



 A photograph of a person from behind, standing in a field of golden wheat with their arms raised in a gesture of praise or joy. The scene is set against a clear blue sky. The image is framed by a white circular border.

HOLY LIVING

Jesus' Virtuous Life and the Holiness Tradition

August 31st, 2022

"The Holiness Stream of Christianity focuses upon the inward re-formation of the heart and the development of 'holy habits.' We can rely upon these deeply ingrained habits of virtue to make our lives function appropriately and to bring forth substantial character formation."

-Richard Foster, *Streams of Living Water*, p. 61

Overview

The holiness stream of Christianity focuses on Christlike living that flows from a purified heart. Here are few of the key concepts:

- Training ourselves to battle against sin and temptation
- A pure heart that desires God's will
- Pure conduct that imitates Jesus' example
- Ongoing purification and inner transformation

A Christian in the holiness tradition would say something like *"I want to train myself to do the right things, for the right reasons, through the power of the Spirit, so that I can slowly but surely become more like Jesus and be victorious in my battle against sin."*

Biblical Basis

The holiness tradition draws on several major themes from the Bible.

1. **First**, there is a clear call to holy living in both the Old Testament (especially Leviticus) and the New Testaments letters.
2. **Second**, Jesus lived a virtuous life, free of sin, that we are called upon to imitate. His temptation in the wilderness and his prayer in the Garden of Gethsemane are two poignant examples of fighting tooth and nail to overcome temptation and pursue God's will.
3. **Third**, Jesus' emphasis on pure hearts *in addition to* pure conduct reminds us of the importance of Christlike living that flows from a purified heart.

1. The Bible Calls Us to Holy Living:

- **Leviticus 11:44-45**, “I am the Lord your God; consecrate yourselves and **be holy, because I am holy**. Do not make yourselves unclean by any creature that moves along the ground. I am the Lord, who brought you up out of Egypt to be your God; therefore **be holy, because I am holy**.” (see also Leviticus 19:2; 20:7, 26; 21:6)
- **2 Timothy 1:9**, “He has saved us and **called us to a holy life**—not because of anything we have done but because of his own purpose and grace.”
- **2 Peter 3:10-12**, “But the day of the Lord will come like a thief. The heavens will disappear with a roar; the elements will be destroyed by fire, and the earth and everything done in it will be laid bare. 11 Since everything will be destroyed in this way, what kind of people ought you to be? **You ought to live holy and godly lives** 12 as you look forward to the day of God and speed its coming.”
- **Ephesians 1:4**, “For he chose us in him before the creation of the world to **be holy** and blameless in his sight.”
- **1 Thessalonians 4:7**, “For God did not call us to be impure, **but to live a holy life**.” (see also 1 Thes. 3:13)
- **Titus 1:8**, “Rather, he [an elder] must be hospitable, one who loves what is good, who is self-controlled, upright, **holy** and disciplined.”
- **Hebrews 12:14**, “Make every effort to live in peace with everyone and **to be holy**; without holiness no one will see the Lord.”
- **1 Peter 1:15-16**, “But just as he who called you is holy, so **be holy in all you do**; 16 for it is written: “Be holy, because I am holy.” (See also 1 Peter 2:5, 9.)

As you can probably tell, the holiness is a frequent topic in the Bible. Over 70% of the New Testament letters mention holiness (15 out of 21). Many of those letters are addressed to God’s “holy people” in a particular place: Romans, 1 & 2 Corinthians, Ephesians, Philippians, Colossians, Philemon, and Jude. Several others mention it in the body of the letter. And in some letters like Colossians, Ephesians, and 1 Peter, holiness is a major theme.

Why is holiness such an important topic in the Bible? There’s at least three specific reasons that the passages in blue mention: the nature of God, God’s purpose for our lives, and the eventual return of Jesus. Together these form three pillars of the call to holy living in the Bible.

Three Pillars of the Call to Holy Living:

1. **The Nature of God**—God is holy, and we should strive to imitate God (Leviticus 11:44-45)
2. **God’s Purpose for our Lives**—It is God’s plan and purpose for our lives to be holy (2 Timothy 1:9)
3. **The Fate of the World** — Holy living is the only appropriate response to the eventual return of Jesus (2 Peter 3:10-12)

2. Jesus Lived a Perfect, Sinless Life.

Although it would be impossible for us to achieve the same thing in our life, it’s important to note that Jesus faced all of the temptations we did, but overcame them all. He lived a sinless life and achieved total purity in both his heart and his conduct. As followers of Jesus, we understand our calling is to follow in his footsteps as best we can.

- **Hebrews 4:15**, “For we do not have a high priest who is unable to empathize with our weaknesses, but we have one who has been tempted in every way, just as we are—**yet he did not sin**.”
- **2 Corinthians 5:21**, “God made him **who had no sin** to be sin for us, so that in him we might become the righteousness of God.”
- **1 John 3:5**, “But you know that he appeared so that he might take away our sins. **And in him is no sin**.”
- **1 Peter 2:22**, “**He committed no sin**, and no deceit was found in his mouth.” (quoting Isaiah 53:9)
- **Matthew 4:1-11** — Jesus battles against the Devil’s temptations in the wilderness.
- **Mark 14:32-42** — Jesus battles against his own desires in the Garden of Gethsemane

3. Jesus Emphasizes Purity of the Heart that Turns into Action

- **Matthew 5:8**, “Blessed are the pure in heart, for they will see God.”
- **Matthew 15:8**, “These people honor me with their lips, but their hearts are far from me.”
- **Matthew 12:34**, “You brood of vipers, how can you who are evil say anything good? For the mouth speaks what the heart is full of.”
- **Matthew 23:26**, “Blind Pharisee! First clean the inside of the cup and dish, and then the outside also will be clean.”
- **Luke 16:15**, “You are the ones who justify yourselves in the eyes of others, but God knows your hearts.”

Understanding the Strengths:

One thing the holiness tradition does well is keeping our focus on **the ultimate goal**: becoming more like Jesus from the inside out. Jesus lived a perfect life and exhibited total purity in his heart and his conduct. As for us, our hearts are full of worldly thinking, selfishness, and evil desires that lead us away from Jesus. So if we are to follow in Jesus’ footsteps, we need to engage in an ongoing process of inner transformation. If we can get our hearts right with Jesus, our conduct for Jesus will flow naturally from a place of authenticity.

One key strength in the holiness tradition is the recognition that right living (*orthopraxy*) flows from a heart that has been purified from evil and worldly thinking at its source. The Latin maxim **Actio sequitur esse** conveys the idea that what we *do* flows from who we *are*—a Biblical truth that we covered extensively in the early part of our Spiritual Formation class.

Once our hearts have been purified at their source (which is, without a doubt, an *ongoing process*), Christian living becomes a natural expression of who we are at our core. It’s just as Jesus says in **Matthew 23:26**, “First clean the inside of the cup and dish, *and then* the outside also will be clean.” A commitment to the virtuous life and the holiness tradition is a commitment to growing in grace, to inner transformation, and to allowing God to purify out hearts so that our Christian living flows from a place of authentic love and devotion to God.

Acknowledging the Limits:

Richard Foster sees three potential problems that could come from *overemphasizing* the holiness tradition:

1. **Legalism**—Whenever there is a strong emphasis on battling against temptation and living a holy life, it can be easy for that to spill over into legalism. Legalism seeks *validation* in the ability to follow all of the rules and a sense of *superiority* in looking down on others who fail to live up to the standard.
2. **Pelagianism**—The idea that we need to live holy lives in order to earn salvation is sometimes referred to as **Pelagianism** (named after the Christian who advocated for it around 400 A.D.). The early church labeled rejected this teaching as heresy.
3. **Perfectionism**—A third drawback might be **perfectionism**—the attitude that we can become perfect through our own hard work and close adherence to the law. It is really a combination of the first two—overemphasizing conduct and thinking it all depends on us.

Richard Foster encourages us to avoid these pitfalls by turning legalism into **love**, Pelagianism into **grace**, and perfectionism into **healthy growth**.

James the Brother of Jesus: Living the Virtuous Life

“A divinely transformed heart, by its very nature, will produce right action. It simple cannot do otherwise. James learned this from his Master and older brother.” -Richard Foster (p. 71)

- **Before:** James was the brother of Jesus, but rejected Jesus and tried to oppose him during his ministry (see **Mark 3:20-21**).
- **After:** James and the rest of Jesus’ family are present with the Apostles after Jesus ascended to Heaven (**Acts 1:14**). James becomes an Apostle (**Gal. 1:19**) the pillar of the church in Jerusalem and pens the book of the Bible bearing his name.
- **Moment it All Changed:** The resurrected Jesus appeared to James (**1 Corinthians 15:7**). We often talk about the dramatic transformation of Saul/Paul, but James’ transformation is rather remarkable as well.

Purifying the Source in the Book of James:

- **James 1:27**, “Religion that God our Father accepts as pure and faultless is this: to look after orphans and widows in their distress and to keep oneself from being polluted by the world.”
- **James 3:11-12**, “11 Can both fresh water and salt water flow from the same spring? 12 My brothers and sisters, can a fig tree bear olives, or a grapevine bear figs? Neither can a salt spring produce fresh water.”
- **James 3:16**, “For where you have envy and selfish ambition, there you find disorder and every evil practice.”
- **James 4:1**, “What causes fights and quarrels among you? Don’t they come from your desires that battle within you?”
- **James 4:8**, “Come near to God and he will come near to you. Wash your hands, you sinners, and purify your hearts, you double-minded.”

Phoebe Palmer: The Holiness Tradition in Church History

- Called into ministry after the tragic death of her infant child. Began a very successful ministry that began as a simple “Tuesday Meeting for the Promotion of Holiness” prayer group.
- **Altar Theology** — Jesus is our altar, and we can be sanctified when we give lay everything we have (our entire life) onto the altar. “We, therefore, living in a state of holiness and sanctification as we continually give ourselves as a living sacrifice to Christ, our altar.” Streams of Living Water, p.65

Key Movements and Individuals in Church History

- James the Apostle
- Hermas
- Gregory of Nazianzus
- Anabaptists
- Puritans
- Holiness Movement (Wesleyan, Methodist, Nazarene, Church of God, Salvation Army)
- John Wesley
- Phoebe Palmer
- Keswick Movement
- Dietrich Bonhoeffer