

Holiness

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- [0 : 00] Now we can get going on what I've brought for this morning, which is a talk that begins with three scripture readings.
- They're all of them apostolic admonitions to professed Christians. They are all of them lead-ins to the layout of what I have to say.
- May we for a moment pray together before I dive in. Gracious Father, send your Holy Spirit, we pray.
- Glorify Christ in our midst and in our hearts. And thereby give us deeper understanding of discipleship to Jesus, which takes the form of holiness every day of our lives.
- And when we see it, give us a heart to embrace it, lead us into the living of it, and get yourself glory in our lives through it, we pray.
- [1 : 24] In Jesus' name. Amen. Here we go now. Apostolic admonitions to professed Christians, all in letter form, all addressed to young Christians to take them forward with the Lord.
- 1 Peter chapter 1 verse 13 is where my first reading begins. Peter writes, But as he who called you is holy, you also be holy in all your conduct, since it's written, You shall be holy, for I am holy.
- That's a quote from the book of Leviticus, that the Old Testament is scripture for Christians, just as the New Testament is, just as the New Testament is.
- And that's a bit of it. It is written, You shall be holy, for I am holy. God is holy.
- God is holy. We think of the holiness of God, the Godness of God, as I sometimes call it, in terms of moral and spiritual purity.
- [3 : 20] Purity, I think, really is the English word that expresses more of what holiness means than any other single term.
- God is pure. And God is pure. That's actually said, I remember, in Habakkuk chapter 1. The prophet says, You are of purer eyes than to behold evil.
- That is, to be able to behold evil. God recoils from evil. God recoils from, I think I said this when I spoke on holiness before, from the defilement, to use the Bible word, the impurity, that can best be focused, by the four-letter word, d-i-r-t, pronounced dirt.
- There is a fundamental gulf, shall I say, contrast between the holiness of God and the defilement of fallen human beings.
- And here, Peter is saying, God is holy, and you must seek every way you can to match him in that.
- [4 : 54] Now, a second reading, 2 Corinthians chapter 6, beginning to read at verse 14. Here we go.
- Paul is picking up the threads of a number of things that he's been saying already in the letter about godly living.
- I think you'll recognize the threads, although we are, so to speak, in the middle of a chapter of the thinking that makes up 2 Corinthians.

Do not be unequally yoked with unbelievers, writes Paul. For what partnership has righteousness with lawlessness?

Or what fellowship has light with darkness? What accord has Christ with Belial? Or what portion does a believer share with an unbeliever?

[5 : 53] What agreement has the temple of God with idols? Oh yes, we are the temple of the living God. As God said, and now here's a quote, an Old Testament quote, actually two Old Testament quotes run together.

God's promise to Israel actually as far back as Leviticus.

And then, this is Isaiah now. Therefore, go out from their midst and be separate from them, says the Lord. Touch no unclean thing.

Then I will welcome you and I will be a father to you, and you shall be sons and daughters to me, says the Lord Almighty. In other words, if we, the Lord's adopted children, practice holiness, we shall find ourselves in the fullness of family life with our God.

Which is what our God himself wants. Okay, same thrust you can see. God lives with us.

[7 : 17] And it's for us to live lives which make living with us his delight. And don't prompt him as he comes close to us simply to disgust at the way we're misbehaving.

Then, in 1 John, chapter 3, this is what we read. John is talking about being born of God.

The reality which we evangelicals are used to referring to as regeneration. And this is what he says. Beloved, we are God's children now.

And what we will be hasn't yet appeared, but we know that when he appears, we will be like him. Because we shall see him as he is.

And everyone who thus hopes in him, and him, by the way, is now the Lord Jesus. Everyone who thus hopes in him purifies himself as he is pure.

[8 : 28] Well, there you are. Three passages, all of them pushing us, shall I say, in the same direction.

We are called to holiness, and let's not forget it. Well, this, as a matter of fact, is, shall I call it, Catholic Christian truth.

And it's something that all branches of the Church, from earliest days, have picked up and run with. If we ourselves don't make a big deal of Christian holiness, well, we are eccentric, and that's our shame, really.

We shouldn't be. Two weeks ago, I read this. It's part of a sentence from a paragraph in an essay written by an Anglo-Catholic brother, with whom I should have quite a number of differences of opinion if we were together.

Actually, someone I knew back in England, so I say that on the basis of first-hand acquaintance. But this is the section of his sentence that I read, and it struck me that there's great wisdom here, and I want you to hear it.

[10 : 04] He wrote of, and I'll pick up the quote now, the older ideal of Christian holiness, with perfection as its aim, an aim which involves being and becoming, and which makes much of the often neglected potential of the human heart and mind for development, and growth.

From those words I deduce, three things. One, perfection and nothing less is the goal.

Granted, we don't attain it flawlessly in this world. Nobody does. And granted, John Wesley got it comprehensively wrong.

He, all through his ministry, cherished an idea that if we sought this blessing, namely that God would root self-centeredness, twistedness, lust, however you like to express it, express it out of our heart, there would be nothing in us except perfect love to God and to everyone.

And that's possible in this world. He didn't claim to have entered this blessing himself, but he was quite convinced it was there for those who sought it.

[11 : 47] And we evangelicals tend to turn up our nose at Wesley at this point. Yes, he was a wonderful man in half a dozen different ways, but on this matter of perfection, he was wrong.

Yes, and I think he was. Nonetheless, perfection remains the goal for each single one of us. And that means that we should never be satisfied with what we think we've attained.

We should always be pressing on to something better. Okay. The goal, remember, is Christ-likeness.

That's the nature of the perfection that we are to aim at. I say it again, we never get there, but we must keep pressing on towards it.

That is the way of a true disciple. Okay, perfection is the goal. There's reference point number one. Reference point number two, which again is indicated by this quote.

[13 : 07] Transformation is the road. The road to the goal. Paul in 2 Corinthians chapter 3 and verse 18 says this, and I expect we know the words because the verse is very often quoted.

We, beholding, as in a mirror, the glory of the Lord, are changed from glory to glory into the same likeness.

Well, what we're beholding, as in the mirror, is the likeness of Jesus. That's the likeness into which we are now changed by the Spirit of the Lord.

And are changed, well, it's a present tense, you could translate it, are being changed. This is Paul's vision of how the Christian life is in the world.

And it's the way of being changed. We are being changed into, towards at least, the image of our Savior.

[14 : 28] Transformation, then, is the road. When I spoke on holiness before, in this room I mean, I think I quoted a verse from a poem by Rudyard Kipling which has stuck in my mind ever since I learned it at the age of something like eight or nine, perhaps ten.

The poem is called *The Way Through the Woods* and the first verse of the poem goes like this. They shut the road through the woods seventy years ago.

Weather and rain have undone it again and now you would never know there was once a road through the woods. And that verse comes to my mind every time I think about holiness and the way in which in past days Christians concentrated on studying holiness, focusing on holiness as a goal, understanding it as a work of God in our lives.

Comparatively, we neglect it. We are concentrating on any number of things which are connected with our discipleship and they're all very good but for the most part we leave holiness out.

Isn't that so? If you were at the meeting in Regent at which I spoke on holiness, you remember I started by asking the assembled auditory the question, would you agree with me that in these days holiness is a matter of neglect?

[16 : 19] And actually there's quite a number of people shouted out from the floor, yes. Well, that was very encouraging to the speaker so on I went. I tell you that simply because I think those folk did well, frankly, to be with me.

I too think that you now you would never know that there was once accomplished full dress, full scale teaching about holiness being regularly given in our churches.

holiness. How long since you heard a sermon on holiness? How long since you read a book on holiness? You see what I mean? Well, that's the second truth which I deduce from the quote that I gave you a moment ago.

as perfection is the goal for all our lives so transformation is the road the road that leads to the goal and if we have neglected to get clear on the on that road well we do well to repent of our neglect and get down to it for this is a matter of central concern to God and of major importance to us.

And then the third thing that I deduce from the quote I gave you development is the agenda and what I mean by that is that on a regular basis Christians are called to review where they are in relation to God's call to holiness and to resolve to do better and the particular points at which each of us discovers before God that we do need to do better they'll vary from person to person but in every case they'll be heart searching and will call for some serious dealing with the Lord who commands us to check this most of you expect at some point like myself will have been in rehab for some form of surgery

[19 : 03] I was in rehab when they gave me a new hip rehab and the lady doing the rehab would encourage me by saying well now you're walking better and you have and then she gave me exercises for swinging my legs in particular I suppose muscle forming ways and yes you're doing better do more of it development you see progress is the name of the game and to stand still in this matter of moving towards Christ's likeness is not repeat not the way to go as disciples of the Lord 2nd Peter chapter 3 verse 18 tells us which way we should go where Peter says grow yes growing is development you see grow in the grace and knowledge of our

Lord Jesus Christ that's his last word in 2nd Peter 3 18 and as we all know last words are solemn words what you say last is meant to be remembered and this is what Peter thinks it proper to say last to the saints to whom he's writing so there we are perfection is the goal transformation is the road and development is the agenda and that's what I'm offering you now in analytical form that's what the rest of this talk really is all about and I start I mean I start the analysis by telling you that when one of my Puritan heroes actually John Bunyan got married his wife was a poor girl and she only brought him as her dowry two books but they were good books one of them was titled

The Practice of Piety by a man named Lewis Bailey and one of them was titled The Plain Man's Pathway to Heaven written by a man named Dent and I'm picking up that title and adapting it and telling you now I am speaking to you for the rest of this talk on the plain man's pathway to holiness and I pause for a moment to ask you at this moment do you recognize yourself under the description of the plain man are we plain people and the sign of our being plain people is that we can face a moral and spiritual challenge straight as distinct from trying to evade it I trust that we are all plain people and

I shall speak to you as to plain people all right so our agenda is the plain man's pathway to holiness for which I might choose at once a motto text that we haven't heard yet Hebrews chapter 12 and verse 14 follow after holiness without which no one will see the Lord that's not of course an undermining of the doctrine of justification by faith it is a warning however against being a spiritual phony who professes faith in Christ maintains evangelical orthodoxy but doesn't pursue holiness real holiness is the expression of real repentance just as real repentance is the expression of real faith and if there's no pursuit of holiness well you can see what follows no real repentance then and it looks as if there's no real faith either well that's the point which the writer to the

Hebrews is making and I ask you to bear it in mind as I offer you now my analysis of the plain man's pathway to holiness subheading number one ingredients in the holy life and I mention three they belong together and I ask that as I go through them you will just check in your own conscience and your own life as to whether you're shall I say focused on them as every Christian should be ingredient number one consecration to God the Greek word for consecrate as the word as consecrate appears in our English

[24 : 57] Bible is actually formed from the Greek word for holy holiness and consecration is actually just another word for repentance as the gospel finds us we are silly sinners with our backs turned as it were to the God who made us consecration to God which is repentance towards God is or can be pictured as what's expressed by the military mandate right about turn quick march quick march in the opposite direction to that in which you were going you had your back turned to God turn round and live henceforth with the Lord before your eyes before your mind focus on him and live for him consecration consecration ultimately for conformity to Christ and second factor following on from that a conjunction conjunction of what conjunction of a threefold response to teaching which

Christ actually gave in the days of his flesh these are three dimensions of discipleship real disciples of Christ are laboring to be on track with regard to these three things three words and they rhyme my mind does this kind of thing you have to either forgive me or let these games with words that my mind plays help you to remember things that I say if you think they're worth remembering three things three things within within the conjunction obey the great commission Matthew 28 verses 19 and 20 the commission which Christ gave to his disciples before he ascended and the commission which is marching orders for the whole church in every generation is as you will remember

I'm sure go make disciples of all the nations baptizing them in the name of the Father and of the Son and of the Holy Spirit teaching them to do to observe everything that I've commanded you that's what disciples are charged to do and well if we disregard this dimension of discipleship we end up unholy not holy at all obey Christ's command second word stay where Christ has set you where has Christ set you he has set you by his grace in a direct life-giving relation with himself faith from the human side establishes the link and the

Holy Spirit from the divine side also establishes the link so that there's a to and a fro in this and union with Christ is the phrase that fits the whole relational reality that we're talking about here and I probably said when I talked here about holiness before and I certainly said ten days ago when I talked about holiness in Regent my daughter trains dogs and perhaps some of you have dogs whom you've sought to train in basic things all who train dogs know that the word stay is a key word the dogs have got to learn when they hear the word stay to remain exactly where they are and wait until they're given a further order they are not to move when

Jesus talked about himself as the vine and us as the branches in the vine and charged us to abide in him and he promised then to abide in us well this corresponds to the modern English command to our dogs stay stay put stay where the owner has put you stay where Christ has set you in union with himself stay in that relationship living your life to him and drawing your life or your spiritual energy from him and then with that third word obey stay and pray lest you enter you into temptation and he's saying that of course he opened the window on an aspect of reality which needs a good deal of study namely

[31 : 20] Satan and Satan's ways of getting us believers off track temptation is the Bible word for Satan's tricks to that end and you will be tempted regularly says the Lord Jesus so keep awake learn to recognize temptation when it comes and pray that you'll be kept steady when the pressures of temptation are upon you and how can I say it collapsing I could have said lapsing but I think collapsing is the better word there collapsing would be the easiest collapsing I mean in your faith and faithfulness would be the easiest thing in the world for you to do no watch and pray that you'll be enabled to stay steady there's the there's the conjunction obey and stay and pray basic principles of holiness basic principles that is of discipleship basic principles of loyalty to our

Lord and then we move to a third reality communion with God through Christ Christ I haven't spoken of that yet I speak of it now have you ever heard of brother Lawrence a 17th century monk who served God in the kitchen of the monastery doing the washing up and keeping the kitchen tidy and occasionally doing a bit of the cooking though not very much brother Lawrence impressed people by the steady sunniness of his life even though the things he was doing were not particularly exciting he wrote about it under by request and what he wrote was published

I think it's still available under the title the practice of the presence of God because that was his secret and when people asked him he said well I try to remember the Lord at all times and to remember that I'm doing what I do in his sight and for his glory and I'm offering you brother Lawrence as a model for the habit of the heart that we all of us need to learn and which if my experience is anything to go by it takes a whole lifetime to learn practicing the presence of God never forgetting that we live our lives in his presence under his eye and never forgetting that our business and everything that we do is to please him that's what we are aiming to do all the time all along the line and

Christians who don't get that far I mean don't get to the point of thinking about their everyday lives in that way are very vulnerable to Satan's temptations you may know the name of George Herbert 17th century poet he put this thought into a poem of his which started like this teach me my God and King in all things thee to see and what I do in anything to do it as for thee a friend of mine who worked in the laboratory of one of the big foodstuffs chains not a distinguished job he was just testing stuff all the time he was yes I will say he was an addict to this particular poem by

Herbert quoting it all the time and he loved to quote a verse which well I'll quote it you may feel that it's a 17th century fizzle it's an attempt at being witty which may not strike you as particularly witty at all he loved it though because it tickled him and seemed to him to say just what he needed to hear as from his own heart every day of his working life and this is how it goes it follows the verse in which Herbert has said that with this motto motto is the word he used but I'll use it with this motto for thy sake everything gets changed and then he then comes the verse that he loved to quote a servant with this he will remember this this is 17th century stuff 17th century life a servant with this clause that is for thy sake as the purpose of his action a servant with this clause makes drudgery divine yes who sweeps a room as for thy laws makes that and the action fine that's 17th century a 17th century witticism the room becomes fine because the dirt has been swept out the action that is the action of sweeping the dirt out is also fine because it's been done for the

[38 : 09] Lord for his sake well this is the meaning of practicing the presence of God and it's something that we all of us do need to learn and as I said a moment ago if your experience is anything like mine it's one of the hardest habits you ever will set yourself to learn but the way of godliness is to keep going at this point practicing God's presence doing everything for his glory and one thing that will mean I'm going to quote a hymn for this one thing that will mean is that one's life will be a continued exercise of praise a Scots

Presbyterian pastor named Horatius Bonner put this into a hymn we sometimes sing the hymn have I got time to quote the hymn yes I have so I'm going to read all six verses because really it's a single thought that's being developed all through you may have sung this hymn but I wonder how deeply you have ever thought about it this is one aspect of practicing the presence of God fill thou my life O Lord my God in every part with praise that my whole being may proclaim thy being and thy ways not for the lip of praise alone nor in the praising heart I ask but for a life made up of praise in every part praise in the common things of life its goings out and in praise in each duty and each deed however small and mean fill every part of me with praise let all my being speak of thee and of thy love

O God poor though I be and weak so shalt thou Lord from me in me receive the glory due and so shall I begin on earth the song forever new so shall no part of day or night from sacredness be free but all my life in every step be fellowship with thee I think that's terrific and that's what becomes reality when we really get down to practicing the presence of God the life of praise well that's the review that I wanted you to have of the ingredients in the life of holiness now I move on to another heading which is the plain man's picture of holiness

God gave us imaginations in which to form with which to form pictures and in the Bible from Genesis to Revelation there is a particular picture of the practice of holiness which it does well to meditate on constantly and labor to how shall I say to instantiate in the life that we live it's a picture of walking just that we meet it as early as Enoch in Genesis chapter 5 verse 24 Enoch we're told walked with God and God took him whatever that may mean and then next chapter we're reading about

Noah and we're told in Genesis 6 and verse 9 Noah walked with God pleased God in what he did and when you get to Paul's letters walking walking is most certainly Paul's standard picture for faithful discipleship and when you think about it walking is a very vivid and fruitful picture for living one's life for think walking is effort it's quite distinct from being carried along by somebody else walking is something you have to do for yourself and we have to live the Christian life for ourselves walking is purposeful effort you walk in order to get somewhere it's directed effort you might say and then again walking has a pattern to it and a rhythm walking in other words is something that you do steadily and the fact that you're doing it steadily imparts a rhythm to your life which actually can be quite invigorating

[43 : 52] I don't know whether walking is the big deal in your personal pattern of exercise to keep your body in shape it is mine I'll tell you and I enjoy walking just because of the rhythmical quality that steady walking imparts you're conscious of it and you enjoy it yes I do and then again walking is a sustained activity one in which you keep on keeping on until you've got to where you're heading walking and there may be all sorts of obstacles and discouragements in the way but you're walking there and you're going to surmount the obstacles and keep going until you've arrived so walking is a picture of persistence and finally

I mean finally in this set of thoughts walking is an unspectacular activity if I run down the street the chances are that a number of heads will turn and people will wonder where the fire is but if I'm walking down the street the likelihood is that nobody will notice me at all and if they're asked did a man of this description pass you they will say well I didn't notice there was nothing about such a man to make me notice him so actually I don't know whether I saw him or not because I didn't notice well one of the disciplines of discipleship is to be willing to live an unspectacular life in which nobody notices in any particular way how you're living what you're doing you're just there and they carry on and you carry on as I say unspectacular is the word that fits nobody notices but if you're walking it will make any difference to you you'll keep on walking and that's part of the message of the picture you keep on walking you keep on keeping on if I may put it in that phrase which was a very potent phrase

I may say in the Christian Union when I was a student we kept constantly exhorted each other to keep on keeping on in the Christian life well these are just some of the thoughts that the picture of life as walking gives you alright but how does one cache the picture if I can put it that way Paul in his letters to the Colossians and the Ephesians answers that question just listen to this Colossians chapter 2 verses 6 and 7 and 8 this is Paul focusing the essential message of the letter as a matter of fact and he wants the Colossians to focus on it and so he puts it all in a single weighty sentence here's the weighty sentence and you can see the well

I can say the weight that it carries therefore chapter 2 verse 6 as you received Christ Jesus the Lord you could equally well translate the Greek as received Christ Jesus as Lord that seems to be part of the meaning so walk in him in union with him yes rooted and built up in him and established in the faith just as you were taught abounding in thanksgiving union with Christ expressed by that phrase in him is the center of this exhortation you walk in him rooted in him yes think of yourself as like a tree the tree won't grow strong and it won't have green leaves and generally it will be a pretty hangdog tree unless it is well rooted rooted where it can draw up water rooted where it's by putting its roots down it establishes for itself steadiness yes well that's a picture which Paul uses walk in him rooted in him rooted and built up in him

Paul says here the image changes it's the building of a house that's being pictured now built up in him being taken forward along the path of transformation and he goes on to say established in the faith just as you were taught you walk with Christ then in faithfulness to the apostolic teaching and you don't allow yourself to be diverted from it and you back such efforts as we at St.

[50 : 10] John's and others in Anik and I in the conference last Friday night are involved in getting catechesis going all-age catechesis for the church of God that actually was standard practice in the church for several centuries in its early days and it became standard practice again in the 16th and 17th centuries and Calvin who wrote a couple of catechisms for use in this particular form of ministry Calvin said the church cannot survive without catechesis and as I said I am involved or as I indicated I am involved as others in St. John's are in an attempt to renew catechesis for the Anik Akna fellowship all-age catechesis that is not just for children start with the children sure but go on to the whole congregation and you ask what is catechesis well it's a focused activity whereby one teaches the truths that Christians are to live by and one teaches them in the same breath so to speak how to live by those truths it's a discipling activity and it isn't quite matched by group Bible study and it isn't quite matched by any sort of discussion group that you may think of or may have experienced it is as I say a combination of theory and practice linked together as the single reality of discipleship it's the activity which more than any other activity does actually cover the making of disciples which was the task that

Jesus commissioned the church to engage in well that's that's what Paul in fact is after when he says walk in him rooted and built up in him and established in the faith just as you were taught and then he rounds it off with the phrase abounding in thanksgiving yes thanksgiving and praise they are cousins indeed they're almost indistinguishable thanks and praise become your mood just as learning and practicing the faith becomes your work okay that's how Paul uses the walk image in his letter to the Colossians and now here he is in Ephesians the clock is beating me no surprise there and

I can't do more than just indicate what there is in Ephesians for us to study at our leisure but it's I'll say it once it's worth studying these are tremendously weighty phrases that Paul uses listen chapter 4 verse 1 of Ephesians the very first verse of the practical part of the letter I therefore the prisoner for the Lord urge you to walk in a manner worthy of the calling to which you have been called and then Paul goes on to spell out some of the qualities which that's going to require of us some of the habits that it's going to involve us in walk in a manner worthy of the calling to which you've been called chapter 4 verse 17 don't behave yes here it is as I say and testify in the Lord you must no longer walk as the

Gentiles do in the futility of their minds and then comes a description of the sadness really the misery of walking in spiritual darkness and then he comes back to a positive presentation of the theme in chapter 5 verse 2 walk in love as Christ loved us and gave himself up for us a fragrant offering and sacrifice to God and then chapter 5 verse 8 at one time you were darkness but now you're light in the Lord walk as children of light for the fruit of the light is found in all that is good and right and true try to discern what's pleasing to the Lord that's the way to do it and then chapter 5 and verse 15 look carefully then how you walk not as unwise or shall I say because this expresses the essential thought of the

[55 : 58] Greek word not as thoughtless not as unwise then in the sense of thoughtless but as wise people making the best use of the time because the days are even though this is the English standard version which I had a good deal to do with I do think in retrospect that's a bit of an under translation there's more meaning there than those English words might convey make the best use of each opportunity would be a better way of rendering the Greek at that point because the days are even yes Satan will see to it that if you are not laboring to achieve something for God in every situation you will in fact be betrayed into confirming something

I mean something erroneous for Satan who wants that and then finally watch how you walk not as thoughtless people but as wise people making the best use of each opportunity because the days are evil so don't be foolish but understand what the will of the Lord is think about it work at it and then live by it so we survey all too briefly Paul's picture of holiness now I must stop I stop with a final heading under which I can only say one thing the plain man's prioritizing of holiness that's the heading the point

I want to make is there in the heading this is priority number one for all of us who have faith in the Lord Jesus and are seeking to maintain a Christian identity pleasing God is a New Testament phrase for what we are supposed to be doing and when I talked about this before I think I quoted words from the Scots pastor Murray McChain in the 19th century which I regarded as words of wisdom it was McChain who said a holy minister is an awful that is an awesome weapon in the hands of a holy God it was McChain who said my people's greatest need this is his congregation my people's greatest need is my personal holiness as their pastor and it was

McChain who prayed Lord make me as holy as it's possible for a saved sinner to be and I say to you brothers and sisters this is the true priority first things first holiness comes first let's see to it that it comes first as the central concern of our lives