

KEVIN DEYOUNG

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

CONTENTS

1	Mind the Gap	9
2	The Reason for Redemption	23
3	Piety's Pattern	31
4	The Impetus for the Imperatives	49
5	The Pleasure of God and the Possibility of Godliness	63
6	Spirit-powered, Gospel-driven, Faith-fueled Effort	79
7	Be Who You Are	93
8	Saints and Sexual Immorality	107
9	Abide and Obey	123
10	That All May See Your Progress	137
	Study Questions	147
	General Index	151
	Scripture Index	156

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

10 THE HOLE IN OUR HOLINESS

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).

12 THE HOLE IN OUR HOLINESS

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.

⁵Ibid.

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 judgment-

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.

Chapter Two

THE REASON FOR REDEMPTION

Why did God save you?

It's not a bad question, if you think about it. After all, you were dead in your sins and trespasses (Eph. 2:1). As a descendent of the first man, Adam, you share in the guilt and corruption of his, the first sin (Rom. 5:12–21). You were an enemy of God (v. 10), a sinner brought forth in iniquity (Ps. 51:5), by nature deserving of wrath (Eph. 2:3). You were a sinner who sinned and deserved to die (Rom. 6:23). But here's the good news for every Christian reading this book: the Bible says that, at just the right time, Jesus Christ died for you (5:8). The Good Shepherd laid down his life for his sheep (John 10:15). Jesus drank the cup of God's wrath for you (see Mark 10:45). His death on the cross means God is now for you instead of against you (Rom. 3:25; 8:31–39). By faith, through the life, death, and resurrection of Christ, you are a reconciled, justified, adopted child of God. What good news!

But why?

Maybe you've thought about *how* God saves us, or *what* we must do to be saved, or *when* you were saved. But have you ever considered *why* he saved you?

There is more than one right answer to that question. The Bible says God saved us because he loves us (John 3:16). It also tells us that God saved us for the praise of his own name (Eph. 1:6, 12, 14). Those are two of the best answers to the why question.

24 THE HOLE IN OUR HOLINESS

But there is another answer—just as good, just as biblical, just as important. God saved you so that you might be holy. Pay attention to the purpose statement in this passage from Ephesians:

Blessed be the God and Father of our Lord Jesus Christ, who has blessed us in Christ with every spiritual blessing in the heavenly places, even as he chose us in him . . . *that we should be holy and blameless* before him. (Eph. 1:3–4)

God chose us for salvation in eternity past and sent Christ to save us in history and gave us the gift of faith by the working of the Holy Spirit in our lifetimes *so that* we might be holy.

And notice Paul is not talking about the righteousness of Christ reckoned to our account when we believe in Jesus. I'll have much more to say about this in the pages ahead, but I want you to see from the outset that Ephesians 1:4 (and there are lots of texts like this one) is talking about a personal holiness that must characterize the life of the believer on the last day and at the present time.¹ Paul is setting up the summons to put off the old self and put on the new (4:22–24). He's thinking of being cleansed by the washing of water with the word (5:26). When God saves us by the righteousness of Christ, he saves us so that we too should be marked by righteousness. As J. I. Packer put it, "In reality, holiness is the goal of our redemption. As Christ died in order that we may be justified, so we are justified in order that we may be sanctified and made holy."²

¹Peter T. O'Brien, after arguing that Ephesians 1:4 looks forward to the final acquittal on the last day, adds, "But this is not to suggest that there is consequently no concern for holiness and blamelessness in the here and now. The 'holiness without which no one will see the Lord' (Heb. 12:14) is progressively wrought within the lives of the believers on earth by the Spirit, and will be consummated in glory at the *parousia*, the time of the 'redemption' anticipated in Eph. 1:14; 4:30. And the clear implication for believers is that even now they should live according to the divine intention" (*The Letter to the Ephesians* [Grand Rapids, MI: Eerdmans, 1999], 100).

²J. I. Packer, *Rediscovering Holiness: Know the Fullness of Life with God* (Ventura, CA: Regal, 2009), 33.

Distinctive holiness has been God's plan for his people in both Testaments:

You yourselves have seen what I did to the Egyptians, and how I bore you on eagles' wings and brought you to myself. Now therefore, if you will indeed obey my voice and keep my covenant, you shall be my treasured possession among all peoples, for all the earth is mine; and you shall be to me a kingdom of priests and a holy nation. (Ex. 19:4–6a)

Do you see again the reason for divine deliverance? God saved the Israelites *unto* holiness. God set them free from slavery to the Egyptians so they might be free to walk in his ways. They were to be a nation of people so set apart, so sanctified, so holy that they might as well have been priests—every last one of them. Every Christian in every church ought to live out this same priestly identity (1 Pet. 2:9). It's the reason God has rescued us:

- “Therefore do not be ashamed of the testimony about our Lord, nor of me his prisoner, but share in suffering for the gospel by the power of God, *who saved us and called us to a holy calling*, not because of our works but because of his own purpose and grace, which he gave us in Christ Jesus before the ages began” (2 Tim. 1:8–9).
- “For God has not called us for impurity, but in holiness” (1 Thess. 4:7).
- “For we are his workmanship, created in Christ Jesus for good works, which God prepared beforehand, that we should walk in them” (Eph. 2:10).
- “Husbands, love your wives, as Christ loved the church and gave himself up for her, *that he might sanctify her*, having cleansed her by the washing of water with the word, *so that he might present the church to himself in splendor*, without spot or wrinkle or any such thing, *that she might be holy and without blemish*” (Eph. 5:25–27).

The Bible could not be any clearer. The reason for your entire

salvation, the design behind your deliverance, the purpose for which God chose you in the first place is holiness.

A NECESSARY GOOD

Not only is holiness the goal of your redemption, it is *necessary* for your redemption. Now before you sound the legalist alarm, tie me up by my own moral bootstraps, and feed my carcass to the Galatians, we should see what Scripture has to say:

- According to Jesus, “Not everyone who says to me, ‘Lord, Lord,’ will enter the kingdom of heaven, but the one who does the will of my Father who is in heaven” (Matt. 7:21). It’s possible to profess the right things and still not be saved. Only those who do the will of the Father will enter the kingdom. And this means hearing Jesus’ words and doing them (v. 26).
- Many passages like 1 Corinthians 6:9–10 teach that “the unrighteous will not inherit the kingdom of God.” We find this same emphasis in Galatians 5:19–21. It’s the consistent and frequent teaching of the Bible that those whose lives are marked by habitual ungodliness will not go to heaven. To find acquittal from God on the last day there must be evidence flowing out of us that grace has flowed into us.
- In particular, 1 John outlines several criteria for determining whether we truly belong to God.³ Not only will those born of God confess the Son (1 John 2:23; 4:15) and believe that Jesus is the Christ (5:1), they will also keep God’s commandments (2:3–4), walk as Christ walked (2:5–6), practice righteousness (2:29), and overcome the world (5:4). “We know that everyone who has been born of God does not keep on sinning, but he who was born of God protects him, and the evil one does not touch him” (5:18).
- Likewise, the book of James makes clear that a faith without accompanying works is no saving faith (James 2:14). “So also faith by itself, if it does not have works, is dead” (v. 17). Many Christians have struggled to reconcile the emphasis on works

³John Piper finds eleven evidences for the new birth in 1 John. I’ve included some of them in the following sentence. See *Finally Alive* (Fearn, Ross-shire, UK: Christian Focus, 2009), 125–128.

in James with the emphasis on faith apart from works in Paul. But there is no real conflict. Paul wants us to see that faith is the instrumental means for being right with God. Nothing contributes to our salvation. The only ground is the righteousness of Christ. James, on the other hand, wants us to see that evidences of godliness must accompany true faith. We are justified by faith alone, but the faith that justified us is never alone. Paul is describing true and living faith; James is arguing against a false faith which consists in nothing but spiritually dead intellectual assent (vv. 17, 19, 20, 26).

- And then there's Hebrews 12:14: "Strive for peace with everyone, and for the holiness without which no one will see the Lord." In other words, holiness is not an option. Some of you may be thinking, "Yes, that's absolutely right. We must be holy, and we are counted holy because of Christ." That's true. And in fact, elsewhere in Hebrews we see that holiness—what some theologians call "definitive sanctification"—is a gift we receive through the gospel (10:10, 14). But Hebrews 12 is about the practical outworking of this positional holiness.⁴ The holiness of Hebrews 12:14 is not a holiness we receive but a holiness we "strive" for. This makes sense given the context of discipline in the first half of chapter 12. The Hebrews were professing Christians suffering for their Christianity and in danger of making shipwreck of their faith (10:39). So God the Father disciplined them, so that they might be trained by it unto righteousness (12:11). God was intent on making his children holy, because holiness must mark out all those who would have fellowship with a holy God.

There are literally hundreds of verses like these. In 1990 John Piper wrote a long letter everyone should read. It's called "A Letter to a Friend Concerning the So-Called 'Lordship Salvation.'"⁵ Back then there was a big debate about whether you could have Christ

⁴See Jerry Bridges, *The Pursuit of Holiness* (Colorado Springs: NavPress, 2006), 31–39. Likewise, Peter O'Brien writes, "How then can we pursue what are already God's gifts to us? The proper response is that they should be worked out concretely in our lives as believers" (*The Letter to the Hebrews* [Grand Rapids, MI: Eerdmans, 2010], 472). Later he says, "All believers must press on to the consummation, their perfected holiness, which is indispensable for seeing God" (473).

⁵<http://www.desiringgod.org/resource-library/articles/letter-to-a-friend-concerning-the-so-called-lordship-salvation>. Accessed June 25, 2011.

as Savior without having him as Lord. John MacArthur wrote *The Gospel According to Jesus* to help people see that the only way to truly follow Jesus is to follow him as Savior *and* Lord.⁶ After another minister questioned Piper's support for the book, Piper wrote this "Letter to a Friend." Following the letter itself is an appendix which lists "Texts That Point to the Necessity of Yielding to Christ as Lord in Order to Inherit Eternal Life." It's a long list. Piper mentions six passages that speak to the necessity of doing good for eternal life, thirteen passages on the necessity of obedience, two on the necessity of holiness, two on the need to forgive others, four on the necessity of not living according to the flesh, two on the necessity of being free from the love of money, fourteen on the need to love Christ and God, and six on the necessity of loving others. There are dozens of other verses on the need to love the truth, be childlike, bridle the tongue, persevere, walk in the light, repent, and fight the good fight. In other words, the child of God must be holy.

A NECESSARY EXPLANATION

Let me be clear about something from the very beginning: stressing the necessity of personal holiness should not undermine in any way our confidence in justification by faith alone. The best theologians and the best theological statements have always emphasized the scandalous nature of gospel grace *and* the indispensable need for personal holiness. Faith and good works are both necessary. But one is the root and the other the fruit. God declares us just solely on account of the righteousness of Christ credited (imputed) to us (2 Cor. 5:21). Our innocence in God's sight is in no way grounded in works of love or acts of charity. Whereas a

⁶John MacArthur, *The Gospel According to Jesus: What Is Authentic Faith?* (Grand Rapids, MI: Zondervan, 2008).

Catholic might answer the question “What must I do to be saved?” by saying, “Repent, believe, and live in charity,”⁷ the apostle Paul answers the same exact question with, “Believe in the Lord Jesus, and you will be saved, you and your household” (Acts 16:31). Getting right with God is entirely and only dependent upon faith.⁸

But there’s more we need to say about this faith. The faith that joins you to Christ and makes you right with God is a faith that works itself out in love (Gal. 5:6). On the last day, God will not acquit us because our good works were good enough, but he will look for evidence that our good confession was not phony. It’s in this sense that we must be holy.

There is nothing un-Protestant about stressing the need for personal holiness. For example, the Belgic Confession (1561) says, “we do not base our salvation on [good works].” We are justified by faith alone, apart from works. But the Confession also says, “it is impossible for this holy faith to be unfruitful in a human being, seeing that we do not speak of an empty faith but of what Scripture calls ‘faith working through love.’”⁹ Likewise, the Heidelberg Catechism (1563) teaches that only true faith in Jesus Christ can make us right with God. All we need to do is accept this gift of God with a believing heart. And yet there is no hesitation later on to underline the necessity of holiness: “Can those be saved who do not turn to God from their ungrateful and impenitent ways? By no means. Scripture tells us that no unchaste person, no idolater, no adulterer, no thief, no covetous person, no drunkard, slanderer, robber, or the like is going to inherit the kingdom of God.”¹⁰ Statements like these could easily be multiplied by looking

⁷Peter J. Kreeft, *Catholic Christianity* (San Francisco: Ignatius, 2001), 130.

⁸This does not mean faith is the good work that saves us. Faith is only the instrumental cause of our salvation. It is the means by which we are joined to Christ and partake in all his benefits (Eph. 1:3; 2:8–9).

⁹Belgic Confession, article 24.

¹⁰See Heidelberg Catechism, Q/A 60, 61, 87.

at almost any official doctrinal statement that has come out of the Reformation.¹¹

In all this it bears repeating that God is the one working in us, giving us the desire and ability to obey. We earn nothing. We are promised everything. But don't be so scared of works-righteousness that you make pale what the Bible writes in bold colors. We are saved by grace through faith (Eph. 2:8). *And* we were created in Christ Jesus for good works (v. 10). Any gospel which purports to save people without also transforming them is inviting easy-believism. If you think being a Christian is nothing more than saying a prayer or joining a church, then you've confused real grace with cheap grace. Those who are justified *will* be sanctified.¹²

There can be no denying or doubting what God has said. It's plain on almost every page of the Bible: we are commanded to be holy, saved to be holy, and, in fact, we must be holy if we are to inherit eternal life.

¹¹See, for example, The Epitome of the Formula of Concord 4.1 (Lutherans); The Westminster Confession of Faith 13.1 (Presbyterian/Reformed); and Article 13 of Thirty-Nine Articles (Anglican).

¹²In the next chapter I talk about the difference between definitive and progressive sanctification. In one sense those who are justified have already been sanctified (definitively). But it's also right to say that those who are justified will be sanctified (progressively).