

The Pursuit of Holiness

I. Introduction

When we look at the word pursue in reference to holiness, the word suggests two thoughts: first, that *diligence* and *effort* are **required**; and second, that it is a **LIFELONG** task.

Holiness is a *process* and something that is never completely attained in life. Rather, as we begin to conform to the will of God in one area of our life, He reveals to us our need in another area. That is why we will always be *pursuing* – as opposed to attaining – **holiness** in this life.

II. Holiness in Spirit (2 Corinthians 7:1)

Jesus taught us in the Sermon on the Mount that God's commands are intended not only to regulate outward conduct, but inner disposition as well. It is not enough that we do not kill; we must also not hate. It is not enough that we do not commit adultery; we must not even entertain lustful *looks* and *thoughts*.

Just as we must learn to bring the appetites of our bodies under control, so we must also learn to bring our thought lives under obedience to Jesus Christ. In fact, Paul warns us against **misguided** and **wrongly** motivated attempts to control the body that leave our thought lives *unrestrained* (Colossians 2:23). It is possible to curb the natural appetites of the body outwardly and yet be filled with all manner of *inner* defilement.

The Bible indicates that our thought lives ultimately determine our character. Solomon said, "For as he thinks within himself, so he is" (Proverbs 23:7). An old well-known saying puts it this way:

Sow a thought, reap an ACT

Sow and act; reap a HABIT

Sow a habit, reap a CHARACTER

III. The Importance of Our Thought Life

It is because of the importance of our thought lives that Paul said, "Finally brothers, whatsoever things are *true*, whatsoever things are *honest*, whatsoever things are *just*, whatsoever things are *pure*, whatsoever things are *lovely*, whatsoever things are of *good report*; if there be any *virtue*, and if there be any *praise*, **think on these things** (Philippians 4:8).

As Christians we are no longer to be conformed to the pattern of this world but we are to be renewed in our minds (Romans 12:1-2; Ephesians 4:23; 1 Peter 1:14). Holiness begins in our minds and works out in our actions. This being true, what we allow to enter our minds is critically important.

A. What We Look At and Listen To

The television programs we watch, the books and magazines we read, the music we listen to, and the conversations we have all affect our *minds*. We need to evaluate the effects of these avenues honestly, using Philippians 4:8 as a standard. Are the thoughts stimulated by these various avenues true? Are they pure, lovely, admirable, excellent, or praiseworthy?

The world around us constantly seeks to conform our minds to its sinful ways. It is earnest and pressing in its endeavors. It will entice and persuade us (Proverbs 1:10-14). When we resist, it will ridicule and abuse us as being "old-fashioned" and "puritanical" (1 Peter 4:4).

Too many Christians, instead of resisting are more and more giving ground to the world's constant pressure.

The music we listen to often carries the message of the world, and the world uses the medium of music to squeeze us into its mold. And we cannot help being gradually influenced if we continually listen to the world's music.

Perhaps it should go without saying that Christians are to abstain from indulging in and listening to suggestive stories and jokes. But, Paul could not take this for granted among the early churches, and neither can we in this century. Listen to Paul's clear warning on the subject: "But fornication, and all uncleanness, or covetousness, let it not be once named among you, as becometh saints; Neither filthiness, nor foolish talking, nor jesting..." (Ephesians 5:3-4).

Another stimulus to impure thoughts we must be alert for is what our eyes see. Jesus warned against the lustful look (Matthew 5:28). Not only must we guard our own eyes; we must be careful that we are not the source of temptation to others. For this reason, modesty of dress and actions is required among both **men** and **women** (1 Timothy 2:9; 5:2).

But Philippians 4:8 speaks to more than just immoral and unclean thoughts. Our thoughts must not only be **pure** – they must also be *true, lovely, and praiseworthy*.

In one of his letters, Paul listed some acts of the sinful nature. These included defilements of the body – sexual immorality, impurity, intemperance, drunkenness, and the like. Others in the list defile the **SPIRIT**: hatred, discord, fits of rage, selfish ambition, and so on. We must *purify* ourselves not only from the gross sins of the body, but also from the more "acceptable" sins of the spirit.

Here again, sometimes we, as Christians, have failed miserably. Focusing on our particular group's list of do's and don'ts, we neglect the inner life where *envy, pride, bitterness, and a critical, unforgiving spirit* may reign unchecked.

The elder brother in the story of the prodigal son (Luke 15) is a classic example of one who led an exemplary outward life but who was consumed by a spirit of envy and self-righteousness. He could claim never to have disobeyed his father's commandments, yet his **jealousy** and **anger** over his father's joy in the return of his prodigal brother marks him to this day as an example to be shunned rather than followed.

The spirit of envy was the root of King Saul's unrelenting warfare against David. Initially Saul was highly pleased with David and set him over his men of war. But one day Saul heard the women of Israel singing, "Saul has slain his thousands, and David his tens of thousands" (1 Samuel 18:7). Saul was very angry that they had ascribed ten thousand to David and to him only thousands. And the Scripture says, "Saul looked at David with suspicion from that day on."

IV. Find Your Contentment in God

God has placed each one of us in the body of Christ as it has pleased Him, and has assigned to each of us a place in life. To some God has assigned a place of prominence, to others a place of obscurity; to some a place of wealth, to others a place of daily struggle to make ends meet. But regardless of our station in life or place in the Body, there is always the temptation to envy someone else. The elder brother would one day inherit all of his father's possessions, yet he became jealous over a banquet to celebrate his brother's return. Saul was king over all of Israel but could not stand someone else receiving more praise than he.

The cure for the sin of envy and jealousy is to find our **contentment in God**. Asaph in Psalm 73 was envious of the wicked as he saw their apparent prosperity (verse 3). He felt his *pursuit* of a holy life was in vain (verse 13). Only when he was enabled to say to God, "Earth has nothing I desire besides you" (verse 25), was he delivered from the sin of envy.

V. The Defilement of Bitterness

Another defilement of spirit that has shipwrecked many Christians is *bitterness*. Bitterness arises in our hearts when we do not trust in the sovereign rule of God in our lives. If anyone had a reason to be bitter it was Joseph. Sold by his jealous brothers into slavery, falsely accused by his master's immoral wife, and forgotten by someone he had helped in prison, Joseph never lost sight in the fact that God was in control of all that happened to him. In the end he was able to

say to his brothers, "You intended to harm me, but God intended it for good to accomplish what is now being done, the saving of many lives. (Genesis 50:20).

We can become bitter against God or against other people. Asaph was bitter against God because he felt God was not giving him a fair shake in life (Psalm 73:21). Job was bitter because he felt God was not recognizing his righteousness and even came to the place where his attitude was described as, "It profits a man nothing when he tries to please God" (Job 34:9).

Bitterness toward people is the result of an *unforgiving spirit*. Someone has wronged us, either apparently or actually, and we refuse to forgive that person. Instead we harbor thoughts of bitterness toward the person. We refuse to forgive because we will not recognize that God has forgiven us of far, far greater wrongs.

Closely akin to bitterness is the *spirit of retaliation*. When we are wronged, the tendency is to retaliate. If you have this spirit, get rid of it and entrust ourselves to Him who judges justly and who said, "It is Mine to avenge, I will repay."

One of the most difficult defilements of the spirit to deal with is the *critical spirit*. A critical spirit has its root in pride. Because of the "plank" of pride in our own eye we are sometimes not capable to dealing with the "speck" of need in someone else's eye. We are often like the Pharisee, who, completely unconscious of his own need, prayed, "God I thank you that I am not like other men" (Luke 18:11). We are quick to see – and to speak of – the faults of others, but slow to see our own needs. How sweetly we relish the opportunity to speak critically of someone else – even when we are unsure of our facts. We forget that "a man who stirs up dissension among brothers" by criticizing one to another is one of the "six things which the Lord hates (Proverbs 6:16-19).

All of these attitudes – envy, jealousy, bitterness, and an unforgiving and retaliatory spirit, and a critical and gossiping spirit – defile us and keep us from being **holy** before God. They are just as evil as immorality, drunkenness, and intemperance. Therefore, we must work diligently at rooting out these sinful attitudes from our minds. Often we are not even aware our attitudes are sinful. We cloak these defiling thoughts under the guise of justice and righteous indignation. But we need to pray **daily** for *humility* and *honesty* to see these sinful attitudes for what they really are, and then for grace and discipline to root them out of our minds and replace them with thoughts of pleasing God.

The Pursuit of Holiness

Pursue

In reference to holiness, the word suggests two thoughts: first, that *diligence* and *effort* are **required**; and second, that it is a **LIFELONG** task.

Holiness is a *process* and something that is never completely attained in life. Rather, as we begin to conform to the will of God in one area of our life, He reveals to us our need in another area.

That is why we will always be *pursuing* - as opposed to attaining - **holiness** in this life.

Holiness in Spirit

(2 Corinthians 7:1)

Jesus taught us in the Sermon on the Mount that God's commands are intended not only to regulate outward conduct, but inner disposition as well.

Just as we must learn to bring the appetites of our bodies under control, so we must also learn to bring our thought lives under obedience to Jesus Christ. In fact, Paul warns us against **misguided** and **wrongly** motivated attempts to control the body that leave our thought lives *unrestrained*.
(Colossians 2:23).

It is possible to curb the natural appetites of the body outwardly and yet be filled with all manner of *inner* defilement.

*Our thought lives ultimately determine
our character*

Sow a thought, reap an ACT

Sow and act; reap a HABIT

Sow a habit, reap a CHARACTER

"Finally brothers, whatsoever things are *true*,
whatsoever things are *honest*, whatsoever things are
just, whatsoever things are *pure*, whatsoever things
are *lovely*, whatsoever things are of *good report*, if
there be any virtue, and if there be any praise, **think**
on these things (Philippians 4:8)

The Importance of Our Thought Life

As Christians we are no longer to be conformed to the pattern of this world, but we are to be renewed in our minds (Romans 12:1-2; Ephesians 4:23; 1 Peter 1:14). Holiness begins in our minds and works out in our actions. This being true, what we allow to enter our minds is critically important.

The television programs we watch, the books and magazines we read, the music we listen to, and the conversations we have *all* affect our *minds*.

The world around us constantly seeks to conform our minds to its sinful ways. It is earnest and pressing in its endeavors. It will entice and persuade us (Proverbs 1:10-14). When we resist, it will ridicule and abuse us as "old-fashioned" and "puritanical" (1 Peter 4:4).

Too many Christians, instead of resisting are more and more giving ground to the world's constant pressure.

Another stimulus to impure thoughts we must be alert for is what our eyes see. Jesus warned against the lustful look (Matthew 5:28). Not only must we guard our own eyes; we must be careful that we are not the source of temptation to others. For this reason, modesty of dress and actions is required among both **men and women** (1 Timothy 2:9; 5:2).

Philippians 4:8 speaks to more than just immoral and unclean thoughts. Our thoughts must not only be pure - they must also be *true, lovely, and praiseworthy*.

Oftentimes, we neglect the inner life where *envy, pride, bitterness*, and a *critical, unforgiving spirit* may reign unchecked.

The cure for the sin of *envy* and *jealousy* is to find our contentment in God.

Another defilement of the spirit that has shipwrecked many Christians is *bitterness*.

Bitterness toward people is the result of an *unforgiving spirit*.

One of the most difficult defilements of the spirit to deal with is the *critical spirit*. A critical spirit has its root in pride. Because of the "plank" of pride in our own eye we are not capable to dealing with the "speck" of need in someone else.

All of these attitudes - *envy, jealousy, bitterness*, and an *unforgiving and retaliatory spirit*, and a *critical and gossiping spirit* - **defile us** and **keep us** from being *holy before God*.

They are just as evil as *immorality, drunkenness*, and *intemperance*. Therefore, we **must** work diligently at rooting out these sinful attitudes from our minds.