

Holiness: A Present Possibility

by G. Campbell Morgan

Holiness is a present possibility for believers, as it is the will of God for His people, and it is already imparted to the believer through the indwelling of the Holy Spirit.

Scripture: Matthew 1:21, Romans 8:1, Romans 8:29

Topics: "Righteousness", "Holiness"

Description

G. Campbell Morgan emphasizes that holiness is not only a desirable ideal but a present possibility for all believers. He argues that holiness, defined as rectitude of character, is essential for true righteousness and is attainable through the will of God, the work of Christ, and the indwelling of the Holy Spirit. Morgan challenges the notion that holiness is reserved for a select few, asserting that every Christian is called to live a blameless and harmless life amidst a corrupt generation. He encourages believers to strive for holiness, relying on the limitless resources available through Christ and the Spirit. Ultimately, Morgan concludes that while perfection may not be achievable in this life, a blameless life is possible through a genuine relationship with God.

Transcript

IN OUR FIRST STUDY WE ATTEMPTED TO UNDERSTAND THE meaning of the term "holiness," and its relation to righteousness. I may summarize that study by reminding you that holiness is rectitude of character, and righteousness rectitude of conduct. Apart from holiness there can be no righteousness. When there is holiness there must inevitably be righteousness. While righteousness is that after which we seek, and for which we pray, we must ever remember that it can be established in individual, social, national, or racial life only when there is holiness of character.

Now, somewhat narrowing our outlook, we are to inquire what the New Testament teaches concerning the possibility of holiness in the present life. Holiness of character, ideally, is attractive to every man in the deepest of him. There are very many devout and sincere expositors of Scripture who hold that the unregenerate man has no admiration for holiness. I differ entirely from that view. If you will allow the word stated as testimony rather than as theory -- I have yet to meet the man who does not in the deepest of his thinking know that the life of holiness is the life of beauty. The man who has never yet come into living relationship with the Lord of holiness and righteousness, the Lord Christ Himself, does most strenuously deny the possibility of living the holy life in this present world. He dismisses quite readily, and quite resolutely all contemplation of the ideal of holiness, because of his deep and profound consciousness of

his inability himself to be holy. Of course, no person born of God denies the beauty of holiness, or the desirability of realizing the character of holiness. To have received the Spirit of God, the gift of life Divine, is to know a great desire after holiness of character. It is quite possible that we so stifle the desire, so resolutely refuse to submit to all the indications of method, as by and by, even though we still name the name of Christ, to lose that desire altogether. Then we shall speak of the ideal as a counsel of perfection. You will remember that this phrase, "counsel of perfection," has come to us from the Roman Church, and is used by its theologians in reference to the laws of life for such as give themselves to the vocation of saintship. It is declared by them that the life of holiness or saintship is not possible for the ordinary Christian man or the ordinary Christian woman, that it is reserved for a select few who have received some higher call, and abandon themselves thereto. Among those of us who are of the Protestant faith there is a great tendency to deny the possibility of holiness; using that very phrase, "counsel of perfection." All Christian people agree that in heaven we shall be holy in character. This admission is evidence that we think that death will be able to do something for us that the living Saviour cannot do. That statement in itself ought to be sufficient to make us inquire quite carefully whether this life of holiness expressing itself in a life of righteousness is possible here and now.

I think that the one verse I have read, not so much that I may deal with it in detail this morning, but as a key to a fine of investigation, ought to answer forevermore the question whether the life of holiness is possible. "That ye may be blameless and harmless, children of God without blemish." Oh, yes, you say, that will be so in heaven! Let the apostle finish his sentence before you object, "in the midst of a crooked and perverse, generation." I do not think you will care to suggest that to be a description of heaven. It far more accurately describes London, or the place where you live. "In the midst of a crooked and perverse generation, among whom ye are as lights in the world." How? By the life that is "blameless and harmless," the life of "children of God without blemish."

Our inquiry ought not to be made of any system of theology, or of the experience of the Church. Thousands of people who have seen something of the glory of the life of holiness, and earnestly desire to attain thereto, turn from the great spiritual vision to inquire what man has to say concerning this. Without desiring to touch on things that are controversial, let me say that for many years in this country there have been two schools of interpreters of holiness, labeled, accurately or inaccurately, Keswick and Methodist. Happily they are becoming so merged that you can hardly tell which is which. Now if we want to know what the New Testament teaches about holiness we should turn to the New Testament itself.

A letter has reached me this week from a sincere seeker after truth, after knowledge of the law of this life of fulness of the Spirit. The writer, after a long letter, puts this as a question to me: "Will you tell me if you have met anyone living the Spirit-filled life?" I am not a judge. I have no right to judge. The Lord knoweth them that are His. I would warn everyone against attempting to decide as to the possibility of the holy life from the experience of saints. I will not, however, leave the inquiry at that point without another word. Yes, I have known saints, so far as I have a right to judge, in whom perfect love has cast out fear, in whom perfect love has become the law of life, gentle, tender, gracious, patient, wooing, winsome souls; strong, angry souls, protesting against all iniquity, holy men and women, and, therefore, righteous men and women. Yet I will not base anything on the experience, either the exceptional or average experience, of the saint. If it cannot be demonstrated that any man or woman has ever yet in nineteen centuries realized the ideal which the Bible presents, I yet decline to lower the ideal to the attainment of those who have failed. It is for me to strive after the highest if no other has. The teaching of Scripture is, that the highest is possible. Therefore, I desire, taking this verse simply as a keynote, a starting point, to make my appeal to

the teaching of the New Testament. The difficulty, in a brief summary of statement, must necessarily be that of selection. I propose, therefore, to make a sevenfold statement in answer to the inquiry whether holiness is a present possible experience, in each case selecting one principal declaration of the New Testament in interpretation of the general thought.

First of all, then, the New Testament declares that holiness of character is possible because it is the will of God for His people.

In the twenty-ninth verse of the eighth chapter of the letter to the Romans the apostle writes these words in the midst of a great argument concerning the life of spiritual fulness: "For whom He foreknew, He also foreordained to be conformed to the image of His Son, that He might be the firstborn among many brethren." Take that simple little passage out of the great paragraph, a paragraph full of mystery and yet full of revelation, a paragraph in which the apostle is showing the original thought and intention of God in the work of His Son, a passage in which occur the words that still fill us with fear as we attempt interpretation of them—the words "foreordained" and "elect." The foreordination is not to salvation but to character, "foreordained to be conformed to the image of His Son." That is the will of God. A great deal has been lost in our own Christian thinking and in our own Christian life by treating the initial things of Christian experience as though they were the final things, by not getting far enough back in our endeavor to understand the real purpose of God in the mission of Jesus and the work of Christ. Some time ago I passed through these writings of the New Testament, and made a catena of passages in which the purpose is declared, passages in which the word "that" occurs in the sense of "in order that." Take one illustration: "The grace of God hath appeared, bringing salvation to all men, instructing us, to the intent that, denying ungodliness and worldly lusts, we should live soberly and righteously and godly in the present world, looking for the blessed hope and appearing of the glory of our great God and Saviour Jesus Christ, Who gave Himself for us that He might redeem us from all iniquity, and purify unto Himself a people for His own possession, zealous of good works." Mark the purpose of the great and gracious work which originated in the councils of eternity, the work that operated in the stream of time, a work that includes within itself the marvelous mission of God in Christ—Who gave Himself for us in order that He might forgive our sins? No, but rather to "redeem us from all iniquity," and purify unto Himself a people for His own possession, zealous of good works. The will of God is our sanctification, that we should be "conformed to the image of His Son." In the days of our childhood we used to sing, "I want to be like Jesus." Have we ever ceased singing it? If so, why? It was a profound word. It was a word full of simplicity, so simple that the child sings it yet and loves it, and catches something of its meaning; yet it is a word as sublime as the eternal purpose of God for every child of His love. Nothing less than that can satisfy the heart of God. Nothing less than that ought to satisfy the heart of the child of God, that we should be "conformed to the image of His Son." That is fundamental; the New Testament declares holiness to be possible when it declares that it is the will of God for His people.

Second, the New Testament declares holiness of character to be possible because it clearly teaches us that for the creation of that character Christ came into the world.

Already in the minds of all of you who are at all familiar with the New Testament, passage after passage has been remembered. Take the first and simplest in the Gospel of Matthew, the word spoken to His mother by the angel in connection with the foretelling of His coming: "Thou shalt call His name Jesus; for it is He that shall save His people from their sins." Not He shall forgive sins; that is initial, preliminary, very true, but that is not the statement. "He shall save His people from their sins." His people, the Hebrew people, yea verily; only remember that by the coming of Jesus Christ the horizon was flung back and the

Gentiles were brought to the rising of His light, and into all the values of His mission. The phrase "His people" includes all such as turn to Him, submit to Him, trust Him. It does not mean He will save from his sins the man who is still in rebellion. It is His people that He shall save from their sins. It is these first principles that we are in danger of forgetting. The word does not say that He shall save His people from the punishment of their sins, but from their sins, from the sins which are the outcome of sin; He saves them from sins by saving from the power of sin. Therefore it is possible that I should live the holy life, according to the purpose of God, and according to the work that Jesus Christ came to do.

Third, the New Testament declares holiness of character to be possible because of the administration of the Spirit of God in the life of the trusting soul.

"There is therefore now no condemnation to them that are in Christ Jesus. For the law of the Spirit of life in Christ Jesus made me free from the law of sin and of death. For what the law could not do, in that it was weak through the flesh, God, sending His own Son in the likeness of sinful flesh and as an offering for sin, condemned sin in the flesh." While this passage may be perfectly clear to the majority of you, be patient while I attempt to make it clear to the youngest. The term law in verse two has no reference to the Mosaic economy, neither has the phrase, "the law of sin and of death," any reference to the decalogue. In the third verse the term law has reference to the Mosaic economy. What, then, is meant by the term law in the second verse? Allow me to substitute a phrase for a word, and read: "For the master principle of the Spirit of life in Christ Jesus made me free from the master principle of sin and of death." That is a scientific statement of the work of the Spirit of life in the believer. What is it that the indwelling of the Spirit does in the life of a man? It sets in operation a new law which negatives the old one. Can this be? Surely we know it can be. Often the simplest illustration will help the seeking soul. At this moment, as I hold this book in my hand, one law is negating another law. The law of gravitation is pulling the book toward the desk. The law of muscular contraction is holding it there, mastering the other. If for one single moment I withdraw the law of muscular contraction, the law of gravitation obtains, and the book falls. The law of the Spirit of life in Christ Jesus sets me free from the law of sin and of death. The law of sin and of death is in my members. "I see a different law in my members, warring against the law of my mind," paralyzing me, making it impossible for me to do the thing I would do, "to me who would do good evil is present." But, says the apostle, there is another law, the law of the Spirit of life in Christ Jesus, and that sets me free from the law of sin and of death, makes me master where I was mastered, or, better, makes the Spirit master where sin had been master. It is a unified statement, and the whole of that section of the Roman letter is needed to illuminate it. By the indwelling of the Spirit a new law is at work in the life of the man, contradicting, negating, denying the law which had mastered him, "the law of sin and of death."

Fourth, the New Testament teaches that holiness of character is possible, because the spiritual forces that are against holiness of character are all defeated.

There is no greater passage in all the New Testament as revealing this than the one in the Colossian letter, in which Paul, in a few bold, black strokes, sets before us the work of Christ. He makes the Cross the final battleground between Jesus and the spiritual antagonisms which are against human life and human character. I am quite well aware that in these days one speaks in an atmosphere of unbelief in regard to these spiritual forces. "Our wrestling is not against flesh and blood but against the principalities, against the powers, against the world-rulers of this darkness, against the spiritual hosts of wickedness in heavenly places." All of the New Testament writers believed in the antagonism of spiritual personalities outside human life, in fallen angels, in demons marshaled and mastered by Lucifer, the son of the morning, fallen from heaven. There in the Cross is seen the last battle between Jesus and these forces.

Again and again He came into open conflict with them. In the wilderness the prince of the power of the air was dragged into the light, and Jesus entering into conflict with him, mastered him by standing wholly within the will of God. The same voice spoke through Peter at Caesarea Philippi; and in the Garden of Gethsemane its echo was heard in the very prayer that Jesus offered. All the way the forces of evil were against Him *in His pathway of holiness and righteousness. The apostle declares that in the Cross He finally triumphed over them, making a show of them, mastering all the underworld of evil. Therefore, when we enter on the life of faith, and put our lives under subjection to the Lord Christ, we begin to fight against a defeated foe, and we serve under the Captain of Salvation Who already has met and vanquished the enemy. Not ultimately and finally in our experience yet is the victory won, but in the measure in which we follow Him Who never loses a battle we too are victorious.

Perhaps I may put all this into another form and say, if we will be quite honest about our failure in the Christian life, about the sins we committed yesterday even though we are children of God, about those hours in which we yielded to temptation and grieved the Holy Spirit, and smirched the spotless linen of our purity, and disgraced the name of our Lord, we all know that we failed because we did not fight under the orders of the King, but leaving our proper habitation of loyalty to Him, walked in the way of temptation, and attempted in our own strength to overcome, and thus were defeated.

I can yet sin, being allured and defeated by the foe. I need not sin for the foe is mastered by my King, Who has bruised the head of the serpent, and if I follow Him the serpent's head is bruised under my feet also by virtue of the victory my Lord has won.

Fifth, the New Testament declares holiness of character to be possible because it is already, in germ and potentiality, imparted to the believer. When Paul wrote his first letter to the Corinthians he did not write to Christian people who were living as they ought to have lived: "I, brethren, could not speak unto you as unto spiritual, but as unto carnal." They were divided among themselves, were careless of their Church discipline, were lending themselves to some of the unclean practices of the pagan world in the midst of which they lived. Yet to these people he said, "Ye were washed . . . sanctified . . . justified," by which he meant to say that in the hour in which they rested in Jesus Christ all the potentiality for the fulfilment of God's ideal was given to them. There is no man or woman who has really rested on Jesus, and received by the gift of the Spirit of God His life in the soul, but that in that reception has received all the forces needed for living this life. Everything that is necessary for holiness is mine in Christ.

Sixth, the New Testament declares holiness of character to be possible because the whole sanctified territory is possessed by the Spirit of God.

I go back again to that Corinthian letter, and I read these remarkable statements made to these very people. "Ye are a temple of the living God," not, Ye may become a temple of the living God. "The Spirit of God dwelleth in you," not, He will come and dwell in you if you pray long enough, and wait long enough. "If any man hath not the Spirit of Christ, he is none of His"! That is the clear, sharp, dividing line between the man of faith and the man of the world; the one is a man indwelt by the Spirit of God, while the other lacks that Indweller.

Are we really Christ's? Have we believed into His name , and received absolution? Then He calls us His own; then we are the temple of the Holy Spirit; then the Holy Spirit is at this moment dwelling within us. We may be locking up certain chambers of the temple from the administration and arbitration of the Spirit, but we are the temple of the Holy Spirit. Hear the great promise, "I will dwell in them," the resident God; "and

walk in them," the active Deity; "and I will be their God," the governing One. These are the promises of God, and these things the apostle wrote, not to a company of men and women who were living on the highest height of Christian experience, but to a church of men and women who were sadly and awfully failing. When next, in the hour of stress and temptation, we are tempted to declare that it is not possible to live the holy life, let us remember this, "We are the temple of the living God." We must find some other reason for our failure, for there is no reason why we should fail if we are submitted to that Indweller.

Seventh, and finally, the New Testament declares holiness of character to be possible because of the limitless resources at the disposal of the believer.

In the Colossian letter we have Paul's great argument concerning the mystery of Christianity. He begins with the widest circle of the mystery, that of the Church. Then he passes to an inner mystery, that of the individual membership of the Church, "Christ in you." Finally, he comes to the ultimate mystery, that of Christ Himself. In the course of that argument he makes two statements: first, "In Him dwelleth all the fulness of the Godhead bodily"; second, "in Him ye are made full." If, then, I declare that the life of holiness is not possible I affirm that Christ is not able to make me holy, or that the statement that all He is, He is for me and in me, that all the resources of His wisdom and might are put at my disposal, is not true.

Such is the teaching of the New Testament. May we be constrained by the Spirit of God to bring our lives to its measurement and standard, and if the doing of it searches us, scorches us, shames us, so much the better for us and for the world, and for the Kingdom of God, if as response to such searching and scorching and shame we yield ourselves anew to Christ, that He may in us fulfil all the high purposes of His will.

In conclusion, let us return to the passage with which we commenced. "That ye may be blameless." There is a very great difference between that and "faultless." The New Testament never suggests that it is possible for the Christian man to be faultless in this life. At last, when the work is all done, when the Potter has perfectly molded the vessel to ultimate perfection, then we shall be faultless. He will present us faultless before the throne. But we can be blameless here and now. I do not think I can better illustrate the difference between faultless and blameless than by using an old illustration. I think it was first used by Mr. John McNeil, of Australia, in his little volume on the Spirit-filled life. I remember reading and being impressed by it; but it became vivid to me when it happened in my own experience. I will use the illustration from that experience. When in 1896 I first crossed the Atlantic there came to me the first letter from my first boy. He was then about six years old. The spelling was individualistic, the grammar original. Whenever he referred to himself he wrote the personal pronoun with a small letter. I did not correct that, for we all grow out of it quite soon enough. It was a very faulty letter, but I have it yet. I cherish it, for it was blameless. Love prompted it. Love did the best it could at six years of age. I had another letter from him last week. If I put them side by side the last is no more blameless than the first, but it is far less faulty.

"That ye may be blameless, and harmless." Harmlessness always grows out of blamelessness. In a beautiful phrase the two things are combined, "Children of God without blemish," that is, such children that the Father can say He is pleased with them. He will not announce it to your neighbor, and you will not announce it either. If you announce it we shall question it. It is a secret the Father whispers in the ear of His child, "without blemish." Have no anxiety about the opinion of your neighbor, but be very anxious about the opinion of your Father. "Blessed is the man," said the psalmist, "unto whom the Lord imputeth not iniquity." He did not say, Blessed is the man unto whom his neighbor imputeth not iniquity. It is infinitely easier to please God than any man or woman ever born. He is more tender, more gentle.

"Children of God without blemish." I know the call is to a life, high, noble, pure, but I know the God Who calls. He is a God of patience; He judges the motive, the aspiration. If I am His child, though I tremble and fail, He in infinite love counts my life blameless when the master passion of the whole endeavor is the pleasing of His heart.

How can I live this blameless and harmless life? Go back to the words which immediately precede. "Work out your own salvation with fear and trembling; for it is God which worketh in you." I am to work out that which He by the power of the Spirit works in. I am to translate into manifestation all that He works in mind, and heart, and will, as I yield myself to Him. So holiness is not to be obtained by climbing to a height, it is to be lived by being a little child keeping close to the side of the Father, and following Christ by the guidance of the Spirit.

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