The Journey Within: Learning to Live the Holy Life

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New Testament Snapshots of Holiness

Luke 1:74-75; Matt. 5:48; 2 Cor. 7:1; Eph. 4:22-24

In Book 1 of this Bible study series, we looked at God’s original plan for humanity, humanity’s rejection of that plan, and His efforts at getting us back on track with the plan—not for the sake of the plan but for the sake of our relationship with Him. His desire for relationship with us springs not so much because He needs us but rather because we need Him. We don’t know it or acknowledge it prior to becoming Christians, but more than anything else in the world, we need relationship with God.

Most of the scripture studies in Book 1 focused on Old Testament passages. Even the New Testament passages we considered referred to concepts from the Old Testament. Now our attention primarily shifts to studies in the New Testament. Does the New Testament portray God maintaining a desire for our holiness, or does He drop the idea as a notion whose time has passed? As we look to the New Testament, we see that God desires more than ever that we live holy lives. Rather than decreasing this emphasis, He actually increases it to include even more facets of our lives.

This first study in Book 2 focuses attention on a variety of scriptures throughout the New Testament, giving us a holiness snapshot found in the new covenant.

Read Luke 1:74-75

John the Baptist paved the way for Jesus’ coming. Almost everything about his life was unusual: his diet, his manner of dress, and even his birth to godly, elderly parents. Zechariah, John’s father, declared the word of the Lord in a special mes-
sage of prophecy spoken at John’s dedication ceremony. We find Zechariah’s dedication message for John in Luke 1:68-79. He saw the ministry that lay ahead for his son, one that would prepare the way for the coming Messiah.

In this prophecy Zechariah spoke of the deliverance and salvation of God’s people. Notice the focus of verses 74-75. He said the Messiah would rescue us from our enemies and enable us to serve God without fear. We would be empowered to do this in holiness and righteousness. In other words, our actions as well as our heart motives and intentions can be correct in God’s eyes.

When will we be enabled to do this? Is it after we die and go to heaven? Is it at the end of our lives on earth? No, the Messiah will enable us to live in holiness and righteousness before Him “all our days.” So from the time we accept the good news of the gospel message and believe in Jesus Christ as personal Savior, we can become new creatures who please God in both action and attitude.

GROUP DISCUSSION

1. Why did God tell us about the Messiah’s provision of holiness and righteousness for our lives prior to His coming?

2. Does this prophecy leave any question regarding God’s intention for our lives once we accept His Messiah?

3. From God’s perspective, does our holiness appear to be a fanciful hope or an emerging reality?
The Sermon on the Mount is perhaps the best-known sermon from the earthly ministry of Jesus Christ. Recorded in Matt. 5—7, this sermon summarizes the ethical teachings of Jesus’ ministry. Jesus covers the waterfront in this sermon of how we are to live toward God, other people, and ourselves. He offers directives on everything from getting along with family members to enjoying a meaningful prayer life.

Planted in the middle of this sermon is one of the most powerful admonitions in the entire ministry of Jesus. He calls on us to “be perfect, therefore, as your heavenly Father is perfect.” What does that mean? How perfect are you feeling today? Perfect enough to compare yourself with God? Not likely. And yet we can’t just dismiss this admonition as a lofty yet unattainable goal. God’s not one to dangle a carrot on a string just out of our reach and urge us to reach toward what He knows we can never grasp. His goals for our lives are far more realistic than that. So it’s not likely that Jesus is commanding an unrealistic expectation.

What if Jesus is not even giving a command here? What if He’s making us a promise? Now that throws a different light on the verse, doesn’t it? Maybe Jesus is saying that when we love God and other people the way He described in verses 43-47, and when we give to the needy, pray, fast, preference Kingdom values as He describes later in chapter 6, then we are perfect as God is perfect!

If this verse is a promise rather than a command, Jesus is not requiring our divine perfection in performance. He is saying God looks at and takes into consideration our hearts, our intentions, our motives, and our desires. As elsewhere in the Sermon on the Mount, in this verse Jesus calls for a heart centered on putting God and His values first.
Personal Reflection

1. Have you read this verse in the past?

2. If so, how did you feel about attempting to apply it to your life?

3. How does it change your response if Jesus’ statement is making a promise rather than giving a command?

4. Why does God place so much emphasis on our intentions, motives, and desires rather than simply our actions?

Read 2 Cor 7:1

The “since” that begins this verse refers back to Paul’s discussion regarding not being yoked with unbelievers. He’s referencing an Old Testament thought such as is found in Deut. 22:9-11 about not mixing different things together, such as combining different kinds of seeds in your garden, yoking an ox with a donkey, or wearing clothes made of different types of cloth. Paul sees no place for believers to join with false teachers who speak for Satan.

This leads Paul to the conclusion that we Christians have the responsibility to purify ourselves. What does he mean by this? Is Paul calling for us to make ourselves divine or performance-perfect? No. He’s telling us to drop everything in our lives that we know wars spiritually against our bodies or
spirits. Get rid of everything that tries to compromise our commitments to Christ. We must not yoke ourselves with anything that weakens our bond to God or threatens our relationships with Him.

**GROUP DISCUSSION**

1. Give examples of things that contaminate our bodies.

2. Give examples of things that contaminate our spirits.

3. Can we reach a compromise with some of these impediments to our faith or relationships with God and keep them in our lives while we serve God? Why or why not?

4. Is Paul's call for us to perfect holiness in our lives a realistic one? In other words, is the goal attainable or unattainable?

**READ EPH. 4:22-24**

Paul calls us to a standard similar to what Jesus urged upon us in Matt. 5:48, that is, to be righteous and holy like God. He offers us this goal and also presents a plan to accomplish it. He reminds us that when we received the gift of God's grace for the forgiveness of our sins, we took off the old clothes of our sinful lifestyle. Once adopted into the family of God, we put on the new clothes that Christ gave us. The forgiveness,
the adoption, and the new clothes all came our way as free gifts of God's grace. We now have a responsibility to constantly remind ourselves of that fact and live consistently in Christ. Paul is not calling us to earn our salvation through works. Rather, the lifestyle of righteousness and holiness follow naturally as fruit in a believer who keeps his or her mind focused on Christ and wears the new clothes of Christ every day. This daily practice moves us to lives that not only please God but also make us like God. What a powerful thought!

**GROUP DISCUSSION**

1. Give examples of the “old clothes” we take off when we become Christians.

2. Give examples of the “new clothes” we put on when we become Christians.

**GROUP ACTIVITY**

Select four individuals from the Bible study group to serve in a panel discussion. Ask each to select a passage of Scripture from this week's lesson and explain why it's important.

**FOR FURTHER STUDY**

Along with the scriptures considered in this Bible study, see also the following ones: