

The Holiness of Christ

by Jerry Bridges

God made him who had no sin to be sin for us, so that in him we might become the righteousness of God (2 Corinthians 5:21).

Before speaking further of holiness in ourselves, it is well that we also consider the holiness of Christ. We need this first of all to be firmly grounded in our security in Christ. As we study more fully the implications of "Be holy because I am holy," we will see more of our own sinfulness. We will see the wickedness and deceitfulness of our hearts, and how far we miss the mark of God's perfect holiness. As this happens, the true Christian will in his heart flee for refuge in Christ. It is important therefore that we understand the righteousness of Christ, and the fact that His righteousness is credited to us.

On numerous occasions the Scriptures testify that Jesus during His time on earth lived a perfectly holy life. He is described as "without sin" (Hebrews 4:15); as One who "committed no sin" (1 Peter 2:22); and as "Him who had no sin" (2 Corinthians 5:21). The Apostle John stated, "In Him is no sin" (1 John 3:5). The Old Testament describes Him prophetically as "the Righteous One" (Isaiah 53:11), and as One who "loved righteousness and hated wickedness" (Psalm 45:7). These statements, taken from six different writers of Scripture, show that the sinlessness of Jesus Christ is the universal teaching of the Bible.

Even more compelling, however, is Jesus' own testimony concerning Himself. On one occasion He looked the Pharisees squarely in the eye and asked, "Can any of you prove Me guilty of sin?" (John 8:46). As someone has observed, it was not their failure to answer His question that is so significant, but the fact He dared to ask it. Here was Jesus in direct confrontation with people who hated Him. He had just told them they were of their father the devil, and that they wanted to carry out his desires. Surely if any people had a reason to point out to Him some careless act of His or some flaw of His character, they would. Furthermore, Jesus asked this question in the presence of His disciples, who lived with Him continuously and had ample opportunity to observe any inconsistencies. Yet Jesus dared to ask the question because He knew there was only one answer. He was without sin.

But the holiness of Jesus was more than simply the absence of actual sin. It was also a perfect conformity to the will of His Father. He stated that He came down from heaven "not to do My own will but to do the will of Him who sent Me" (John 6:38). On another occasion, He said, "My food is to do the will of Him who sent Me" (John 4:34). Perhaps His highest testimony to His positive holiness was His statement, "I always do what pleases Him" (John 8:29).

Such a positive declaration must include not only His actions but also His attitudes

and motives. It is possible for us to do the right action from a wrong motive, but this does not please God. Holiness has to do with more than mere acts. Our motives must be holy, that is, arising from a desire to do something simply because it is the will of God. Our thoughts should be holy, since they are known to God even before they are formed in our minds. Jesus Christ perfectly met these standards, and He did it for us. He was born into this world subject to the law of God that He might fulfill it on our behalf (Galatians 4:4,5).

Whenever we seriously contemplate the holiness of God, our natural reaction is to say with Isaiah, "Woe is me, for I am ruined! Because I am a man of unclean lips, and I live among a people of unclean lips; for my eyes have seen the King, the Lord of hosts" (Isaiah 6:5).

A serious view of the holiness of God--His own moral perfection and infinite hatred of sin--will leave us, as it did Isaiah, seeing with utter dismay our own lack of holiness. His moral purity serves to magnify our impurity.

Therefore, it is important that we receive the same assurance that Isaiah received: "Behold . . . your iniquity is taken away, and your sin is forgiven" (Isaiah 6:7). It is not only at the initial point of salvation that we need this assurance. In fact, the more we grow in holiness, the more we need assurance that the perfect righteousness of Christ is credited to us. This is true because a part of growing in holiness is the Holy Spirit's making us aware of our need of holiness. As we see this need, it is well for us to always keep in mind the righteousness of Jesus Christ on our behalf, and the fact that "God made Him who had no sin to be sin for us, so that in Him we might become the righteousness of God" (2 Corinthians 5:21).

The truth of our acceptance by God through the righteousness of Christ may seem so elementary that you wonder why it is stressed here. It is because we need to dwell on it to thwart the attacks of Satan. The Holy Spirit makes us more aware of our lack of holiness to stimulate us to deeper yearning and striving for holiness. But Satan will attempt to use the Holy Spirit's work to discourage us.

One of Satan's attacks is to try to convince you that you are not a genuine Christian after all. He will say something like, "A true Christian wouldn't think the evil thoughts you've been thinking today." Now it may be that six months ago Satan would not have come to you with such a suggestion because you were not troubled about your thoughts. But now that the Holy Spirit has begun to reveal how sinful your thoughts of lust and resentment and pride really are, you may begin to have doubts about your salvation.

A number of years ago, God was allowing me to go through some deep inner struggles to teach me something of the sinfulness of my heart. During this time I was leading a weekly Bible study at a military base about an hour's drive from where I lived.

Every Monday night as I left the fellowship of that Bible study and started my lonely drive home, Satan would begin to attack me: "How can anyone who is having the struggles you are having be a Christian?" he would ask. I began to fight him by resorting to an old Gospel hymn which begins,

"Just as I am, without one plea,
But that Thy blood was shed for me,
And that Thou bidst me come to Thee;
O Lamb of God, I come."

I would sing through that hymn, and by the time I finished I would be praising God for His salvation given freely to me through Jesus Christ.

You, too, if you diligently pursue holiness, must often flee to the Rock of your salvation. You flee there, not to be saved again, but to confirm in your heart that you are saved through His righteousness alone. You begin to identify with Paul when he said, "Here is a trustworthy saying that deserves full acceptance: Christ Jesus came into the world to save sinners--of whom I am the worst" (1 Timothy 1:15). It is at this point that Christ's holy life lived on your behalf becomes so important to you.

A second reason we need to consider the holiness of Christ is because His life is meant to be an example of holiness for us. Peter told us that Christ left an example for us to follow in His steps (1 Peter 2:21). Peter spoke particularly of Christ's suffering without retaliation, but in the following verse he said also that Christ committed no sin. Paul urged us to be imitators of God (Ephesians 5:1), and also said "Follow my example, as I follow the example of Christ" (1 Corinthians 11:1).

Clearly then, the sinless holy life of Jesus Christ is meant to be an example for us. Consider then His statement, "I always do what pleases Him." Do we dare take that as our personal goal in life? Are we truly willing to scrutinize all our activities, all our goals and plans, and all of our impulsive actions in the light of this statement: "I am doing this to please God"?

If we ask that question honestly, we will begin to squirm a bit. We know we do some things, good things in themselves, to gain admiration for ourselves rather than glory for God. We do other things strictly for our own pleasure, without any regard for the glory of God.

What is my reaction when the neighborhood bully pesters my little boy? Usually my initial reaction comes from a spirit of retaliation till the Holy Spirit reminds me of the example of Jesus. How do we view those who do not show love for us? Do we see them as persons for whom Christ died or as persons who make our lives difficult?

I recall an unpleasant business encounter once with a person who later became a Christian through another's witness. When I learned of this, I was deeply chagrined to reflect on the fact that I had never once thought of him as a person for whom Christ died, but only as someone with whom I had an unpleasant experience. We need to learn to follow the example of Christ, who was moved with compassion for sinners and who could pray for them even as they nailed Him to the cross on Calvary.

In the words of nineteenth-century Scottish theologian John Brown, "Holiness does not consist in mystic speculations, enthusiastic fervours, or uncommanded austerities; it consists in thinking as God thinks, and willing as God wills." Neither does holiness mean, as is so often thought, adhering to a list of "do's and don'ts," mostly don'ts. When Christ came into the world, He said, "I have come to do Your will, O God" (Hebrews 10:7). This is the example we are to follow. In all of our thoughts, all of our actions, in every part of our character, the ruling principle that motivates and guides us should be the desire to follow Christ in doing the will of the Father. This is the high road we must follow in the pursuit of holiness.

Excerpt from The Pursuit Of Holiness, Jerry Bridges
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