore.

He loves me the same, no matter what. What about that statement? Well, this is where I think we need to be really, we need to be careful.

We need to say, is it true that I can never disappoint God, the father? Is it true that God loves me the same, no matter what? I think the answer is yes and no.

It depends on what you mean by that. Now, the Bible talks about justification. And the Bible talks about adoption. So we've been justified, we've been declared righteous, we've been adopted.

But we need to make sure that we don't flatten out the scriptures, so that's all, that's all that we see in it. That's all that it talks about. And the only way that we look at our relationship with God is through justification and through adoption.

[13 : 10] Because, and this is why, justification and adoption are both legal terms. They're both legal terms. They talk about our legal status in relationship to God.

So in justification, we are declared righteous in relation to God as the judge, the lawgiver. We're set free from the law.

We are, the law can no longer condemn us, because its demands have been satisfied in Jesus Christ. And so we can say with Paul, therefore there is now no condemnation for those who are in Christ Jesus.

Justification changes forever our legal status before God. And then in adoption, we are declared to be God's children.

So we have a new relationship to God. Now he is our father. And our status is forever changed. We are the children of God.

[14 : 15] It's, these are both things that happen outside of even our experience of them. We don't, you don't wake up one day and necessarily feel justified or feel adopted.

These are things that happen to us that God declares about us. That it's a change in our status. It might not be necessarily, we might not experience the feelings of those things until later.

But it changes the legal status. So on January 11, 2012, in Addis Ababa, in this dumpy little office, Stephanie and I adopted Cademan Abenezer Webb.

Now nothing in the whole world can change that. Sometimes people ask, well, can they take him away? No, they can't. Can they take away your children? No, they can't. Not unless you do something terrible.

Can Ethiopia change their mind? No. His status has been forever changed. So governments can't change it.

[15 : 20] Social services can't change it. Cademan's sin can't change it. Our hopes and our desires can't change it. His relationship has forever been changed.

And brothers and sisters, in Christ Jesus, we have been justified and adopted. In Christ, if that is your status, if you have been put into Jesus, if you have been justified and adopted, then we can say that no matter your sin, no matter your failure, no matter how much you struggle, if you are in Christ, then you are a justified child of God.

And those things don't rest on your works. They rest on Christ's works. They aren't dependent on my day-to-day experience of those things. They are as settled in heaven as Christ is in heaven. They are as firm as God is firm. Okay? So can, in a certain sense, can God's love not change? Yeah. But, disappointing, grieving God, is something that Paul says that we can do.

[16:33] Don't grieve the Holy Spirit. that's a genuine motive to obey God and to pursue holiness.

You are God's child. Your status is secure. But, dear brothers and sisters, we can grieve God. We can disappoint him in the sense, not that he, he's surprised by our sin, not that he was expecting obedience and instead he got something else.

Not in the sense of, he didn't know that was coming, but in the sense of, he's given us so much.

And when we sin, we be, we turn our back on God.

We, actually, we begin to fight against God. Sin is, is that, disobeying God, it's, it's a making war on God's, God.

And so, as parents, aren't you disappointed, grieved, saddened, angry, when your children fight against you? And against what is for their good? You are.

[17:41] You're angry and sad, not because you hate them, but because you love them. Your love invests you in them.

Your love is a self-giving, it invests you in them. And so, your love invests you in their actions. And so, God's love invests him in us.

He relates to us, he cares about us, he's living with us. And so, we can grieve him. And what about, God loves me the same, no matter what I do?

Well, again, yes and no. Theologians talk about different kinds of love in God. And, now, we can understand these things, because, they, they, they are something of our experience.

They roughly correspond to different kinds of love in, in us. So, I'm not talking about something we can't understand. Theologians talk about the love of, of benevolence, the love that is benevolence.

[18:47] The love of benevolence is, goodwill, toward others. Goodwill towards others. And, there's a general benevolence, and then there's a, I would say, a special benevolence.

So, God, loves all men, in a certain sense. He's benevolent. He gives them reign, no matter, wicked or, righteous. But, as God's children, holy, and dearly, loved, God is full of goodwill, toward us.

He wishes, always to do us good, and actually, all that he does to us, is good. Okay? In Christ, we are, secure, in God's benevolent love.

There's never a moment, when he turns that love, away from us. Out of his benevolence, he, he sent forth a savior, a redeemer, and even in his discipline, he does it, in love.

So, it feels, it hurts, to be disciplined, but God's doing it, because he loves us. We always have, his benevolent love. So, right now, Christian, the curse of God, is not on you.

[20:01] God's hands are lifted, in blessing. He's going to do you good. He loves you. But, there is another kind of love. They call it, the love of complacency.

Now, that doesn't mean, laziness, a lazy love, or a careless love. It's not talking about, being complacent, in the sense that we use the word.

It means, arresting, enjoying, love. Complacent means, to enjoy, and to take pleasure, in someone. Last week, we quoted, Jonathan Edwards, in another part of his, personal narrative, he wrote, since I came to Northampton, that's where, he had moved to, and lived for a long time, I've often had, sweet complacency, in God, and views, of his glorious, perfections, and the excellency, of Jesus Christ.

So, I've had the sweet, complacency, in God. He's saying, I've had wonderful pleasure, in resting, and enjoying, and taking delight, in God's glory.

Well, in God, just as there is in us, there's a benevolent love, a love of goodwill, and, a complacent love. One is a settled, a settled disposition.

[21:25] That's, the love of benevolence. It's the settled disposition, of God's heart. He's going to do us good. He loves us. The other, is a real time, in the mix, of living, relational, enjoyment.

So, can God, love me, more than he does, now? In benevolence, no. No.

In complacency, yes. In complacent love, yes. We saw, we saw it last week. He, he, he, he, loves all of his people. But will anyone deny that, he walked with Enoch.

He delighted in Enoch. And don't you see that, to say, God can't love me, any more than he does. If we understand that, incorrectly, or if we, if we put the wrong spin, or if we, if we just think about it, in one dimension, instead of two, it's that false humility.

If we're just saying, it all depends on Jesus, it doesn't depend on me at all, that's a false humility. And it's, and it kills holiness. Men, men who have been preeminently holy, have always wanted to be as close to God as possible.

[22 : 46] They've always wanted God to enjoy them, and them to enjoy God. They wanted to walk, and enjoy his love, more than they were now. They wanted to please God more.

So, Psalm 25. The Lord confides in those who fear him. He makes his covenant known to them. The Lord confides.

He becomes the friend of those who fear him. And the more that we fear him, the more he confides in us. God draws near, and he reveals himself to those who fear him.

And the greater the fear, the greater the closeness. And God, in complacent love, draws closer, and he reveals more, and he gives more of his spirit, and more of his presence, and they experience more of his love.

Not all Christians experience is the same. There are Christians who experience more of God's love, who feel it more, who know it more.

[23 : 52] He actively enjoys his obedient children more than his disobedient children. Just like, we enjoy our obedient children, and we have a, it's hard to enjoy our disobedient children, isn't it?

Now, we love them all, don't we? In benevolence, we want them, we love them all, we want to do good to all of them. But there is that complacent love of being able to enjoy them, sit down with them, relax, rest, enjoy what they're doing, be pleased with them.

So to flatten everything out and say, I'm nothing but a sinner, and I can't do any better, and God loves us all the same, it's all Jesus, it's nothing about me, it's a false humility, and it kills a desire for holiness.

It makes us stagnant, and unexcited. It takes the personal out of God. It takes the fatherhood out of God. And it leaves us unexcited about killing sin, and unexcited about loving righteousness.

Because it does something in our hearts. It just leaves us to the point of, well, it doesn't really matter. But when we see that what I do does matter to God, it really matters to him.

[25 : 18] That I do have a part to play, that it's not just justification by faith, it's not just adoption, but there is a living relationship that grows out of that. Those things are the settled state, but there's a living relationship with God at stake.

And I want to enjoy God. And when I'm enjoying God, and when I'm having that fellowship with him, and when I'm experiencing more of his love, and I know that he's pleased with me, then I'm going to cut off right hands, and gouge out right eyes.

I'm going to be on guard, beware of anything that will interrupt that communion, that fellowship, that living relationship. John Owen said it like this, when once the soul of a believer has obtained sweet and real communion with Christ, so there is the believer, he's come to the sweet and real communion with Christ, it looks about him, the believer looks about him, and he watches all temptations, all ways whereby sin might approach, to disturb him in his enjoyment of his dear Lord and Savior, his rest and his desire.

How does it charge itself not to omit anything, not to do anything that may interrupt the communion obtained? So do you see, when someone's enjoying that communion, he's on guard.

A believer that has gotten Christ in his arms is like one that has found great spoils, or a pearl of great price. He looks about him every way, and he fears everything that might deprive him of it.

[26 : 57] Riches make men watchful, and the astral sensible possession of him, in whom are all riches, and the treasure of God will make men look about for the keeping of him.

Do you see what Owen is saying? The more we are enjoying our walk with God, communing with God, the more it makes us protect that communion and that walk.

It makes us more, we guard it, we found a treasure, and I'm not going to let sin steal it away from me. And I've known, when I sin, my conscience won't let me, it disturbs that fellowship.

And I don't want anything to disturb it. I want to do everything to cultivate it. And it's a spiral upward. You know, sin leads to sin.

Unbelief leads to greater sin, and that leads to more unbelief and greater sin. There's spirals downward, but you know, there are spirals upward as well. The more of God's complacent love I enjoy, the more holy I want to be.

[28 : 09] And the more holy I am, the more of God's felt, complacent love I gain. And so we go around and around until we get to heaven.

Now, will we always have sin as long as we live? Yes. Am I talking about a sense of pride and accomplishment? No. Holiness is always very aware of its own sinfulness. Holiness is always humble, real holiness. But, what I'm saying is, there can be progress in the Christian life. The Bible expects progress.

Right? Jesus didn't die so that his church would be unradiant, blemished. He's, one day, we are going to be spotless, perfect, without stain or wrinkle.

So, there is going to be a day that we are holy. So, holiness in the ultimate sense is possible, but it's going to happen. And holiness in life is possible.

[29:12] There is a progress because we are new creatures. We are new creations. We are walking with God. And God is at work in us and he's not going to relent until he has us.

Until he has us all. Well, time is running long. Let's, let's get to the nitty gritty.

Remember this lesson is called holiness is possible. See, what I was trying to do in that first part was to just remove this idea of this false humility that says it's not possible. That just focuses on our sin, that doesn't see us as new creatures, that just flattens out the gospel and doesn't make God a living reality, a father to us.

But, let's just talk about more reasons why holiness is possible if you're a Christian. First, people in the Bible are said to obey God's commandments and they're called holy.

Holiness is possible. It sounds really humble to say I can't obey God for one nanosecond in my life. But that's not true.

[30:23] Why? Because Zachariah and Elizabeth, John the Baptist's parents, were holy. And, Luke doesn't leave us to doubt what he means when he says that God, they were righteous before God.

Listen to what Luke 1.6 says. They were both righteous before God, walking blamelessly in all the commandments and statutes of the Lord. were they perfect?

Were they perfect? Well, really, the only thing we know about Zachariah is that one time that he didn't believe God when God came to him. So, we know that Zachariah's not perfect.

So, were they sinless? No. And, I think it would be very naive to think that Elizabeth never struggled with anything. She was old and she was barren.

You never think in her life she ever looked at her neighbor with envy and jealousy and a broken heart and said when she saw her neighbor with a baby she didn't have that.

[31:33] But, God said they were both righteous before me and Luke tells us what he means.

They were blameless in keeping his commandments. They were holy and God saw them that way.

They were faithful in obedience and they were holy. Job was blameless and upright man who feared God and turned away from evil. Paul said to the churches follow my example as I follow Christ.

He doesn't say everything I do is filthy rags don't pay any attention to me. No. In humility he said follow my example as I follow Christ.

We saw it last week Enoch pleased God. The prophets were called holy men. Is it possible to be more more than holy in just name more than just holy in name but in life?

Yes. The Bible shows not a few men and women who were holy. So, is holiness possible? Yes. Definitely.

[32:45] People have obtained it. People have obtained the commendation of God where he looks on them and says they're blameless in my sight. Second, the Bible assumes that you can please God.

The Bible assumes that you can please God. The Bible doesn't look at saved people as guilty wretches who can't do anything right. Who can never be holy.

The Bible assumes believers can be holy and they can please God. They can put a smile on God's face by what they're doing. It's all over the scriptures and it's meant to excite us to pursue holiness. Pleasing God isn't put out there and said, well, no one can do it. No. It's meant to make us pursue holiness. So, just listen. In Colossians 1.10, it says, bearing fruit, growing in every work and in the knowledge of God, that pleases God.

Romans 12.1, presenting your body as a living sacrifice pleases God. Colossians 3.20, obeying your parents pleases God.

[33:55] 1 Thessalonians 2.4, teaching the word and truth pleases God. 1 Timothy 2, praying for governing authorities pleases God.

1 Timothy 5.4, supporting your family pleases God. Hebrews 13.12, sharing with those who are in need pleases God.

1 John 3.22, keeping God's commands pleases God. Hebrews 11, believing God pleases Him. And so, we can think it's so humble and so righteous to always think that my righteous deeds are filthy rags and I'm just a desperate, wicked sinner who can't do anything right, that I can never please God, but the Bible doesn't talk about Christians like that.

Now, again, if you're coming away from this hearing, well, we can be proud. That's not what I'm talking about. The God of the Bible can be pleased and He is pleased.

And so, what does Paul say we should do? Ephesians 5.10 says, find out what pleases the Lord. Find out what pleases Him and do it.

[35 : 12] So, children of God, you can please God with your holy life. And so, find out what pleases Him and do it. Now, third, the Bible expects you to pass the test.

Turn to 2 Corinthians chapter 13 verse 5. 2 Corinthians chapter 13 and verse 5. He says here, examine yourselves to see whether you are in the faith.

Test yourselves. do you not realize that Christ Jesus is in you? Unless, of course, you fail the test. Now, we don't, let me just put this into context.

What is Paul after here? What is he up to? He's trying to confirm to them that his ministry made a difference in their lives. His ministry was not without effect.

That they are different. They aren't what they used to be. That he is a genuine apostle of Christ. Christ Jesus. He's trying to get them to see that salvation has really come to them and his ministry to them really did make a difference.

[36 : 45] And how is he going to prove it to them? He says, look at yourselves. Test yourselves. Look at yourselves. He expected those Corinthians to look at themselves and say, wow, I am different.

there's a big difference in my life. Christ Jesus is in me. I'm a new creature. I'm living differently. The old is gone. The new has come. Am I perfect? No, but I am genuinely different.

I am not what I used to be. And he challenged them to examine themselves because he expected them to pass the test. He expected them to look at their lives and be able to see genuine effects of salvation.

Genuine progress and holiness. He wasn't sitting them down to a calculus exam where maybe one in a hundred here could pass it. He put them to a test that he was pretty sure that they were going to pass.

It wasn't rigged against them. You see, the Bible doesn't know anything about an Eeyore religion that won't let anyone see anything good in themselves.

[37 : 56] Now, of course, in my flesh, no good thing dwells. But that's not all we are, are we? That's not dominating us anymore. And so there should be change in our lives.

And the Bible recognizes that. That's not being falsely, that's not being proud. That's just honoring God where we see him at work.

Even if it's in us. The Bible doesn't know anything about an Eeyore religion that doesn't expect change, that says, this is what I am, and I can't wait to go to heaven to be totally different.

Has God saved you? Has God done something? Then you are going to see new graces, new desires, new actions, new patterns.

You're going to start to see holiness. And you know what? It's okay to see it. You're expected to pass the test. Holiness is not only possible, it's expected.

[38 : 57] It's the norm. And it's ultimately not because of us. None of this I'm talking about is self-religion or self-powered anything. It's because of what he's doing, what he has done, what he is doing right now.

I'm just trying to show you that holiness is not impossible. Every person of the Trinity is for your holiness. You will be holy in life.

Men have been called holy. You are expected to be able to see holiness in your life. It's not a mirage that you can't catch. And so you have permission to see evidences of grace in your life.

You're expected and allowed to see obedience. You won't be perfect in this life. You can't do anything to earn God's love. But as a redeemed, regenerate child of God, you don't have to look at yourself and just see nothing but a spiritual failure.

He's at work in you. And you honor him when you see it. And you praise him. He's already made a difference. And what he starts, he's going to finish.

[40:04] John Flavel said, if you lay the foundation, he'll put on the roof. We're houses under construction. But houses under construction don't stay in the same spot, do they?

The walls go up. The drywall comes on. The painting goes on. There's progress. God's with us. We can, we should be making progress.

Holiness is possible. And so, let's get after it. Let's get after it. Let's get after it together. It's a group activity. It's not just me by myself.

I need you. You need me. So, together, we'll build each other up in the most holy faith. Well, our time is gone. Thank you for your attention. We're dismissed.

Thank you.