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HOLINESS

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CHAPTER ONE

HOLINESS IS FOR YOU

*For sin shall not be your master,
because you are not under law, but under grace.*

ROMANS 6:14

The shrill ring of the telephone shattered the stillness of the beautiful, crisp Colorado morning. On the other end was one of those utterly impossible individuals God seems to have sprinkled around here on earth to test the grace and patience of His children.

He was in top form that morning—arrogant, impatient, demanding. I hung up the phone seething inside with anger, resentment, and perhaps even hatred. Grabbing my jacket, I walked out into the cold air to try to regain my composure. The quietness of my soul, so carefully cultivated in my “quiet time” with God that morning, had been ripped into shreds and replaced with a volatile, steaming emotional volcano.

As my emotions subsided, my anger turned to utter discouragement. It was only 8:30 in the morning and my day was ruined. Not only was I discouraged, I was confused. Only two

hours before, I had read Paul's emphatic declaration, "For sin shall not be your master, because you are not under law, but under grace." But despite this nice-sounding promise of victory over sin, there I was locked in the viselike grip of anger and resentment.

"Does the Bible really have any answers for real life?" I asked myself that morning. With all my heart I desired to live an obedient, holy life; yet there I was utterly defeated by one phone call.

Perhaps this incident has a familiar ring to you. The circumstances probably differed, but your reaction was similar. Perhaps your problem was anger with your children, or a temper at work, or an immoral habit you can't overcome, or maybe several "besetting sins" that dog you day in and day out. Whatever your particular sin problem (or problems), the Bible does have the answer for you. There is hope. You and I can walk in obedience to God's Word and live a life of holiness. In fact, as we will see in the next chapter, God expects every Christian to live a holy life. But holiness is not only expected; it is the promised birthright of every Christian.

Paul's statement is true. Sin shall not be our master.

The concept of holiness may seem a bit archaic to our current generation. To some minds the very word *holiness* brings images of bunned hair, long skirts, and black stockings. To others the idea is associated with a repugnant "holier than thou" attitude. Yet holiness is very much a scriptural idea. The word *holy* in various forms occurs more than six hundred times in the Bible. One entire book, Leviticus, is devoted to the subject, and the idea of holiness is woven elsewhere throughout the fabric of Scripture. More important, God specifically commands us to be holy (see Leviticus 11:44).

The idea of exactly how to be holy has suffered from many false concepts. In some circles, holiness is equated with a series of specific prohibitions—usually in such areas as smoking, drinking, and dancing. The list of prohibitions varies depending on the group. When we follow this approach to holiness, we are in danger of becoming like the Pharisees with their endless lists of trivial do's and don'ts, and their self-righteous attitude. For others, holiness means a particular style of dress and mannerisms. And for still others, it means unattainable perfection, an idea that fosters either delusion or discouragement about one's sin.

All of these ideas, while accurate to some degree, miss the true concept. To be holy is to be morally blameless.¹ It is to be separated from sin and, therefore, consecrated to God. The word signifies "separation to God, and the conduct befitting those so separated."²

Perhaps the best way of understanding the concept of holiness is to note how writers of the New Testament used the word. In 1 Thessalonians 4:3-7, Paul used the term in contrast to a life of immorality and impurity. Peter used it in contrast to living according to the evil desires we had when we lived outside of Christ (1 Peter 1:14-16). John contrasted one who is holy with those who do wrong and are vile (Revelation 22:11). To live a holy life, then, is to live a life in conformity to the moral precepts of the Bible and in contrast to the sinful ways of the world. It is to live a life characterized by the "[putting] off of your old self, which is being corrupted by its deceitful desires . . . and [putting] on the new self, created to be like God in true righteousness and holiness" (Ephesians 4:22, 24).

If holiness, then, is so basic to the Christian life, why do

we not experience it more in daily living? Why do so many Christians feel constantly defeated in their struggle with sin? Why does the Church of Jesus Christ so often seem to be more conformed to the world around it than to God?

At the risk of oversimplification, the answers to these questions can be grouped into three basic problem areas.

Our first problem is that *our attitude toward sin is more self-centered than God-centered*. We are more concerned about our own "victory" over sin than we are about the fact that our sins grieve the heart of God. We cannot tolerate failure in our struggle with sin chiefly because we are success-oriented, not because we know it is offensive to God.

W. S. Plumer said, "We never see sin aright until we see it as against God. . . . All sin is against God in this sense: that it is His law that is broken, His authority that is despised, His government that is set at naught. . . . Pharaoh and Balaam, Saul and Judas each said, 'I have sinned'; but the returning prodigal said, 'I have sinned *against heaven* and before thee'; and David said, 'Against Thee, Thee only have I sinned.'"³

God wants us to walk in *obedience*—not victory. Obedience is oriented toward God; victory is oriented toward self. This may seem to be merely splitting hairs over semantics, but there is a subtle, self-centered attitude at the root of many of our difficulties with sin. Until we face this attitude and deal with it, we will not consistently walk in holiness.

This is not to say God doesn't want us to experience victory, but rather to emphasize that victory is a by-product of obedience. As we concentrate on living an obedient, holy life, we will certainly experience the joy of victory over sin.

Our second problem is that *we have misunderstood "living*

by faith" (Galatians 2:20) to mean that no effort at holiness is required on our part. In fact, sometimes we have even suggested that any effort on our part is "of the flesh."

The words of J. C. Ryle, Bishop of Liverpool from 1880 to 1900, are instructive to us on this point: "Is it wise to proclaim in so bald, naked, and unqualified a way as many do, that the holiness of converted people is by faith only, and not at all by personal exertion? Is it according to the proportion of God's Word? I doubt it. That faith in Christ is the root of all holiness . . . no well-instructed Christian will ever think of denying. But surely the Scriptures teach us that in following holiness the true Christian needs personal exertion and work as well as faith."⁴

We must face the fact that we have a personal responsibility for our walk of holiness. One Sunday our pastor in his sermon said words to this effect: "You can put away that habit that has mastered you if you truly desire to do so." Because he was referring to a particular habit which was no problem to me, I quickly agreed with him in my mind. But then the Holy Spirit said to me, "And you can put away the sinful habits that plague you if you will accept your personal responsibility for them." Acknowledging that I did have this responsibility turned out to be a milestone for me in my own pursuit of holiness.

Our third problem is that *we do not take some sin seriously*. We have mentally categorized sins into that which is unacceptable and that which may be tolerated a bit. An incident that occurred just as this book was nearing completion illustrates this problem. Our office was using a mobile home as temporary office space, pending the delayed completion of new facilities. Because our property is not zoned for mobile homes, we were required to obtain a variance permit to occupy the trailer. The

permit had to be renewed several times. The last permit renewal expired just as the new facilities were completed, but before we had time to move out in an orderly manner. This precipitated a crisis for the department occupying the trailer.

At a meeting where this problem was discussed, the question was asked, "What difference would it make if we didn't move that department for a few days?" Well, what difference would it make? After all, the trailer was tucked in behind some hills where no one would see it. And legally we didn't have to move the trailer; just vacate it. So what difference would it make if we overstayed our permit a few days? Isn't insistence on obeying the letter of the law nit-picking legalism?

But the Scripture says it is "the little foxes that ruin the vineyards" (Song of Songs 2:15). It is compromise on the little issues that leads to greater downfalls. And who is to say that a little ignoring of civil law is not a serious sin in the sight of God?

In commenting on some of the more minute Old Testament dietary laws God gave to the children of Israel, Andrew Bonar said,

It is not the importance of the thing, but the majesty of the Lawgiver, that is to be the standard of obedience. . . . Some, indeed, might reckon such minute and arbitrary rules as these as trifling. But the principle involved in obedience or disobedience was none other than the same principle which was tried in Eden at the foot of the forbidden tree. It is really this: Is the Lord to be obeyed in *all* things whatsoever He commands? Is He a holy Lawgiver? Are His creatures bound to give implicit assent to His will?⁵

Are we willing to call sin "sin" not because it is big or little, but because God's law forbids it? We cannot categorize sin if we are to live a life of holiness. God will not let us get away with that kind of attitude.

These three problems will be addressed in greater detail in subsequent chapters of this book. But before moving on, take time to settle these issues in your heart, right now. Will you begin to look at sin as an offense against a holy God, instead of as a personal defeat only? Will you begin to take personal responsibility for your sin, realizing that as you do, you must depend on the grace of God? And will you decide to obey God in all areas of life, however insignificant the issue may be?

As we move on, we will first consider the holiness of God. This is where holiness begins—not with ourselves, but with God. It is only as we see His holiness, His absolute purity and moral hatred of sin, that we will be gripped by the awfulness of sin against the Holy God. To be gripped by that fact is the first step in our pursuit of holiness.

CHAPTER TWO

THE HOLINESS OF GOD

But just as he who called you is holy, so be holy in all you do; for it is written: "Be holy, because I am holy."

I PETER 1:15-16

God has called every Christian to a holy life. There are no exceptions to this call. It is not a call only to pastors, missionaries, and a few dedicated Sunday school teachers. Every Christian of every nation, whether rich or poor, learned or unlearned, influential or totally unknown, is called to be holy. The Christian plumber and the Christian banker, the unsung homemaker and the powerful head of state are all alike called to be holy.

This call to a holy life is based on the fact that God Himself is holy. Because God is holy, He requires that we be holy. Many Christians have what we might call a "cultural holiness." They adapt to the character and behavior pattern of Christians around them. As the Christian culture around them is more or less holy, so these Christians are more or less holy. But God has not called us to be like those around us. He has called us to be like Himself. Holiness is nothing less than conformity to the character of God.¹

As used in Scripture, holiness describes both the majesty of God and the purity and moral perfection of His nature. Holiness is one of His attributes;² that is, holiness is an essential part of the nature of God. His holiness is as necessary as His existence, or as necessary, for example, as His wisdom or omniscience. Just as He cannot but *know* what is right, so He cannot but *do* what is right.

We ourselves do not always know what is right, what is just and fair. At times we agonize over decisions having moral overtones. "What is the right thing to do?" we ask. God, of course, never faces this predicament. His perfect knowledge precludes any uncertainty on what is right and wrong.

But sometimes, even when we know what is right, there is a reluctance on our part to do it. The right action may involve sacrifice, or a blow to our pride (for example, when we know we should confess a sin to someone), or some other obstacle. But here again, this is never true with God. God never vacillates. He always does what is just and right without the slightest hesitation. It is impossible in the very nature of God for Him to do otherwise.

God's holiness then is perfect freedom from all evil. We say a garment is clean when it is free from any spot, or gold is pure when all dross has been refined from it. In this manner we can think of the holiness of God as the absolute absence of any evil in Him. John said, "God is light; in him there is no darkness at all" (1 John 1:5). Light and darkness, when used this way in Scripture, have moral significance. John is telling us that God is absolutely free from any moral evil and that He is Himself the essence of moral purity.

The holiness of God also includes His perfect conformity

to His own divine character. That is, all of His thoughts and actions are consistent with His holy character. By contrast, consider our own lives. Over time, as we mature in the Christian life, we develop a certain degree of Christian character. We grow in such areas as truthfulness, purity, and humility. But we do not always act consistently with our character. We tell a lie or allow ourselves to get trapped into a series of impure thoughts. Then we are dismayed with ourselves for these actions because they are inconsistent with our character. This never happens to God. He always acts consistently with His holy character. And it is this standard of holiness that God has called us to when He says, "Be holy, because I am holy."

The absolute holiness of God should be of great comfort and assurance to us. If God is perfectly holy, then we can be confident that His actions toward us are always perfect and just. We are often tempted to question God's actions and complain that He is unfair in His treatment of us. This is the devil's lie, the same thing he did to Eve. He essentially told her, "God is being unfair to you" (Genesis 3:4-5). But it is impossible in the very nature of God that He should ever be unfair. Because He is holy, all His actions are holy.

We must accept by faith the fact that God is holy, even when trying circumstances make it appear otherwise. To complain against God is in effect to deny His holiness and to say He is not fair. In the seventeenth century Stephen Charnock said, "It is less injury to Him to deny His being, than to deny the purity of it; the one makes Him no God, the other a deformed, unlovely, and a detestable God . . . he that saith God is not holy speaks much worse than he that saith there is no God at all."³

I still vividly recall how God first dealt with me over

twenty-five years ago about complaining against Him. In response to His will, I had settled in San Diego, California, and had begun to look for a job. When several weeks went by without success, I mentally began to accuse God. "After all, I gave up my plans in order to do His will and now He has let me down." God graciously directed my attention to Job 34:18-19: "Is he not the One who says to kings, 'You are worthless,' and to nobles, 'You are wicked,' who shows no partiality to princes and does not favor the rich over the poor, for they are all the work of his hands?" As soon as I read that passage I immediately fell to my knees confessing to Him my terrible sin of complaining and questioning His holiness. God mercifully forgave and the next day I received two job offers.

Acknowledging His holiness is one of the ways we are to praise God. According to John's vision of heaven described in Revelation 4, the four living creatures around God's throne never stop saying, "Holy, holy, holy is the Lord God Almighty, who was, and is, and is to come" (Revelation 4:8). The seraphim in Isaiah's vision of God's glory also uttered this three-fold ascription of God's holiness (Isaiah 6:3). When Moses was praising God for the deliverance of the Israelites from Pharaoh's army, he also sang of God's holiness:

Who among the gods is like you, O LORD? Who is like you—majestic in holiness, awesome in glory, working wonders?

EXODUS 15:11

God is often called in Scripture by such names as the Holy One, or the Holy One of Israel.⁴ Holy, according to Stephen

Charnock,⁵ is used more often as a prefix to His name than any other attribute. Holiness is God's crown. Imagine for a moment that God possessed omnipotence (infinite power), omniscience (perfect and complete knowledge), and omnipresence (everywhere present), but without perfect holiness. Such a one could no longer be described as God. Holiness is the perfection of all His other attributes: His power is holy power; His mercy is holy mercy; His wisdom is holy wisdom. It is His holiness more than any other attribute that makes Him worthy of our praise.

But God demands more than that we acknowledge His holiness. He says to us, "Be holy, because I am holy." God rightfully demands perfect holiness in all of His moral creatures. It cannot be otherwise. He cannot possibly ignore or approve of any evil committed. He cannot for one moment relax His perfect standard of holiness. Rather He must say, as He does say, "So be holy in *all* you do" (1 Peter 1:15, emphasis added). The prophet Habakkuk declared, "Your eyes are too pure to look on evil; you cannot tolerate wrong" (Habakkuk 1:13). Because God is holy, He can never excuse or overlook any sin we commit, however small it may be.

Sometimes we try to justify to God some action which our own conscience calls into question. But if we truly grasp the significance of God's perfect holiness, both in Himself and in His demands of us, we will readily see we can never justify before Him even the slightest deviation from His perfect will. God does not accept the excuse, "Well, that's just the way I am," or even the more hopeful statement, "Well, I'm still growing in that area of my life."

No, God's holiness does not make allowance for minor flaws or shortcomings in our personal character. Well might we

Christians, though justified solely through the righteousness of Christ, ponder carefully the words of the writer to the Hebrews: "Make every effort . . . to be holy; without holiness no one will see the Lord" (Hebrews 12:14).

Because God is holy, He cannot ever tempt us to sin. "When tempted, no one should say, 'God is tempting me.' For God cannot be tempted by evil, nor does he tempt anyone" (James 1:13). Probably none of us ever imagines that God is actively soliciting us to do evil, but we may feel that God has put us in a situation where we have no choice.

King Saul felt this way in his first major campaign against the Philistines (1 Samuel 13). Before going into battle Saul was to wait seven days for the prophet Samuel to come and offer a burnt offering and ask the favor of the Lord. Saul waited the seven days for Samuel. When he didn't come, Saul became anxious and took it on himself to offer the burnt offering. Saul felt he had no alternative. The people were fearful and had begun to scatter; the Philistines were assembling for battle; Samuel was overdue. Something had to be done! God had put him in a place where he had no choice, it seemed, but to disobey God's explicit instructions.

But because Saul disobeyed God's express will, he lost his kingdom (1 Samuel 13:13-14). What about us? Do we sometimes feel we have no choice but to shade the truth a little, or commit just a slightly dishonest act? When we feel this way, we are in effect saying that God is tempting us to sin, that He has put us in a position where we have no alternative.

People under authority are particularly vulnerable to this temptation. Supervisors often put pressure on those below them to commit dishonest or unethical acts. As a young officer in

the Navy, I faced this temptation. For a few pounds of coffee to the right people, our ship could get "free" all kinds of valuable equipment we needed to do our job. "And after all," so the reasoning went, "it all belongs to the Navy." I finally had to stand up to my commanding officer and, in jeopardy to my Navy career, tell him I could have no part of that.

Because God is holy, He hates sin. Hate is such a strong word we dislike using it. We reprove our children for saying they hate someone. Yet when it comes to God's attitude toward sin, only a strong word such as hate conveys an adequate depth of meaning. Speaking of various sins in Israel, God says, "For all these things are what I hate" (Zechariah 8:17, NASB). Hatred is a legitimate emotion when it comes to sin. In fact, the more we ourselves grow in holiness, the more we hate sin. David said, "I gain understanding from your precepts; therefore I hate every wrong path" (Psalm 119:104). Now if that is true of a man, think of God. As we grow in holiness, we grow in hatred of sin; and God, being infinitely holy, has an infinite hatred of sin.

We often say, "God hates the sin but loves the sinner." This is blessedly true, but too often we quickly rush over the first half of this statement to get to the second. We cannot escape the fact that God hates our sins. We may trifle with our sins or excuse them, but God hates them.

Therefore every time we sin, we are doing something God hates. He hates our lustful thoughts, our pride and jealousy, our outbursts of temper, and our rationalization that the end justifies the means. We need to be gripped by the fact that God hates all these things. We become so accustomed to our sins we sometimes lapse into a state of peaceful coexistence with them, but God never ceases to hate them.

We need to cultivate in our own hearts the same hatred of sin God has. Hatred of sin as sin, not just as something disquieting or defeating to ourselves, but as displeasing to God, lies at the root of all true holiness. We must cultivate the attitude of Joseph, who said when he was tempted, "How then could I do such a wicked thing and sin against God?" (Genesis 39:9).

God hates sin wherever He finds it, in saint and sinner alike. He does not hate sin in one person and overlook it in another. He judges each man's works impartially (1 Peter 1:17). In fact, biblical evidence indicates that God may judge the sins of His saints more severely than those of the world. David was a man after God's own heart (Acts 13:22), yet after his sin against Uriah, he was told, "Now, therefore, the sword will never depart from your house" (2 Samuel 12:10). Moses, for one act of unbelief, was excluded from the land of Canaan despite many years of faithful service. Jonah, for his disobedience, was cast into a horrible prison in the stomach of a giant fish for three days and nights, that he might learn not to run from the command of God.

In the deceitfulness of our hearts, we sometimes play with temptation by entertaining the thought that we can always confess and later ask forgiveness. Such thinking is exceedingly dangerous. God's judgment is without partiality. He never overlooks our sin. He never decides not to bother since the sin is only a small one. No, God hates sin intensely whenever and wherever He finds it.

Frequent contemplation on the holiness of God and His consequent hatred of sin is a strong deterrent against trifling with sin. We are told to live our lives on earth as strangers in reverence and fear (1 Peter 1:17). Granted, the love of God to

us through Jesus Christ should be our primary motivation to holiness. But a motivation prompted by God's hatred of sin and His consequent judgment on it is no less biblical.

The holiness of God is an exceedingly high standard, a perfect standard. But it is nevertheless one that He holds us to. He cannot do less. While it is true that He accepts us solely through the merit of Christ, God's standard for our character, attitudes, affections, and actions is, "Be holy, because I am holy." We must take this seriously if we are to grow in holiness.