

Personal Holiness: Unlocking the Door to Effective Prayer



By David Butts

Holiness – it is a subject that seems to have been lost in the shuffle at the end of the second millennium. It has been forgotten in light of the fact that most of us aren't living holy lives and have, therefore, very little to say to others about holiness.

Why am I talking about holiness as related to prayer? For too long I have focused on giving people the tools to pray better and more effectively, not realizing that without holiness, prayers can go unanswered. This is not telling God what He can't do...He can do whatever He wants. Instead, it is recognizing that God normally does not answer the prayers of those who are not making every effort to walk in holiness. God Himself lays it out for us very clearly in His Word:

“If I had cherished sin in my heart, the Lord would not have listened.” (Psalm 66:18)

“Your sins have hidden His face from you, so that He will not

hear.” (Isaiah 59:2)

“Who may ascend the hill of the Lord? Who may stand in His holy place? He who has clean hands and a pure heart, who does not lift up his soul to an idol or swear by what is false. He will receive blessing from the Lord and vindication from God his Savior. Such is the generation of those who seek Him, who seek Your face, O God of Jacob.” (Psalm 24:3-6)

God not only commands us to be holy, but He has provided for us a way to holiness which leaves us without excuse. We cannot blame our society or culture for our unholiness. Believers in New Testament times were in a society as immoral as can be imagined...yet were taught and expected to be holy. Listen to the commands of God’s unchanging Word:

“Since we have these promises, dear friends, let us purify ourselves from everything that contaminates body and spirit, perfecting holiness out of reverence for God.” (2 Cor. 7:1)

“Make every effort to live in peace with all men and to be holy; without holiness no one will see the Lord.” (Heb. 12:14)

“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 Pet. 1:15-16)

“Since everything will be destroyed in this way, what kind of people ought you to be? You ought to live holy and godly lives.” (2 Pet. 3:11)

“For God did not call us to be impure, but to live a holy life.” (I Thess. 4:7)

“Therefore, I urge you, brothers, in view of God’s mercy, to offer your bodies as living sacrifices, holy and pleasing to God – this is your spiritual act of worship.” (Rom. 12:1)

“For He chose us in Him before the creation of the world to be holy and blameless in His sight.” (Eph. 1:4)

Regardless of our skills or lack of skills in prayer, we will not become a mighty people of prayer until we begin to develop a passion for the holy life – until we will not settle for “good enough” but strive to be like Jesus. I believe the Scriptures we have read give us the key for living a life of holiness. The key to our holiness is nothing less than the holiness of God Himself. We are to be holy...because He is holy! Look at what the Scriptures say of His holiness:

“Who among the gods is like you, O Lord? Who is like you...majestic in holiness, awesome in glory, working wonders?” (Ex. 15:11)

“And they were calling to one another: Holy, holy, holy is the Lord Almighty; the whole earth is full of His glory.” (Isaiah 6:3)

“Who will not fear you, O Lord, and bring glory to your name? For you alone are holy. All nations will come and worship before you, for your righteous acts have been revealed.” (Rev. 15:4)

Holy...set apart...different...unique...perfect...that’s the God we worship! How is it possible that we sinful creatures can even aspire to holiness? It’s because God has CALLED us to! You see, it is God’s nature to be holy. You and I have been born again into God’s family. His genetic structure for holiness has been given to us because of Jesus. When we made Jesus Lord and Savior of our lives, we experienced the new birth. The Holy Spirit came to dwell in us. We still have much of the sin nature within us; however, there is a new nature...a new genetic code if you will...a code of holiness that comes straight from our Heavenly Father. Holiness now becomes a possibility...where it was an impossibility. The problem arises when this is as far as we take the call to be holy. Most of us feel that our holiness consists only of this imputed righteousness that comes from Jesus and we say... “I don’t worry about sin, because I’m forgiven.” I have to admit...I’ve been there...and so have

many of you.

But God is not satisfied with incomplete holiness. You will find in Scripture the truth that holiness can never be accomplished by any of us just trying hard...Jesus' death is absolutely essential for us to experience the new birth and new life in Christ. It is HIS righteousness that is now at work in us. Since God's holiness has been placed within us, we should now make our best effort to live out that life of holiness as we keep our eyes on our Holy God. And God expects us to strive for personal holiness which is demonstrated by the way we live our lives:

“Perfecting holiness out of reverence for God” (2 Cor. 7:1). Perfecting...working on it...striving for it...and the motive? Reverence for God and wanting to be like Him. There is no greater compliment to a dad, than when a son or daughter wants to be like him. We give God pleasure as long as we strive for holiness – to be like our Heavenly Father.

“Make every effort...to be holy” (Heb. 12:14). This is not a passive acceptance of something. This is not to be confused with your salvation. You accepted Christ's gift of salvation by faith...but there is effort involved if you want to be holy. Paul would say, “work out your salvation with fear and trembling.” Why with fear and trembling? Because we are doing so under the watchful eye of a Holy God. So, how do we live holy lives? We make the Word of God our foundation...we strive to do what it says...and we flee from all that it forbids.

God is waiting for His people to pray, but He longs for prayers that come from the lips of a holy people...a people set apart and dedicated to God:

“For the eyes of the Lord are on the righteous and His ears are attentive to their prayer...” (I Pet. 2:12)

“Who may ascend the hill of the Lord? Who may stand in His holy place? He who has clean hands and a pure heart...” (Ps.

24:3-4)

If we will “take time to be holy,” God will be attentive to our prayers. Let ’s not stop short of personal holiness: being holy “as He is holy.”

–Dave Butts was president of Harvest Prayer Ministries from 1993 until his death in 2022.