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Holiness Is Not an Option

MAKE EVERY EFFORT TO LIVE
IN PEACE WITH ALL MEN AND
TO BE HOLY; WITHOUT
HOLINESS NO ONE WILL SEE
THE LORD.

Hebrews 12:14

Just what do these words, "without holiness no one will see the Lord" actually mean? Does our salvation in the final analysis depend to some degree on our attaining some level of personal holiness?

On this question the Scripture is clear on two points. First, the best Christians can never in themselves merit salvation through their personal holiness. Our righteous deeds are like filthy garments in the light of God's holy law (Isaiah 64:6). Our best works are stained and polluted with imperfection and sin. As one of the saints of several centuries ago put it, "Even our tears of repentance need to be washed in the blood of the lamb."

Second, Scripture repeatedly refers to the

obedience and righteousness of Christ on our behalf. "For just as through the disobedience of the one man the many were made sinners, so also through the obedience of the one man the many will be made righteous" (Romans 5:19). "For Christ died for your sins once for all, the righteous for the unrighteous, to bring you to God" (1 Peter 3:18). These two passages teach a twofold aspect of Christ's work on our behalf. They are often referred to as His active and His passive obedience.

Active obedience means Christ's sinless life here on earth, His perfect obedience and absolute holiness. This perfect life is credited to those who trust in Him for their salvation. His passive obedience refers to His death on the cross through which He fully paid the penalty for our sins and placated the wrath of God toward us. In Hebrews 10:5-9 we read that Christ came to do the will of the Father. Then the writer said, "And by that will, *we have been made holy* through the sacrifice of the body of Jesus Christ once for all" (Hebrews 10:10). So we see that our holiness before God depends entirely on the work of Jesus Christ for us, by God's will.

Does Hebrews 12:14 refer then to this holiness which we have in Christ? No, for at this point the writer speaks of a holiness which we are to strive after; we are to "make every effort . . . to be holy." And without this holiness, the writer says, no one will see the Lord.

Scripture speaks of both a holiness which we have in Christ before God, and a holiness which we are to strive after. These two aspects of holiness

complement one another, for our salvation is a salvation to holiness: "For God did not call us to be impure, but to live a holy life" (1 Thessalonians 4:7). To the Corinthians Paul wrote: "To the church of God in Corinth, to those sanctified in Christ Jesus and called *to be holy*" (1 Corinthians 1:2). The word *sanctified* here means "made holy." That is, we are through Christ *made* holy in our standing before God, and *called* to be holy in our daily lives.

So the writer of Hebrews is telling us to take seriously the necessity of personal, practical holiness. When the Holy Spirit comes into our lives at our salvation, he comes to make us holy in practice. If there is not, then, at least a yearning in our hearts to live a holy life pleasing to God, we need to seriously question whether our faith in Christ is genuine.

It is true that this desire for holiness may be only a spark at the beginning. But that spark should grow till it becomes a flame — a desire to live a life wholly pleasing to God. True salvation brings with it a desire to be made holy. When God saves us through Christ, He not only saves us from the penalty of sin, but also from its dominion. Bishop Ryle said, "I doubt, indeed, whether we have any warrant for saying that a man can possibly be converted without being consecrated to God. More consecrated he doubtless can be, and will be as his grace increases; but if he was not consecrated to God in the very day that he was converted and born again, I do not know what conversion means."¹

The whole purpose of our salvation is that we be "holy and blameless in His sight" (Ephesians

1:4). To continue to live in sin as a Christian is to go contrary to God's very purpose for our salvation. One of the writers of three centuries ago put it like this: "What a strange kind of salvation do they desire that care not for holiness They would be saved by Christ and yet be out of Christ in a fleshly state. . . . They would have their sins forgiven, not that they may walk with God in love, in time to come, but that they may practice their enmity against Him without any fear of punishment."²

Holiness, then, is not necessary as a *condition* of salvation — that would be salvation by works — but as a *part* of salvation that is received by faith in Christ. The angel said to Joseph, "You are to give Him the name Jesus [which means 'Jehovah is salvation'], because He will save His people from their sins" (Matthew 1:21).

Therefore, we may say that no one can trust in Christ for true salvation unless he trusts in Him for holiness. This does not mean the desire for holiness must be a conscious desire at the time a person comes to Christ, but rather that the Holy Spirit who creates within us saving faith also creates within us the desire for holiness. He simply does not create one without the other.

Paul said, "For the grace of God that brings salvation has appeared to all men. It teaches us to say 'No' to ungodliness and worldly passions, and to live self-controlled, upright and godly lives in this present age" (Titus 2:11-12). The same grace that brings salvation teaches us to renounce ungodly living. We cannot receive half of God's grace. If we have experienced it at all, we will experience not

only forgiveness of our sins but also freedom from sin's dominion.

This is the point James is making in his hard-to-understand passage on faith and works (James 2:14-26). He is simply telling us that a "faith" that does not result in works — in a holy life, in other words — is not a living faith but a dead one, no better than that which the demons possess.

God's nature demands holiness in the life of a Christian. When He calls us to salvation, He calls us to fellowship with Himself and His Son Jesus Christ (1 John 1:3). But God is light; in Him is no darkness at all (1 John 1:5). How then can we have fellowship with Him if we continue to walk in darkness?

Holiness then is required for *fellowship with God*. David asked the question, "O Lord, who may abide in Thy tent? Who may dwell on Thy holy hill?" (Psalm 15:1). That is to say, "Lord, who may live in fellowship with You?" The answer given in the next four verses may be summarized as "he who leads a holy life."

Prayer is a vital part of our fellowship with God; yet the Psalmist said, "If I regard wickedness in my heart, the Lord will not hear" (Psalm 66:18). To regard wickedness is to cherish some sin, to love it to the extent that I am not willing to part with it. I know it is there, yet I justify it in some way like the child who says, "Well, he hit me first." When we are holding on to some sin, we are not pursuing holiness and we cannot have fellowship with God.

God does not require a perfect, sinless life to have fellowship with Him, but He does require that

we be serious about holiness, that we grieve over sin in our lives instead of justifying it, and that we earnestly pursue holiness as a way of life.

Holiness is also required for *our own well-being*. Scripture says, "The Lord disciplines those whom He loves, and He punishes everyone He accepts as a son" (Hebrews 12:6). This statement presupposes our need of discipline, for God is not capricious in administering it. He disciplines us because we need discipline.

To persist in disobedience is to increase our necessity for discipline. Some of the Corinthian Christians persisted in disobedience to the point where God had to take their lives (1 Corinthians 11:30).

David described the discipline of the Lord this way: "When I kept silent about my sin, my body wasted away through my groaning all day long. For day and night Thy hand was heavy upon me; My vitality was drained away as with the fever-heat of summer" (Psalm 32:3-4).

When God speaks to us about some sin, we need to heed and take action. To fail to deal with that sin is to risk incurring His hand of discipline. One icy morning as I was turning into the driveway of The Navigators headquarters where I work, my car skidded out of control into a corner fence post. Someone else in a similar predicament had already bent the post, and I only increased the angle. I said nothing to the property manager, despite several gentle proddings from God. Two weeks later I had another slight accident. After over 15 years of accident-free driving, I knew God was trying to get

my attention, so I called up the property manager, reported my first accident, and offered to pay for a new fence post. As Peter said, "Live your lives as strangers here in reverent fear" (1 Peter 1:17). God is serious about holiness in the lives of His people, and He will discipline us to attain it.

Holiness is also necessary for *effective service to God*. Paul wrote to Timothy, "If a man cleanse himself from [ignoble purposes], he will be an instrument for noble purposes, made holy, useful to the Master and prepared to do any good work" (2 Timothy 2:21). Holiness and usefulness are linked together. We cannot bring our service to God in an unclean vessel.

The One who makes our service effective and who empowers us for service is the Holy Spirit. Note well that He is called the *Holy Spirit*, or the Spirit of Holiness. When we indulge our sinful natures and dwell in unholiness, the Spirit of God is grieved (Ephesians 4:30) and will not prosper our service. These are not times when we fall into temptation and immediately seek God's forgiveness and cleansing, but lives that are characterized by unholiness.

Holiness also is necessary for our *assurance of salvation* — not at the moment of salvation, but over the course of our lives. True faith will always show itself by its fruits. "Therefore, if anyone is in Christ, he is a new creation" (2 Corinthians 5:17).

I recall a young man, a fairly new Christian, whose father was visiting him. He had not seen his father for several years and not since he had become a Christian. He was eager to share his new-found

faith with his dad, and we prayed together that he might be an effective witness to his father.

Several days later I asked him how it had gone with his witness. He told me his dad had claimed to have trusted Christ as his Saviour when he "went forward" at age 10 in an evangelistic meeting. I asked the young man, "In all the years you were growing up, did you ever see any evidence that your father was a Christian?" His answer was "No." What reason have we to put confidence in that man's salvation? He was almost 60 and had never once given his son any evidence that he was a Christian.

The only safe evidence that we are in Christ is a holy life. John said everyone who has within him the hope of eternal life purifies himself just as Christ is pure (1 John 3:3). Paul said, "Those who are led by the Spirit of God are sons of God" (Romans 8:14). If we know nothing of holiness, we may flatter ourselves that we are Christians but we do not have the Holy Spirit dwelling within us.

Everyone, then, who professes to be a Christian should ask himself, "Is there evidence of practical holiness in my life? Do I desire and strive after holiness? Do I grieve over my lack of it and earnestly seek the help of God to be holy?"

It is not those who profess to know Christ who will enter heaven, but those whose lives are holy. Even those who do "great Christian works" will not enter heaven unless they also do the will of God. Jesus said, "Not everyone who says to Me, 'Lord, Lord', will enter the kingdom of heaven, but only he who does the will of My Father who is in heaven.

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"Many will say to Me on that day, 'Lord, Lord, did we not prophesy in Your name, and in Your name drive out demons, and perform many miracles?' Then I will tell them plainly, 'I never knew you. Away from Me, you evildoers'" (Matthew 7:21-23).

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- NOTES: 1. J. C. Ryle, *Holiness*, page xv.
2. Walter Marshall; 1692, quoted in A. W. Pink, *The Doctrine of Sanctification* (Swengel, Pennsylvania: Bible Truth Depot, 1955), page 29.