

The Essential of Holiness

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[0 : 00] For a short time this evening let's turn to Hebrews chapter 12, Hebrews 12 and especially the last part of verse 14. Although the two parts of it are certainly bound together we want to focus on the final part of it.

Strive with peace with everyone and for the holiness without which no one will see the Lord. The word strive at the beginning covers the holiness as well as the peace that's mentioned there.

Strive for peace but it also follows on in the meaning of it that we strive also for the holiness without which no one will see the Lord.

Now we've been looking at a few of what we've called essentials as they arise in the teaching of the Bible. We began with the essential of being born again without which we cannot enter the kingdom of God.

We looked then at the essential of justification, how it involves our sin being forgiven, our being given the righteousness of Christ for a standing before God that he approves of.

[1 : 14] Then we looked at obedience, the necessity of obedience, how obedience is an essential and how it forms very much part of the very heart of that saving relationship that we have with God when we are indeed his people.

And tonight we want to look at the essential of holiness. Now it's a kind of logical arrangement to the topics we've looked at so far and it's important that we look at the logical arrangement in the Bible of these essentials as well as other subjects that we come across.

Because as we've seen, to begin with being born again brings you then to justification, to being accepted with God. And then obedience lies at the heart of that relationship with God where we're taken from serving sin to serving God and serving righteousness.

And then following on from that, as we'll see tonight, there is the essential of holiness. We come to live for holiness. We come to desire a holy life and to live a holy life from the fact that we're born again, from the fact that God has given us his spirit to live in our hearts, from the fact that he's forgiven our sin, from the fact that we know the significance of his call that we be holy as he is holy.

When we're saying we're looking at holiness, we're looking at a very small fragment of the topic.

[2 : 49] Because holiness of life, as it is something true of every Christian, as it's something that we need as an essential, is a very, very large subject.

Indeed, it's a very elusive subject. It's very difficult to define it. Even when you take all the data from scripture that tells us about holiness, you still find yourself asking, but what really is it?

How do I define it? What is it in terms of its detail? Where do I see its detail? And especially, where do I see holiness in myself?

Perhaps that's not actually the wisest question. It's far easier to see holiness in the life of someone else. And sometimes to look for holiness in yourself is the way towards spiritual pride.

It need not be so, but it very often is so. Holiness really defies our ability to describe it fully, to appreciate it fully, to be able to understand it fully.

[3 : 57] But there are a number of things the Bible tells us about holiness of life as an essential that we want to just briefly look at tonight. Let's ask a question first of all.

Do we love God? Well, if we love God, we love holiness. You cannot love God without loving holiness.

If we love God, then we love the fact that he's holy. He is the holy God. He is the immaculate, sinless, spotless, glorious God.

Glorious in his holiness. So glorious, so great in his holiness, that his holiness before us in the word of God, even before the holy angels in heaven who never sinned, is something before which they bow in the presence of God and constantly exclaim, Holy, Holy, Holy Lord God Almighty.

Do we love God? Well, if we say we love him even in a measure, and however difficult it might be for us to say with absolute certainty and without some trepidation that we love God, if we're able to say it even to some extent, then we have to say that we love holiness too.

[5 : 19] Not only that, but we love God's terms for holiness. And we have to say if we love God that we love holiness, and that if we love holiness then we love the law of God.

We love the commands of God. Because they set out for us the pattern of holiness that he requires. The practical living by which our holiness must be practiced.

Holiness is not just a state. Holiness is not something that really applies to you as a kind of mental condition. Holiness is a lifestyle.

Living a holy life means living practically in this world what the Bible calls a holy life. So what is holiness?

I'm just going to refer to two things. There are many other things we could mention as well. But let's confine it tonight to two things. First of all, holiness is a renovation in the soul.

[6 : 24] It begins in the soul. We mentioned being born again. How that takes us really to the root of our relationship with God and where it changes into what it should be.

And how God, without being born again, God transforms us from the inside out. And how essential that is. Well, holiness, as an essential, involves that renovation in the soul.

It begins at the point of being born again. Holiness actually is rooted in that change that God brings about. As soon as you are justified, as soon as your sin is forgiven, as soon as you are made a new creation, as soon as you are born again, you are then on the way towards holiness.

You then have planted within you a desire to be holy. And however much we've desired to be holy or admired holiness before we were born again.

And I'm sure many of us did admire holiness, at least in a sense, as we saw people who we knew were holy, people who lived a godly life, people who were walking in a way that was true to God in their lives.

[7 : 36] Yet the fact of the matter is, until we are born again, until we are ourselves changed, we don't love holiness for God's sake. We may love it for other reasons.

We may even admire it from a distance. We may even wish that we had it. But holiness of life and pursuing holiness of life begins with a renovation in the soul, a renovation from the power of God by the Spirit of God, in which He plants in you a desire to be holy because that is what He is.

Because that's what He requires of us. And the desire to be holy is the desire to be like Him. Whatever we think of holiness to be, one inescapable thing that it is, is that it is likeness to God.

likeness to God. Jesus closed the Sermon on the Mount with this reference.

Be ye therefore perfect, even as your Father in heaven is perfect. And when you come to 1 Peter, the likes of 1 Peter, just looking at that text, out of many we could look at, 1 Peter chapter 1, verses 13 to 16, where we find Peter there talking about God having become a father to His people, and our being saved by Him.

[9 : 14] Well, he says, 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, so you also be holy in all your conduct.

Since it is written, You shall be holy, for I am holy. You see, we are inseparably connected to the holiness of God, whether we like it or not.

Whether we're Christians or not. Whether we're saved or not. We're inseparably connected to the holiness of God. The God whom we are dealing with is holy. The God who will meet us is holy.

Whom we will meet is holy. The God who leads His people as the father of them, as the father of their souls, the father of their lives, the one who promises all of these fatherly blessings and care to them, is a holy father.

[10 : 21] A God who will meet us as judge, will be our holy judge. There will be no corruption, there will be no bribery, there will be no, nothing of what you associate with certain aspects of injustice in this life.

The carrying out of verdicts which are not true and not just. Everything about God is holy. And you and I, one way or another, tonight, are connected to the holiness of God.

Now he's saying, this is something that is awesome, Peter is saying. And yet, the strange thing is that the holiness of God, once God has come into your life, and once you've come to know this renovation of soul, there are, it's got a two-sided aspect to the way that you relate to God and his holiness.

You remember, Peter at one occasion, when you read of him, as Jesus displayed his power with them in that little boat, and enabled them to catch miraculously a huge shoal of fish, where they by their own efforts had nothing.

What did he do? What did he say? He fell down before Jesus. And he said to him, Depart from me, O Lord, for I am a sinful man.

[11 : 56] What was he impressed with? Why did he fall down in the presence of Jesus and say these words? Because he knew that only divine holiness could have brought about such an act.

That only one who is himself God, as the holy God, could have produced such a catch of fish from what seemed to be an empty ocean.

Depart from me, for I am a sinful man. In other words, there is a reaction on our part when we come to really appreciate the holiness of God, that realizes that it's actually proper, that there should be a distance between us and this God.

that it's just simply not fitting, that we, who are so unholy, so sinful, that we should be close to this God, that we should take it upon ourselves, even to draw near to this God.

By right, that's to say, if God were to give us what we require and what we deserve, rather, we would not come near this holy God at all.

[13 : 06] We would be like Adam, trying to hide from him, by whatever means. And yet, the other aspect of it is this, and it's such a wonderful and fascinating and precious thing.

Peter didn't mean, Lord, never come back to me again. Don't ever come close to me again. Built into his expression as well, this sense of, Lord, I just can't live without you.

I need to be close to you. I need to have you close with me. In the words of that great hymn, Abide with me, fast falls the eventide.

In life, in death, O Lord, abide with me. Which God are we speaking to? Is it the God who is not holy that we want to abide with us?

No, it's the God we know to be holy. And only as we appreciate his holiness as the holy God where we really ask him to abide with us. Do we love God?

[14 : 14] Well, we must love his holiness. Do we love his holiness? Then you want him with you. You appreciate that there is, rightly, a distance between you and this holy God. But what he's done in your soul draws you near.

And the holiness, that on the one hand, actually makes you seem to want to go away from it, yet on the other hand, it attracts you, it fascinates you, it brings you to want closer to it.

Do you appreciate that tonight for yourself? Do you know that in your own heart? Have you come to the point where you've really seen something of God and his holiness?

Something of his awesomeness that in one sense repels you and yet in a greater sense draws you and fascinates you and brings you to want to be close to him.

Because you realize that this holiness of God is one of the most precious, precious things that you know about him.

[15 : 16] It really is what marks his perfection. As a perfect God you need. Not the gods we invent for ourselves. Not the gods that thousands out there tonight are following.

Whether it be sport or recreation or whatever other activities there may be in human experience rather than coming to draw near to God in worship.

But you and I are here surely because this God attracts us. This holiness is something we want to draw close to in Jesus Christ.

There's a renovation in our soul. Along with that a rejection of sinning. Now none of us is able to say tonight or sure that we have done away with sin completely.

It's what makes preachers sometimes feel their hypocrisy and feel that they're hypocrites. That they're setting out and preaching the gospel which God has placed on their hearts.

[16 : 27] Things which they know they themselves do not live up to. Things where people can point to ourselves as really not achieving and not being perfect in.

And we hold up our hands and say yes that's true. I'm a sinner. I'm a sinner every day. I'm a sinner who needs the righteousness of Christ every day.

I'm a sinner who needs the Holy Spirit's ministry in my soul every day. I'm a sinner who needs the power of that Holy Spirit. Because when God places the need to be holy before us we realize that it means a rejection of sinning.

A turning away from sin. A turning to God and an endeavor as the catechism puts it of new obedience. An endeavor to live a holy life.

And you know these great men who drew up the catechisms and the confession of faith that we have they knew the use of words was so important. And the care they took and the language they used even to include words like endeavor.

[17 : 35] To endeavor after new obedience. That's to just keep on attempting. to realize that we fail and yet we come back again for another attempt and it's repeated every day of our lives.

And these great men of God realized that they themselves needed daily to endeavor this to retry to keep at it. But it is a rejection of sinning nonetheless.

If we are to be like God which holiness is then we are required to shun sin. To be done with it. To be whenever we are aware of it instant in confession of it and seeking forgiveness and seeking help and power and grace from God to overcome it to get past it to get beyond it to move on to another stage.

and that includes every sin. Every sin that God in the Bible calls sin.

Not what we might call sin. Not what the world would regard as sin which would probably be just something like any major crime such as murder.

[18 : 54] But there are many other sins that the Bible speaks about that the world in its lostness would not regard as sin at all. It would in fact regard as nowadays quite acceptable sins of a moral kind.

You notice what it says there in verse 16 that no one is sexually immoral or unholy like Esau. Sexually immoral is unholy. It is the opposite of holiness.

It doesn't matter what the world thinks. It doesn't matter what's fashionable. It doesn't matter what people create for themselves as a standard of life. What God calls unholy is unholy despite what people will make of it.

And holiness means rejecting every sin including those in the area we call morality or immorality. Yet holiness is not the same thing as living a formal or religious moral life.

Holiness is not just like a formal attending to commandments and trying like Saul of Tarsus before he was converted to keep these in his own strength by his own resolve by his own determination by what he then regarded as his respect for God and his disrespect for Jesus.

[20 : 17] Thomas Chalmers preached the gospel. He was one of the greatest preachers of the gospel ever in the history of our country.

He became the leader of the Free Church when it was formed in 1843. But before he was converted he was a minister in Fife.

He tells us in some of his writings what his preaching was like. And he says that he used to preach strong moral type of sermons.

Things which dealt with moral issues. Adultery lies stealing that sort of stuff. And after he was converted he told his congregation of the change that had come into his life.

But he also said this I realize now he said that all of these moral pleadings didn't have the weight of a feather on your conscience.

[21 : 32] Why? There was no Christ in it. There was no actual love for God from a new heart in it. holiness of life is in regard to rejection of sinning.

It's not just a formal attachment to a creed, a formal following of God's commandments. It's not just leading an upright life that shows everybody like Saul of Tarsus what a good person we are.

holiness is following out of love for God the standard of behavior that he requires.

there's nothing by way of cold formality about it. The Pharisees thought that they were very holy people and they passed themselves off as being experts in holiness.

Jesus met them as we saw going through Luke's gospel. Jesus met them so many times and so many times when Jesus met them he actually accused them and used such vehement language in order to press home on their consciences the kind of formal attachment they had to their own laws and indeed to the laws of God.

[23 : 03] You are he said nothing other than whited sepulchres. Outside they're all nicely painted inside they're full of dead men's bones and rotteness.

That's how Jesus put it. That's what Jesus thinks of a mere formality of religion. A holiness that is nothing other than just a formal standing as we see it ourselves.

Holiness loves holiness. holiness loves the likeness of God. Holiness hates sin. Holiness is sorrow over sin.

Holiness wants to put sin out of being. Not just out of your life but out of existence if it were possible. And you know I think it was Philip Henry rather than Matthew Henry.

Philip Henry was Matthew Henry's father but if not it was certainly Matthew Henry who said this it is a mark of our desiring to be holy that we are content when people show us our faults.

[24 : 20] Do you like your faults to be shown? I know there is a way of doing it in a kind of unacceptable way a way of showing up people's faults as if we are perfect or just doing it a way that is using the wrong kind of language and lacking in tact and compassion and just sneeringly that is not what we are talking about at all.

But if you and I really want to be holy if we are really serious about holiness of life then you won't grumble when somebody shows you something you have done wrong something in which you have come short of your standard.

You and I if we really are serious about holiness we will say about I know it is very very difficult and it is easy in this pulpit and any pulpit to say these things. Very difficult in the doing of them.

But we are following out logically the thought of scripture. Holiness is rejection of sinning. And if there is something wrong that is pointed out to us especially lovingly and factfully then we are going to say thank you for pointing that out.

I need to attend to it or I will not be holy. What is holiness? A renovation of soul and a rejection of sinning.

[25 : 47] Secondly, why is holiness an essential? Spend a bit more time on that that we intended but let's look at why is holiness an essential? Well it says here strive for holiness without which no one will see the Lord.

If you confine it to the text itself it's perfectly simple. Holiness is essential because without it no one will see the Lord. What does it mean to see the Lord?

It means to see with approval. Not just to approve of him on your part but to have him approve of you. The kind of seeing that John 17 verse 24 speaks about when Jesus was praying for his people that they would ultimately be with him where he is so that they may behold my glory that they may see my glory.

And that's the idea of sight in this instance here. Without holiness no one shall see the Lord. You will not be able to see him in a way by which you come to approve of him and he approve of you.

In other words with a loving relationship between you and himself. And it's not just in terms of our life in the world to come it's also applicable now.

[27 : 05] Without holiness you will not see the Lord. You will not appreciate the Lord in all aspects of his being and of his work. Can we say tonight that we love the Lord?

And if we're saying we love the Lord then we love holiness. And if we're saying we love the Lord and we love holiness then we love to see God in his terms. To see the way he works the way he speaks to us the way he points out our needs to us the way he commands us the way he promises to us all of the things that God reveals of himself without holiness we will not see that with approval.

that's what he's saying we will not see God but neither will we see him when it comes to the world to come. Without holiness no one shall see the Lord.

Heaven is a holy place where the holy God resides. where holy people will be with him forever made holy by his spirit.

And if we don't love holiness we're not in love with heaven because without holiness you and I will not set a fruit in it.

[28 : 38] We shall not see the Lord. Hebrews talks about God and his holiness at the end of this chapter.

Let us offer to God acceptable worship with reverence and awe for our God is a consuming fire. What is it that makes hell to be hell?

The holiness of God. God in his wrath, in his holy wrath. God in applying to us what our son deserves.

God in his holiness burning against sin. Without holiness that's where you will be.

That's what you will see. That's what your eternity will be. Whether you're professing Christ or not. Without holiness that's your destiny and mine.

[29 : 49] You will not see the Lord. And this is an inviolable principle that God has set out for us here. Without holiness no one will see the Lord. God is not going to adjust that.

God is not going to change the terms of that. God is not going to listen to our appeal somehow to relax this great principle that without holiness no one shall see the Lord.

we can appeal to him for all we like. Jesus himself said that when he comes and when he appears in the world as the judge that there will be many people who recognize him who will say Lord you preached in our streets.

We saw you doing miracles and we did miracles in your name. And they'll be knocking at a closed door because without holiness no one shall see the Lord.

Jesus is our shield, our shepherd, our friend, our righteousness.

[30 : 55] That's where we have holiness rooted in our relationship with God through Jesus Christ. When you have Jesus, when you embrace Jesus, when Christ Jesus is your savior, when you've made him your own, when you've brought into your possession through the preaching of the gospel, the offer of Christ as it's offered to you, and when you've made that Christ your own, then you are guaranteed holiness of life.

Because it no longer depends on your own efforts, though as we'll see in a minute there is effort involved. You're depending on him. you're living by his promises.

You're doing away with self-righteousness. And a do-it-yourself holiness or salvation. It's all in Christ.

It all emanates from his work. And that's why this unchangeable principle is unchangeable. don't ever think that it's going to change.

Without holiness, no one shall see the Lord. Thirdly, there's the pursuit of holiness.

[32 : 16] As we said, the word strive at the beginning is covering both aspects of peace and holiness. Strive for peace with everyone and strive for the holiness without which no one will see the Lord.

Well, the word strive in the Greek text of the New Testament there. It really means to pursue something. We often have it translated as pursue or follow after.

And it's a word that was used in the ordinary sense of hunting. When you're hunting prey, or when they used to hunt prey, in those days they still do. You actually keep at it until what you're actually trying to catch or whatever way you're going to take the prey, you just keep on until it's yours.

Or take it into the animal world, if you look at a cheetah, these wonderful films that you can see nowadays, cheetah, leopard, whatever it is, stalking its prey, eyeing up its victim, coming nearer, nearer, and nearer, and then bang, off it goes.

Sometimes it doesn't make it, and it gives up the pursuit, and what happens? Well, the prey just keeps going, and it goes away from it, and it's lost it.

[33 : 38] That's how it is with holiness. Stop pursuing it, and it'll run away from you. Stop hunting it, stop searching after it, seeking after it, pursuing it, following after it, striving, whatever word you use, but it's going to just disappear away from sight.

Because we have responsibilities, friends. We have responsibilities to pursue holiness, to use the means that God has given us, finally, because he has given us all that we need to be holy.

Isn't that an amazing thing? He doesn't require anything of us, not even such a great thing holiness of life, without having given us all the means that we need to use to achieve it.

He's given us his word, he's given us in the renovation of our souls, in our being born again, he's given us the Holy Spirit. When you go to the likes of Romans chapter 8, you can see that the Spirit of God, the Holy Spirit, God himself, in the life of his people, how he sets about preparing them for heaven by making them holy.

It's what is elsewhere called the work of sanctification. And what God is doing in the life of his people is making them holy.

[35 : 07] There are so many different things that happen in the lives of Christians, so many different experiences. But you can really say that at the end of it all, through all the failures, through all the successes, through every pain and through every joy, it all comes together in God's handiwork in this way.

As we've seen in our studies in Discipleship Explored, in the Epistle to the Philippians, he who has begun a good work in you will bring it to completion.

And what is that point of completion? It is being perfectly holy, being like God in every respect, so that we perfectly are presented in his image, in the image of his Son.

So there's a challenge to me tonight. I preach from the Word of God, I study the Word of God to that end. Am I using the Word of God to make me more holy?

Am I saying daily to God, Lord, thank you for your Word as a means by which you make me holy? God is holy?

[36 : 30] Is that how I regard the sacraments? Is that how I regard the Lord's Supper? You know, to stay away from the Lord's Supper when we should be there is really denying ourselves a primary means to progress in holiness of life.

it's one of the means that God has given us along with the Word to make us holy and to make us more holy than we are. Because that's what it's about.

It's not primarily a means of witnessing to people that we are Christians. It's not a means simply of coming apart every so often and to be distinguished from others who are not going to take communion.

there is that emphasis in it, there is that element in it, but it's really in passing in a sense because what it's primarily about is that it's a means of grace.

It's a channel that God has given us to make us holy, to enable us to pursue, to strive after holiness. That's so precious to us.

[37 : 48] we don't need to come to God and say, Lord, why didn't you give me such and such to make me holy? He's given you everything you need.

The word, the sacraments, the Holy Spirit in your heart if you're a Christian, if not, ask him for it, go to God, seek him. Tell him you need the Holy Spirit in order to make you holy and you don't have it yourself.

but his promise is if you will ask him, he will give you the Holy Spirit. That's what Jesus said. Prayer, is that why I pray?

To make me more holy? The Pharisees prayed to make an impression. I'm not suggesting anyone here does that. But I'm putting to myself, am I praying out of a concern to grow in holiness?

Because without it, I shall not see the Lord. And I need to use, and you need to use, every single means that he's given us to our advantage in holiness.

[39 : 04] Without holiness, no one shall see the Lord. It is indeed an essential. Let's pray. Lord, our gracious God, we ask that you would solemnize our minds as we reflect upon the demand that you make that we be holy, and as we reflect upon the many advantages you have given us towards that, and how you have given us everything we require so that we would indeed pursue after holiness and come to live holy lives.

We pray that you would enable us to reflect upon these daily, but Lord, we ask that you would enable us to go beyond a mere reflection of it. Help us to be holy.

Help us to live in holiness. Help us to seek daily to be like you. Help us to mourn over its absence when we find ourselves embroiled in sins of thought, word, and deed.

Hear us, we pray now, and forgive our sin for Jesus' sake. Amen.