

The Goal of Our Election

A sermon preached by Dr. John Clayton at Covenant Presbyterian Church of Fort Smith, Arkansas on May 28, 2023.

But I say, walk by the Spirit, and you will not gratify the desires of the flesh. For the desires of the flesh are against the Spirit, and the desires of the Spirit are against the flesh, for these are opposed to each other, to keep you from doing the things you want to do. But if you are led by the Spirit, you are not under the law. Now the works of the flesh are evident: sexual immorality, impurity, sensuality, idolatry, sorcery, enmity, strife, jealousy, fits of anger, rivalries, dissensions, divisions, envy, drunkenness, orgies, and things like these. I warn you, as I warned you before, that those who do such things will not inherit the kingdom of God. But the fruit of the Spirit is love, joy, peace, patience, kindness, goodness, faithfulness, gentleness, self-control; against such things there is no law. And those who belong to Christ Jesus have crucified the flesh with its passions and desires. If we live by the Spirit, let us also keep in step with the Spirit (Gal. 5:16–25).¹

In his epistle to the Ephesians, after a brief greeting and salutation, the apostle Paul launches into a lengthy blessing of God for what he has done for us in Christ to the praise of the glory of God. In the Greek, it's actually one, long sentence, elegantly crafted and rich with sovereign significance. It's also one of the several passages in our New Testament that overtly describes the predestination of God's elect. Paul explains that God the Father chose us in Christ "before the foundation of the world" (Eph. 1:4a). Such a statement clearly eliminates human merit or initiative from our redemption and rightly directs all glory to God. But coupled with this magisterial statement of God's sovereign election is an oft-overlooked purpose statement: God the Father chose us in Christ "before the foundation of the world *that we should be holy and blameless before him*" (Eph. 1:4, emphasis added). In other words, the goal of our election is holiness.

As this is the case, we should expect it to be an essential part of the gospel, which it is. As Paul explains later in Ephesians, "Christ loved the church and gave himself up for her, that he might sanctify her, having cleansed her by the washing of water with the word, so that he might present the church to himself in splendor, without spot or wrinkle or any such thing, that she might be holy and without blemish" (Eph. 5:25-26). As Christ's meritorious work guarantees our positional and future holiness, so also it directs us to live as what we are in Christ. As the apostle Peter puts it, "as he who called you is holy, you also be holy in all your conduct, since it is written, 'You shall be holy, for I am holy'" (1 Peter 1:15-16).

To modern ears this can sound legalistic, perhaps too idealistic, some might even argue, anti-gospel. But could it be that the topic of personal holiness sounds foreign because it has increasingly disappeared from our vocabulary and dialogue, both outside and even inside the church? Is personal holiness even considered any more in our work? Our entertainment? Our politics? Our social life? What about our worship? Four decades ago, J.I. Packer observed,

Ecumenical goals for the church are defined nowadays in terms of the quest for social, racial, and economic justice, but it would be far healthier if our first aim was agreed to be

¹ Unless referenced otherwise, all Scripture quotations are from *The Holy Bible, English Standard Version* (Wheaton, IL: Crossway Bibles, 2001).

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personal and relational holiness in every believer's life. Much as the modern West needs the impact of Christian truth, it needs the impact of Christian holiness even more, both to demonstrate that godliness is the true humanness and to keep community life from rotting to destruction. The pursuit of holiness is thus no mere private hobby, nor merely a path for a select few, but a vital element in Christian mission strategy today. The world's greatest need is the personal holiness of Christian people.²

Though unintentional, Packer's words sound clairvoyant today, where holiness is not only absent from our public dialogue but from Christian people and the pulpit too. If we truly want revival in our land, it must start with a revival of personal holiness in our churches. Rightly did the great Scottish Presbyterian minister Robert Murray McCheyne confess almost two centuries ago, "My people's greatest need is my personal holiness."³ To which I might add: What a minister should long to see in his people is a pursuit of holiness.

What is holiness?

Now, to avoid confusion, let's define our terms; let's make sure we understand what holiness is. The Greek word Paul uses in the first chapter of Ephesians, translated "holy," is the adjectival form of the noun *hagiasmos*, which is often translated as "sanctification" (Holiness and sanctification are the same Greek word). The word describes the state of being set apart for God by God, as he is holy. When you hear the word holiness, you may think of righteousness, and rightly so. Though different words, they are the same thing but from different perspectives, one inward the other outward. Holiness is our inward consecration to God, while righteousness is its outward practice.

We may likewise think of holiness as two dimensional: positional and practical. Positionally, we are holy before God because we are pardoned and accepted for Christ's perfect obedience and substitutionary sacrifice for our sin, which we receive by faith. Positionally, we cannot be more holy than we are in Christ, but practically, this side of glory, we are called to "cleanse ourselves from every defilement of body and spirit, bringing holiness to completion in the fear of God" (2 Cor. 7:1). By God's grace through faith in Christ we are becoming what we already are in Christ. But we do not do this on our own but through the indwelling ministry of the Holy Spirit.

Which brings us to Paul's epistle to the Galatians, and his explanation of how the Holy Spirit works in our holiness. Paul says we are to "walk by the Spirit" (2:16) and "keep in step with the Spirit" (2:25). The metaphor of walking implies action and direction. The Christian life is not one of passivity. We are active participants in our sanctification. To "keep in step" is to follow the lead, lock step, of the Holy Spirit.

But if we are indwelt by the Holy Spirit, why do we continue to sin? Is not his powerful presence sufficient to perfect holiness in us? What keeps us from holiness?

² J.I. Packer, *Keep in Step with the Spirit* (Grand Rapids: Fleming H. Revell, 1984), 103.

³ *Ibid.*, 99.

What keeps us from holiness?

Of course, sin keeps us from holiness, but specifically the enticement to sin comes from our sinful flesh, which wages war against the Holy Spirit: “For the desires of the flesh are against the Spirit, and the desires of the Spirit are against the flesh, for these are opposed to each other, to keep you from doing the things you want to do” (Gal. 5:17). By “flesh,” Paul is not referring to his physical body but the entirety of his fallen human nature, which is dominated by sin. It is the hereditary gift from our father Adam, passed on from generation to generation, the gift of death that keeps on giving. And as our flesh is characterized by sin, we can be sure it hates the Spirit’s presence, whose indwelling and enduring presence is known by every Christian.

To be clear, it is a battle. As Paul admits to the Romans, “For I do not understand my own actions. For I do not do what I want, but I do the very thing I hate. . . . For I know that nothing good dwells in me, that is, in my flesh. For I have the desire to do what is right, but not the ability to carry it out. For I do not do the good I want, but the evil I do not want is what I keep on doing. Now if I do what I do not want, it is no longer I who do it, but sin that dwells within me” (Rom. 7:15–20). How many of us could say the same? Actually, every Christian this side of glory can. As an old man and shortly before death, John Knox confessed, “I know how hard the battle is between the flesh and the spirit under the heavy cross of affliction, when no worldly defense but present death doth appear. I know the grudging and murmuring complaints of the flesh...”⁴ Those “grudging and murmuring complaints of the flesh” reveal its lifelong determination and its hatred of holiness. It’s no wonder that it can feel like a battle raging.

In fact, as we grow in holiness, the more apparent this battle becomes. In his commentary on Galatians, Martin Luther describes his time as a monk and his ongoing struggle with the desires of his flesh. He’d go to confession daily but grew more and more frustrated, because confession could not kill the desire, nor could his good deeds. It was not until he learned that knowledge of the battle does not necessitate defeat, rather “the more goldy a man is, the more does he feel that battle.”⁵ In other words, if you don’t sense that there is a battle raging within, you’re not growing in holiness. And so, Luther said to himself, “Martin, you shall not utterly be without sin, for you still have the flesh; you shall therefore feel the battle thereof, according to that saying of Paul, ‘The flesh resisteth the Spirit.’ Despair not therefore, but resist it strongly, and fulfill not the lust thereof.”⁶

That there is a battle, however, does not mean it’s a fair one. In fact, it’s decidedly lop-sided. The powerful presence of the Holy Spirit is sufficient to perfect holiness in us unto the end. In Christ, we are not a helpless victim caught between two opposing forces. Rather, all “who belong to Christ Jesus have crucified the flesh with its passions and desires” (5:24). We are indwelled by the same Spirit who resurrected our Lord Jesus from the dead, and through him we are enabled and empowered *not to sin*, to obey the Spirit’s prompting, to do the will of God from the heart (Eph. 6:6), knowing that one day in glory the battle will be over, and we will be like our Lord.

⁴ John Knox, *Treatise on Prayer*, <https://ccel.org/ccel/knox/prayer/prayer.iii.html>.

⁵ Martin Luther, *Commentary on Galatians* (Grand Rapids: Fleming H. Revell, 1924), 365.

⁶ *Ibid.*, 364.

What does holiness look like?

So, what does holiness look like? Simply put, holiness looks like Jesus. It is no coincidence that the Holy Spirit is also referred to as the Spirit of Christ, as the Spirit conforms us to the image of Christ, to Christlikeness. For this reason, Jesus told his disciples that it was to their advantage that he depart (John 16:7). As one man, he was confined to time and space, but the Spirit of Christ dwells in all who believe (Rom. 8:9), and through his indwelling presence we are being conformed to Christ.

Paul describes the evidence of the Holy Spirit's work in us as fruit. It is not character qualities to be learned but evidence of his presence to be lived. Therefore, it is fruit of Christlikeness: the love of Christ, joy of Christ, peace of Christ, patience of Christ, kindness of Christ, goodness of Christ, faithfulness of Christ, gentleness of Christ, self-control of Christ (5:22-23). And while we see in Christ the perfection of this Spirit-wrought fruit, we look for evidence of its progression in our sanctification. Robert Letham gives the example of a man he knew who professed Christ and yet was "notorious in many respects," leading him to wonder about his true conversion, that is, until he learned about the man's relatives who were far worse.⁷ This side of heaven, evidence of fruit is witnessed in progression not perfection. The Shorter Catechism describes our sanctification as "the work of God's free grace, whereby we are renewed in the whole man after the image of God, and are enabled more and more to die unto sin, and live unto righteousness."⁸ And while "more and more" can feel like miles and miles, the Holy Spirit's work is witnessed as we grow in holiness.

In conclusion, let us consider a few ways in which we witness the Holy Spirit's work in our holiness. First, the Holy Spirit's work in our holiness is witnessed in delivering us from the "desires of the flesh" (2:16). Since our flesh has been crucified, the Holy Spirit turns our desires from the things of the flesh to the things of the Spirit. This doesn't mean that the desires of our sinful flesh are eliminated. Surely, the desires of the flesh lurk in the dark recesses of our sinful flesh, but the Spirit leads us away from those dark corners into the light. The Holy Spirit directs us to what we rightly "want to do" (5:17) in Christ. And when we do this we build holy habits, not by self-reliance but Spirit-dependence.

And every virtue we possess,
And every victory won,
And every thought of holiness,
Are His alone.⁹

Second, the Holy Spirit's work in our holiness is witnessed in our obedience to the gospel. "But if you are led by the Spirit," Paul explains, "you are not under the law" (5:18). The law is "holy and righteous and good" (Rom. 7:14) and therefore the standard of perfect obedience. It's also

⁷ Robert Letham, *The Holy Spirit* (Phillipsburg: P&R Publishing Company, 2023), 257.

⁸ "The Shorter Catechism" Q. 35, *The Westminster Confession of Faith and Catechisms* (Lawrenceville: PCA Christian Education and Publications, 2007), 377.

⁹ Harriet Auber, "Our blest Redeemer ere He breathed," <https://hymnary.org/hymn/LHTC1918/157>.

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impossible to obey to perfection, unless you are the Lord Jesus Christ, who did. Therefore, we look to him for the greatest exchange in history, “For our sake he made him to be sin who knew no sin, so that in him we might become the righteousness of God” (2 Cor. 5:21), which we receive through faith. And it is God’s Spirit who does this work, “convincing us of our sin and misery, enlightening our minds in the knowledge of Christ, and renewing our wills,” and through whom we are persuaded and enabled to “embrace Jesus Christ, freely offered to us in the gospel.”¹⁰

Third, the Holy Spirit’s work in our holiness is witnessed in enabling and empowering us to “keep in step.” And he does this typically through objective means. Our Shorter Catechism explains it this way: “The outward and ordinary means whereby Christ communicateth to us the benefits of redemption, are his ordinances, especially the word, sacraments, and prayer; all which are made effectual to the elect for salvation.”¹¹ The Holy Spirit speaks through the Word he has authored, not apart from it. This includes what we call the visual Word, or the sacraments of baptism and the Lord’s Supper. And as the Spirit leads us, as we are faithful to pray, he is faithful to work through our prayers. We “keep in step” through the ordinary means of grace. So, let us learn to pray, as Robert Murray McCheyne prayed, “Lord, make me as holy as it is possible for a saved sinner to be.” That’s a worthy prayer for us to pray, since the goal of our election is¹²holiness.

¹⁰ “The Shorter Catechism” Q. 31, *The Westminster Confession of Faith and Catechisms* (Lawrenceville: PCA Christian Education and Publications, 2007), 374-5.

¹¹ *Ibid.*, Q. 88, 396.

¹² Quoted in J.I. Packer, *Keep in Step with the Spirit* (Grand Rapids: Fleming H. Revell, 1984), 120.