

How In The World Can We Be Holy?

from *Moody Monthly* by Stephen Bly

After a 12-mile drive down a dirt road, Brian had me pull over next to a stand of white pines, red firs, and scrub cedars.

“You can’t hunt there,” I said. “It’s tribal land and posted ‘No Trespassing’.”

“That just means keeping vehicles off the land . . . snowmobiles, pickups, four-wheelers . . . that sort of thing, doesn’t it?”

“Nope. ‘No Trespassing’ means we don’t set foot on that property without permission from the owners.”

“But Rod goes hunting here all the time, and he doesn’t get permission.”

“Well, old Rod must have a different idea what ‘No Trespassing’ means.”

Brian and I didn’t easily settle our differences that day. It reminded me how something as straightforward as a “No Trespassing” sign can be completely ignored or grossly misunderstood.

The Lord has posted a few distinct, transparent notices throughout the biblical text that many of us abuse in a similar fashion.

For example, 1 Peter 1:16 quotes the Lord as commanding “Be holy, because I am holy.”

Holiness is commanded. Posted repeatedly on the path of life, its message is unobstructed: As followers of the Lord Jesus Christ, we must make sure the moral quality of our character and actions conform with His. That’s holiness. Sometimes we get lost in a forest of theological definitions. Holiness is not merely a word to ponder, it’s a level of life to achieve. We must press on to be like Jesus—in our hearts, in our heads, and with our actions.

Some seem to be able to stumble through life completely ignoring this mandate. Others find escape by twisting its meaning.

“If I’m sort of trying to be mostly holy . . . that’s about as good as God expects me to be,” they suggest.

But unlike politicians and bureaucrats, the Lord seems to delight in communicating in unmistakably clear language. When Jesus says in Matthew 5:48, “Be perfect, therefore, as your heavenly Father is perfect,” He intends for us to quickly grasp the meaning. So it is with “Be holy, because I am holy.”

The Trouble with Lists

At some point in our Christian journey, many of us become convinced that holiness is basically a list of what kind of behavior is unacceptable. We have a natural attraction to lists. They can help us do the right things. They provide proof when we’re being obedient. And proof when others aren’t.

There are, however, at least three problems when we reduce holiness to a list of rules.

First, the list is always too short. Last night I wandered into the living room to find my 15-year-old son watching television and eating pretzels on the couch. We have great hopes of our furniture lasting until our last child graduates from high school, but recent bouts with greasy crumbs have made us doubt. So we have made a rule. He may not eat potato chips on the couch.

When I expressed alarm that there were pretzel bits all over the couch, he informed me that I never said anything about not eating pretzels. I can see the list now. No eating potato chips, corn chips, tortilla chips, pretzels, cheese crackers, saltine crackers, low-fat saltine crackers, low-fat low-sodium saltine crackers . . . whew! How long a list would I need?

The same is true in the area of holiness. Your list might have started out simple. One item might be ‘no pornography.’ So you stay away from the sleazy joints downtown. But now, what

about those cable network movies? And how about all those R and X-rated movies at the video rental place? (PG-13s?) Now there are all those pornographic ports on the Internet! The list is too short. It must constantly be expanding.

Second, every list is too long. Five feet behind my chair is a nice slate pool table. I live in the mountains of north-central Idaho where there's snow on the ground from November to May. Other than running a few miles every day, I spend most of the winter stuck behind my computer.

Except when I take a break and shoot a game of pool. But such behavior—playing pool—at one time was on many people's lists of things a Christian should never do if he wanted to live a holy life. Maybe it's still on some lists. Perhaps those lists are too long.

Third, most lists of do's and don'ts fail to tell us how to obey them. Not only are they lacking in simple instructions, but they never seem to define what kind of attitude the Lord expects as we carry them out. Doesn't God require more than robots? Isn't the longing of our hearts as important as the movement of our bodies?

Sometimes it's easy to get people to agree that holiness is more than just a list of do's and don'ts. "Yeah," they shout, "throw out the whole list. The Lord loves us just like we are, right?"

Sure. But He has no desire for us to stay just like we are.

When we discard the idea of personal holiness, that the moral quality of our character and actions should conform with the Lord's, we distance ourselves from the daily benefits and blessings of the abundant life Jesus has promised us (John 10:10). To ignore holiness is to remain a slave to sin (Rom. 6:19b). Instead, Paul calls us to yield ourselves "in slavery to righteousness leading to holiness." Holiness is about choices. Day by day, moment by moment choices.

There is no middle ground. We are either caught up in pursuing holiness or we are running away from it.

No one stands still.

No, not one.

Another Approach

The first two chapters of 1 Peter provide guidelines for how to keep holiness properly focused in our daily life.

1. Let your discipline begin in your mind.

"Therefore, prepare your minds for action" (1 Peter 1:13).

There are two ways to keep your dog in your yard. Build a fence or teach him not to run away. The same is true with our thoughts. We can try to build a fence out of rules that we need to keep. But somehow we'll find an open gate or a way to dig under or jump over.

Alternately, we could discipline our minds to stay in the yard. Philippians 4:8 might be a good place to begin the training. "Finally, brothers, whatever is true, whatever is noble, whatever is right, whatever is pure, whatever is lovely, whatever is admirable—if anything is excellent or praiseworthy—think about such things."

Will a well-disciplined mind really propel us into a life of holiness? "The mind of the sinful man is death, but the mind controlled by the Spirit is life and peace" (Rom. 8:6).

Every once in a while we need a thought check. Maybe something as simple as a few quiet private moments in the evening when we ask ourselves, *What were the five most dominant themes that occupied my mind today?*

Use both the amount of time spent thinking about them and the intensity of thought you gave to the matter. You might have spent two hours trying to decide which gift to surprise your

spouse with and five minutes trying to decide how to get back at your boss. Both would be considered dominant themes in your mind.

Once you have your short list of themes, compare it to Philippians 4:8, James 3:17, Galatians 5:22, or other passages of Scripture that remind us what we ought to be thinking about. You'll have a quick idea about how properly disciplined your mind was (or wasn't) for the day.

2. Be self-controlled.

That is, keep your actions as disciplined as your mind. That's not easy. We sometimes have this idea that if we think good thoughts we will automatically do good deeds. But remember what Paul said: "I myself in my mind am a slave to God's law, but in the sinful nature a slave to the law of sin" (Rom. 7:25).

It works this way. Driving home from work you remember that for the past several weeks, the first words you've been speaking to your kids in the evening have been negative. They left tricycles in the driveway, forgot to bring in the garbage cans, didn't mow the grass, had a water balloon fight in the den, tried a chemistry experiment on the cat . . . every day it's something different and you lose your temper within 30 seconds of coming through the door.

But this day is going to be different. You're getting yourself under control. You're psyched up ahead of time. You're going to be Mr. Cool, even if they spraypainted their dresser again with the clothes still in the drawers.

Everything is calm for the first 15 seconds. Then you realize Junior has tried to flush Sissy's favorite doll down the toilet and there seems to be a large pool of water covering the bathroom, two bedrooms, and a hall. Suddenly, your actions are the very ones your mind said they would not be.

All of us are habitual people. The seat belt gets fastened. The teeth get brushed. The garbage is taken out. The family is pushed out of bed in time to get ready for Sunday school. The car gets its scheduled oil change. Morning devotions are read to the kids before they go to school.

Maybe we all could use a few more godly habits.

Let's say you decide that each of your children needs at least two encouraging words or actions from you for every complaining or negative one. You'll need a new habit. It means before you hit the ceiling because Junior has super-glued the closet door shut, you better give him a hug and tell him you think it's great that he's doing so well in math. A two-for-one habit. For a lot of us, it would be a real demonstration of self-control.

3. Live for the long run of life.

As the apostle Peter said, "Set your hope fully on the grace to be given you when Jesus Christ is revealed" (1 Peter 1:13).

Some people argue that if holiness paid off quicker more people would be motivated. It is true there are times when our hard work at spiritual discipline seems to bring few rewards. Like the psalmist, we think, "*Surely in vain have I kept my heart pure; in vain have I washed my hand in innocence*" (Psalm 73:13). The solution is found when we consider the long-term conclusion for each. "*The Lord watches over the way of the righteous, but the way of the wicked will perish*" (Psalm 1:6).

Even a first year baseball coach knows that it's the score at the end of the game that counts, not merely what happens in the first couple of innings. If the team gives up five runs early, it's up to him to convince them that the game is far from over.

Keeping one eye on the end of the game of life, that is, one eye focused on the Lord's return—always longing for the fullness of life in heaven that's free of sin and sorrow—helps us realize all the struggles for holiness on this earth are worth it, and the game isn't over yet. Hebrews 12:2 reminds us that we should "Fix our eyes on Jesus, the author and perfecter of our faith, who for the joy set before him endured the cross, scorning its shame, and sat down at the right hand of the throne of God."

Monica had a miserable four years of high school. Trying hard to excel in academics left her little time to party and play with the rest of her class. She was constantly put down for her hard work and good grades. Her moral and spiritual commitments didn't help her popularity. She was called the last virgin at Central High.

She had absolutely no interest in attending a five-year class reunion. Besides, it came as she was completing summer study for her master's degree.

On the night before her wedding she sat in the dark on the front steps of her parents' house and visited with her mother. "The thing I think I'm most proud of, Mom, is that I really have saved my sexual life for Eddie. He said it was the greatest gift any wife could ever give her husband."

Monica and Eddie attended her 10-year class reunion. Most of the party girls of high school looked 40. Half had been divorced. Others spoke about the jerks they were married to. Most tried to compete for honors and attention, trying desperately to rekindle the "glory days."

At the 20-year class reunion, Monica found many sadder but wiser classmates. They seemed to marvel how she and Eddie had gotten along so well. And at the 30-year reunion, Monica and Eddie were elected class king and queen. It was a unanimous vote. Monica wasn't a ravishing, middle-aged beauty; it was 34 years of consistent holiness that made her so attractive to a generation that had finally learned to distinguish true virtue.

But a life pushing ourselves toward holiness can be a weary task. "Let us not become weary in doing good, for at the proper time we will reap a harvest if we do not give up" (Gal. 6:9).

Staying Faithful

Here are three things that can help keep us going. First, spend more time around believers who bring out the best in you. The spreading of the gospel cannot be accomplished from inside a cave. We must be out among those who need to hear about Christ. But we cannot spend all our time with those who drag us down. The wearier our journey becomes, the more time we must spend with uplifting fellowship.

Second, seek out a holiness partner. A spiritually mature Christian who will help, encourage, and correct you so you may become more and more conformed to the character of Christ, not merely conformed to an arbitrary list of do's and don'ts.

Third, take a few hours from time to time to reflect on how far you've come. We all have a long way to go, but we've made some progress over the years. Old habits have lost their grip. Memory of some sinful desires now brings only a sigh, a shaking of the head, and gratefulness to God for setting us free.

Refuse to limit your life to the methods and habits that belong to your sinful past. "Do not conform to the evil desires you had when you lived in ignorance" (1 Peter 1:14).

One of the first Bible truths most of us understand is that God loves us, forgives us, and saves us, no matter how sinful we might be. Paul sums it up in Romans 5:8 when he states, "But God demonstrates his own love for us in this: While we were still sinners, Christ died for us."

A second message that should be just as surprising and thrilling is that we don't have to remain entrapped by the sin and sinful habits of the past. We were all sinners when God chose to save us, but we don't have to remain that way. In fact, for the love of God, we must not remain that way.

Joanna used to say that her most glaring sin when she was young was poverty. But now she calls it greed. Struggling to put herself through college, she used all sorts of gimmicks to survive. She knew when to show up at a friend's or relative's and get invited to supper. She knew how to drop canned goods so they would dent, and then demand the supermarket sell them to her at a discount. Every October she would buy a fall coat at some big department store, wear it until spring, then return it to the store for a refund claiming it was a birthday present that didn't fit. For her, every price tag was up for negotiation and every loose dollar might as well be hers as the next person's. She never tipped. She never tithed. "They don't get me anything," she complained.

But after 15 years in the real estate business, Joanna discovered a saving relationship with Jesus Christ. It was time to make some changes, but they didn't come easily.

To sell a commercial building she owned it was necessary to replace all the worn carpet in the offices. She had the used carpet delivered to the church for use in the Sunday school rooms, and asked the pastor for a receipt. She thought it would make a nice donation to list on her taxes.

Joanna was shocked and angered to learn the pastor didn't want the carpet and sent it back to her. He tried carefully to explain that something that was too worn for a business was certainly too frayed for use in the Lord's house. He even intimated that if she were serious about the cold bare floors of the Sunday school rooms, she might tithe the profit she made on the sale of the building, and they would buy brand-new carpet.

It took three months for Joanna to begin to break free from the pattern of her old ways and finally allow God to correct her character. Some people never allow Him that opportunity.

Playing by New Rules

Salvation brings a change in the rules of life for you and me. Getting serious about holiness means we have agreed to play by the new rules.

What are the old rules? Well, take your job, for example. The old rules say your vocation must be inwardly rewarding, financially lucrative, and demand little from us (especially after quitting time). But what are the new rules? First Thessalonians 4:11,12 tells us, "Make it your ambition to lead a quiet life, to mind your own business and to work with your hands, just as we told you, so that your daily life may win the respect of outsiders and so that you will not be dependent on anybody."

It would be a good idea for each of us to make a chart. Along the left-hand side jot down the name of the half-dozen or so most important areas of life. Maybe it would include the Lord, marriage, children, job, finances, health, church service, and leisure time. Next to it write the "Rules of the World" concerning that item. Then in a right-hand column, record the "Rules of the Kingdom" for each item.

That would be one way for us to remember we're playing the game by new rules. Perhaps if we knew these principles better, we wouldn't need an exhaustive list of do's and don'ts to live a holy life.

Colossians 3:17 could be one of the guides. "And whatever you do, whether in word or deed, do it all in the name of the Lord Jesus." That means all you need on your list is two little phrases:

1. "As Jesus would say. . .".

What words can we use? What subjects can we talk about? What are acceptable stories to tell? We should be able to preface any words that come from our mouths with the phrase, "As Jesus would say . . .".

2. "I would like to dedicate the following act to the Lord Jesus Christ . . .".

If that line were the sincere introduction to everything we did, we wouldn't need a list of prescriptions.

Both phrases require us to have a mature understanding of the heart and mind of Jesus Christ. And that compels us to hours of serious Bible study and one-to-one fellowship with the Lord.

Holiness is a life, not a list.

A life of holiness will bring power to the believer, peace to the fellowship, and pleasure to the Father. Its pursuit will require daily decisions that no one else can make for us.

"But just as he who called you is holy, so be holy in all you do" (1 Peter 1:15).