

# Why Holiness Matters

*The Ten Commandments, Jesus, and You*

Erwin W. Lutzer

Moody Church Media  
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## **WHY HOLINESS MATTERS**

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CHAPTER ONE

## DOES HOLINESS MATTER?

Now that we are in an era of grace, does personal holiness still matter? Or to put it another way, is it safer to sin in this new era than it was during Old Testament times when lawbreakers were stoned to death for any number of offenses?

Given the way many of us live, you would think that holiness was optional; after all, Christ has redeemed us from the curse of the law and meets all of God's requirements on our behalf, so we might think it doesn't matter how we live. Most Christians, I'm told, have no filter for what they watch on television, what they access on the internet, and in brief, how they order their lives. The temptation is to get our values from the culture and feel no twinge of conscience or need to adjust course.

But holiness is not just the expectation of the Old Testament saints who were commanded, "You shall be holy to me, for I the LORD am holy" (Leviticus 20:26), but the same command is given to us today. Peter admonishes

us, “Therefore, preparing your minds for action, and being sober-minded, set your hope fully on the grace that will be brought to you at the revelation of Jesus Christ. As obedient children, do not be conformed to the passions of your former ignorance, but as he who called you is holy, you also be holy in all your conduct, since it is written, *‘You shall be holy, for I am holy’*” (1 Peter 1:13–16, italics added).

What does holiness mean for us, being the sinners that we are? Many picture holiness as being associated with a dour personality, the musings of a guru sitting under a tree contemplating life. We can’t imagine the words *holy* and *joyful* in the same sentence. We regard the “holy saints” of the past as hermits who spent their time reading and daydreaming about all the things they weren’t permitted to do. In short, holiness doesn’t seem very attractive. We would rather be happy than holy. We can’t imagine being both.

And yet we are jerked into reality when we read in the New Testament, “Strive for peace with everyone, and for the holiness without which no one will see the Lord” (Hebrews 12:14). If holiness is necessary in order to see the Lord, it doesn’t appear to be an option we can ignore. But it all seems so impossible; a noble but unattainable goal.

So, how can we, who constantly fall short of God’s standards, pursue or strive for holiness? What does that mean? And why does it matter?



## HOLINESS DEFINED

Biblically, the word *holiness*, when applied to God, is relatively easy to define but difficult to grasp. For Him, it refers to His separateness; as theologians put it, God is “wholly other” meaning He is transcendent, entirely beyond us, and unlike us. In addition to separateness, it means purity; light without a hint of darkness; perfection without a hint of defect. Holiness is the only attribute of God that is repeated three times when creatures worship Him. “Holy, holy, holy” the angels cry in Isaiah 6:3, and in heaven we will hear the same refrain as we fall down and worship (Revelation 4:8).

There is no external standard by which God’s holiness and actions can be judged. We are prone to question God, to charge Him with neglecting His people and even cruelty for allowing all the evils of the world. But we must be careful because we do not have a privileged moral position from which we can adjudicate His dealings. Better to live with bewilderment and unanswered questions than to think we know better than God how this world should be ordered. His ways are not our ways.

Alexander Pope recognized our tendency to judge God and question His motives. In *An Essay On Man*, Pope rebukes us for our arrogance by saying we:

Snatch from his hand the Balance and the Rod,  
Re-judge his Justice, Be the GOD of GOD!

Try as we might, we cannot mold God into our image.

The old adage that “God created man in His own image and ever since man has tried to return the favor,” is all too true. We want a God we can understand, a God who thinks like we do, a God who does what we think He should. We even want a God we can control.

When God appeared to Moses at the burning bush, He revealed Himself as holy. “Do not come near; take your sandals off your feet, for the place on which you are standing is holy ground” (Exodus 3:5). Moses would spend the rest of his life learning about the holiness of God and how it would be displayed.

Later, Moses would learn that the holiness of God could be seen in the judgment and destruction of the wicked. After Pharaoh’s armies were drowned in the sea, Moses led the Israelites in singing “Who is like you, O LORD, among the gods? Who is like you, majestic in holiness, awesome in glorious deeds, doing wonders?” (Exodus 15:11). Pharaoh and his armies are drowned, and God is “*majestic in holiness*”!

But God’s holiness was also displayed in the deliverance of His people. The same song continues, “You have led in your steadfast love the people whom you have redeemed; you have guided them by your strength to your holy abode” (v. 13). The Israelites were set apart from their enemies and guided to God’s “*holy abode*.”

God’s holiness is seen when He judges and when He redeems.

## AN IMPORTANT DISTINCTION

Before we discuss what holiness should mean for us, let's pause for a clarification. Theologians distinguish between God's "communicable attributes" and His "non-communicable" attributes. God's "non-communicable" attributes, those that belong to Him alone, include omniscience, omnipresence, and omnipotence. But He also has "communicable attributes," those attributes we can emulate such as love, mercy, goodness, and yes, holiness. That is why we can, in some ways, resemble God; if we have a Father-son relationship with Him, we can mirror, however imperfectly, our Father in heaven. Incredibly, God disciplines us so that we might "share His holiness" (Hebrews 12:10).

Don't hurry over this too quickly. We are disciplined by God that we might "share His holiness." Holiness is a communicable attribute; we are called to put His holiness on display by the way we live, by our aversion to sin, and by our love of righteousness. The Puritan John Owen wrote, "I do not understand how a man can be a true believer unto whom sin is not the greatest burden, sorrow and trouble."<sup>1</sup> We cannot be holy if we think of sin as a trifling matter. Hatred for sin and a love of righteousness is birthed in our hearts by God when we are converted.

There is another distinction we must grasp. When in repentance and faith we accept Christ as Savior, we receive

God's absolute holiness; His righteousness, His purity, and His perfections are credited to us. This holiness comes from outside of us; it is a gift ascribed to our account, thanks to Jesus Christ. Without it, we cannot stand in God's presence in this life nor in the life to come. We are welcomed into heaven solely on the basis of this righteousness, that is, Christ's holiness. As the hymn goes:

*Dressed in His righteousness alone,  
Faultless to stand before the throne.*

But—and now we get to our responsibility—we must also pursue personal holiness; we must demonstrate practical, everyday righteousness, “without which no one will see the Lord” (Hebrews 12:14). This righteousness does not contribute to our salvation; it is not added to the perfections given at the point of our salvation because our best works can never “attain the righteousness of God.” Our quest for personal holiness is always tainted with sin often unseen by us. We are more depraved than we can ever know. But as we shall see, that's not an excuse to be careless about God's commands.

Holiness for us is to be separated unto God, we are to put Him on display before the world. Here's our assignment: “But you are a chosen race, a royal priesthood, a holy nation, a people for his own possession, that you may proclaim the excellencies of him who called you out of darkness into his marvelous light” (1 Peter 2:9). We are a

holy priesthood to proclaim the excellencies of God.

The pursuit of personal holiness is essential. It can be defined as striving to be like Christ in thought, word, and deed. It is a life lived with the motivation of pleasing God in all things; it is attempting to be in perfect harmony with God and the instructions He has given us. This holiness includes not just our actions, but also what we think; it reaches to the heart of our values, our motivations, and our lifestyles.

Pursuing holiness means pursuing God, and in the process, we discover we are blessed.

Centuries ago, Blaise Pascal wrote that mankind “vainly searches but finds nothing to help him, other than to see an infinite abyss that can only be filled by One who is Infinite and Immutable. In other words, it can only be filled by God Himself.”<sup>2</sup>

Holiness means pursuing God; it means seeing that nothing else matters except His glory. It means being godly, that is, “God-like.” And in the process, the deepest need of our souls is met. And we become a witness to the world.

## **SO WHY DOES HOLINESS MATTER?**

Holiness—practical holiness—should be pursued, even though it cannot be fully attained in this life. Here are just a few reasons why we must strive for holiness in this life.

Reason one: Striving for holiness is the only proof

to others (and even to ourselves) that we have been born again. “Whoever says he abides in him ought to walk in the same way in which he walked” (1 John 2:6). And again, “By this it is evident who are the children of God, and who are the children of the devil: whoever does not practice righteousness is not of God, nor is the one who does not love his brother” (1 John 3:10).

Reason two: Striving for holiness will prepare us for the judgment seat of Christ where we shall give an account for the deeds done in the body, whether good or bad (2 Corinthians 5:10). This judgment should be taken seriously; John says we should live in such a way that we shall not be “ashamed before him at his coming” (1 John 2:28, KJV). I believe one of the reasons there will be tears in heaven is because we will weep tears of regret for the way we lived in light of the opportunities we were given.

Reason three: Striving for holiness is the path to happiness for the believer; for to grieve the Holy Spirit means that we live with anger and misery. Because Jesus loved righteous and hated evil, He was anointed with the “oil of gladness” (Hebrews 1:9). As we dare to draw near to God, we find that our journey has a blessed end. “In your presence there is fullness of joy; at your right hand are pleasures forevermore” (Psalm 16:11). In other words, the path to happiness is holiness.

Reason four: Striving for holiness brings glory to God

because it shows that we believe in the integrity of His promises. “Since we have these promises, beloved, let us cleanse ourselves from every defilement of body and spirit, bringing holiness to completion in the fear of God” (2 Corinthians 7:1). The journey toward “perfecting holiness” is through accepting the forgiveness and strength of God; it is by submitting to the power of God’s Word.

Reason five: Striving for holiness means that we are a witness to the world. To quote Peter again, we are to be a holy people for God’s own possession that we may “proclaim the excellencies of him who called you out of darkness into his marvelous light” (1 Peter 2:9).

In short, holiness matters because God matters and so do we. When we struggle against sin and pursue holiness our victories honor the God we love.

And now, let us contemplate the question: Why would God, at Sinai, begin by telling us what *not* to do before we are told what we *should* do?