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*Filling the Gap between Gospel Passion
and the Pursuit of Godliness*

Chapter Three

PIETY'S PATTERN

There's no question holiness is one of the central themes in the Bible. The word "holy" occurs more than 600 times in the Bible, more than 700 when you include derivative words like holiness, sanctify, and sanctification. You can't make sense of the Bible without understanding that God is holy and that this holy God is intent on making a holy people to live with him forever in a holy heaven. The whole system of Israel's worship revolves around holiness. That's why you have holy people (the priests), with holy clothes, in a holy land (Canaan), at a holy place (tabernacle/ temple), using holy utensils and holy objects, celebrating holy days, living by a holy law, so that they might be a kingdom of priests and a holy nation.

At its most basic, holiness means separation.¹ It is a spatial term. When someone or something is holy it is set apart. In the Gettysburg Address (1863), Abraham Lincoln declared the Civil War battlefield in Pennsylvania to be "hallowed ground." Because of the momentous events that took place in Gettysburg, Cemetery Ridge and Little Round Top would be forever set apart, no longer ordinary or common places, but ones with special significance consecrated for special commemoration. The battlefield at Gettysburg would be holy ground, a place set apart.

In a similar way, God is holy because he is transcendent and different from everything he has made. He is separate and distinct, not ordinary or common. He is God, and there is no other (Isa. 45:22). We are called to be holy because God is holy (Lev. 11:44, 45; 19:2; 1 Pet 1:15–16). Our holy God sets us apart to live in a way that reflects, however imperfectly, his holiness.

GOT IT AND STILL GROWING

It's important to realize early in this book—and we'll see this again and again in the chapters ahead—that in one sense we are already holy in Christ. When Christians talk about “sanctification” we usually mean something like “the process of growing in godliness.” For centuries theologians have distinguished between justification—the one-time declaration that we are righteous—and sanctification—the ongoing process of becoming righteous. That's a fine way to speak, and it's the way I'll use “sanctification” in these pages. But when the New Testament uses the verb “to sanctify” or the noun “sanctification,” it regularly refers to the saving work of God *already* true of us because we belong to Christ.² According to Hebrews 10:10, we were sanctified once for all through the offering of the body of Jesus Christ. In Acts 20:32 and 26:18 the “sanctified” ones appears to be a synonym for true Christians. Elsewhere, the “saints” are those who have been “sanctified in Christ Jesus” (1 Cor. 1:2). So Paul can equate being sanctified with being washed and being justified (6:11). When we are joined to Christ by faith, he becomes to us our wisdom, righteousness, sanctification, and redemption (1:30).

In this way of thinking, every Christian is sanctified. We are already set apart, no longer common or profane. Some theologians call this gift of holiness through union with Christ our “definitive sanctification.”³ But this definitive sanctification does not eliminate the need for continuing “progressive sanctification.” In Christ every believer has a once-for-all *positional* holiness, and from this new identity every Christian is commanded to grow in the ongoing-for-your-whole-life *process* of holiness (Phil. 2:12–13). As David Peterson puts it, “Believers are definitively consecrated to God in order to live dedicated and holy lives, to his glory.”⁴ In other words, sanctified is what we are and what we must become.

Cheap Imitations

But what exactly are we trying to become? God saved us to be holy—got it. We must be holy as God is holy—check. We are set apart to serve God—sounds good. But what does holiness actually look like? Let's try to bring this out of the theological stratosphere and down to earth where we worship, work, and play. I'll start with several examples of what holiness is not.

Holiness Is Not Mere Rule Keeping

The word “mere” is critical. Holiness is not less than obeying commands. After all, Jesus didn't say, “If you love me, you will give up on rules and religion and do whatever makes you feel good.” He said, “If you love me, you will keep my commandments” (John 14:15). So holy people obey, but this is not the same as mere rule keeping. Godliness is more than basic morality and niceness. The Pharisees were externally moral, but their hearts were often far from God (Mark 7:7). Neville Chamberlain was nice when he appeased Hitler, but Chamberlain is hardly one of history's great heroes. Don't get me wrong, all things considered I'd rather have a polite, tree-planting, tax-paying guy who watches PG-13 movies move in next door than a heavy-drinking recluse who wagers on cockfighting and dresses like he's late for the Renaissance Fair. But holiness is more than middle-class family values.

It's all too easy to turn the fight of faith into sanctification-by-checklist. Take care of a few bad habits, develop a couple good ones, and you're set. But a moral checklist doesn't take into consideration the idols of the hearts. It may not even have the gospel as part of the equation. And inevitably, checklist spirituality is highly selective. So you end up feeling successful at sanctification because you stayed away from drugs, lost weight, served at the soup kitchen, and re-

nounced Styrofoam. But you've ignored gentleness, humility, joy, and sexual purity. God has not really gotten to your heart. I could probably sell a lot of books if I demanded that Christians read their Bibles two hours a day, throw away their TVs, sell their possessions, adopt three orphans, and move into a commune. We like getting lists. Some of us like getting beat up and then being told exactly what needs to be done to become a true spiritual giant. This sort of exhortation seems promising at first, but it proves ineffective in the long run. Mere rule keeping is not the answer because holiness cannot be reduced to a little ethical refurbishment.

Holiness Is Not Generational Imitation

Because I'm a young person (sort of) writing in a way that challenges young people (among others), it would be tempting for older Christians to assume this book is about how much better things used to be. But as Billy Joel sang (see, I'm not that young!), "the good ol' days weren't always good and tomorrow ain't as bad as it seems." The pursuit of holiness is not the quixotic effort to recreate the 1950s, let alone the 1590s.

Of course, there is much we can learn from previous generations. I often look to the Puritans or the Reformers or my grandparents' generation for theological or ethical examples. But learning from the Puritans does not mean we have to talk like them, dress like them, or abolish Christmas like some of them did. There is no shortcut to sanctification by trying to relive the glory days of some bygone era. "If only things could be like they used to be." Well, that might help with public standards of sexual decency, but the good ol' days weren't so good on race relations. Every generation has both its insights and its blind spots. It takes wisdom to learn from the good and avoid the bad. So yes, I think Christians in general used to be more concerned about personal holiness in certain areas. But does God want us to recreate

their world or reintroduce all their strictures about card playing and alcohol prohibition? I doubt it.

Holiness Is Not Generic Spirituality

Has there ever been a phrase more adept at smuggling in doctrinal confusion and moral laxity than the slogan “spiritual, not religious”? Granted, for some people this means, “I want a personal, life-changing relationship with God, not mere church attendance.” But more often than not the phrase implies a dislike for theological standards, moral absolutes, and organized religion. Being spiritual in contemporary jargon means you are open to mystery and interested in “spiritual” things like prayer, healing, and inner peace.

True spirituality means being transformed by the Spirit through communion with the Father and the Son. If you are interested in spirituality, your priority should be to grow in the holiness that comes from the Spirit. Righteousness is the goal of Christian discipleship. “In the Christian world today such a statement may sound radical,” R. C. Sproul observes. “Many people have spoken to me about being ethical, moral, spiritual, or even pious. But nobody seems to want to talk about being righteous.”⁵ To be saved by the Spirit’s converting grace, sealed by the Spirit’s absolute guarantee, and sanctified by the Spirit’s indwelling power—that’s what it means to be spiritual.

Holiness Is Not “Finding Your True Self”

In secular Western society the truly good person is the one who has learned to be true to himself. For example, Anna Quindlen (who has written for *The New York Times* and *Newsweek*), had this to say to a group of graduating seniors:

Each of you is as different as your fingertips. Why should you march to any lockstep? Our love of lockstep is our greatest curse, the source of all that bedevils us. It is the source of homophobia, xenophobia,

racism, sexism, terrorism, bigotry of every variety and hue, because it tells us that there is one right way to do things, to look, to behave, to feel, when the only right way is to feel your heart hammering inside you and to listen to what its timpani is saying.⁶

It sure feels like Ms. Quindlen is giving my little internal timpani a lot of credit. What if your timpani is homophobic, xenophobic, racist, and sexist? Or can all vice simply be attributed to our love of lockstep—you know, all the bad people follow the crowd and all the good people do their own thing? And what if you follow Quindlen's advice and reject her list of bigotries? Does that make you another lockstep loser? Can you listen to your timpani and the graduation speaker at the same time? I suppose it's the central creed of postmodernism that you can march to the beat of your own drummer as long as it beats in time with mine.

But what if your bongo is out of step with the God of the universe? We've been told there is a good person in all of us. We've been shown in a thousand movies that the purpose of life is to find the real you. We've learned from countless television shows that the highest calling is to believe in yourself. The world most definitely insists on holiness. Don't let anyone tell you it doesn't. But the world's holiness is not found in being true to God; it's found in being true to yourself. And being true to yourself invariably means being true to someone else's definition of tolerance and diversity.

Holiness Is Not the Way of the World

We'll never make progress in holiness if we are waiting for the world to throw us a party for our piety. To be sure, cultural values will sometimes overlap with biblical values. In the West, explicit racism is not tolerated. In Muslim countries, homosexuality is frowned upon. In the Bible Belt, church attendance is encouraged. But the "world" is not another way of saying "the people around us." The world stands

for everything that opposes the will of God. In its simplest form, this means “the desires of the flesh and the desires of the eyes and pride in possessions” (1 John 2:16 mg.). Or to put it another way, worldliness is whatever makes sin look normal and righteousness look strange.^{1896 Highlighters Z}

Some nations and cultures are better than others, but in every society there is a principle of Babylon that makes war against the children of God (Revelation 17–18).

Worldliness is a serious problem. The Bible says that “if anyone loves the world, the love of the Father is not in him” (1 John 2:15). Christians used to talk about worldliness and fear its creeping influence. Today, however, if you talk about dressing in a worldly way or spending your money in a worldly way or seeking worldly entertainment you’re bound to hear barely muffled laughter. Worldliness is what our grandparents were uptight about. We have a planet to save and no time to concern ourselves with such trivialities. We simply don’t believe that friendship with the world is enmity with God (James 4:4).

Many Christians have the mistaken notion that if only we were better Christians, everyone would appreciate us. They don’t realize that holiness comes with a cost. Sure, you can focus on the virtues the world likes. But if you pursue true religion that cares for orphans *and* promotes purity (James 1:27), you’ll lose some of the friends you were so desperate to make. Becoming a living sacrifice, holy and acceptable to God, requires you to resist the world which wants to press you into its mold (Rom. 12:1–2). Saving yourself for marriage, staying sober on Friday night, turning down a promotion to stay at your church, refusing to say the f-word, turning off the television—these are the kinds of things the world doesn’t understand. Don’t expect them to. The world provides no cheerleaders on the pathway to godliness.

THE REAL DEAL

We've seen five examples of what holiness isn't. Now let's go to the positive side and see what holiness actually looks like.

Holiness Looks Like the Renewal of God's Image in Us

Adam and Eve were created in God's image, after his likeness (Gen. 1:26). But in Adam's sin, the human race was given over to corruption (Rom. 5:12–21). We are still image-bearers (Gen. 9:6; James 3:9), but the image has been distorted (Gen. 6:5; Eccles. 7:29). The goal of sanctification is the renewal of this image. The holy person is being renewed in knowledge after the image of the Creator (Col. 3:10), which means growing in righteousness and holiness (Eph. 4:24). This does not happen all at once, but rather, we are transformed into the image of God from one degree of glory to another (2 Cor. 3:18). God is holy, so most basically being holy means being like God. This is why it's so critical that Christians know the character and work of the one they worship. If you want to know what holiness looks like, look at God.

Holiness Looks Like a Life Marked by Virtue Instead of Vice

But what does God-like character look like in God's people? One way to answer that question is to look at every command and example in the Bible. But a quicker approach is to examine the lists of vices and virtues in the New Testament. These provide a useful summary of wickedness and holiness.

Here are the sort of vices that characterize the wicked and the sort of people who will not enter the kingdom:

- Mark 7:21–22: evil thoughts, sexual immorality, theft, murder, adultery, coveting, wickedness, deceit, sensuality, envy, slander, pride, foolishness.

- Romans 1:24–31: impurity, homosexual relations, all manner of unrighteousness, evil, covetousness, malice, envy, murder, strife, deceit, maliciousness, gossip, slander, hatred of God, disobedient to parents, foolish, faithless, heartless, ruthless.
- Romans 13:13: orgies, drunkenness, sexual immorality, sensuality, quarreling, jealousy.
- 1 Corinthians 6:9–10: sexual immorality, idolatry, adultery, men who practice homosexuality, thieves, the greedy, drunkards, revilers, swindlers.
- Galatians 5:19–21: sexual immorality, impurity, sensuality, idolatry, sorcery, enmity, strife, jealousy, fits of anger, rivalries, dissensions, divisions, envy, drunkenness, orgies and things like these.
- Colossians 3:5–9: sexual immorality, impurity, passion, evil desire, covetousness (which is idolatry), anger, wrath, malice, slander, obscene talk, lying.
- 1 Timothy 1:9–10: unholy, profane, those who strike their fathers and mothers, murderers, the sexually immoral, men who practice homosexuality, enslavers, liars, perjurers, and whatever else is contrary to sound doctrine.
- Revelation 21:8: the cowardly, the faithless, the detestable, murderers, the sexually immoral, sorcerers, idolaters, and all liars.

On the flip side, here are the sorts of virtues found in God's people:

- Romans 12:9–21: genuine love, hatred for evil, steadfastness in what is good, brotherly affection, excelling in showing honor, zealous, fervent in spirit, serving the Lord, joyful in hope, patient in tribulation, constant in prayer, generous, hospitable, blessing

enemies, rejoicing with those who rejoice and weeping with those who weep, harmonious, humble not haughty, associating with the lowly, honorable, peaceable, does not repay evil for evil, overcomes evil with good.

- 1 Corinthians 13:4–7: loving, patient, kind, not envious, not boastful, nor arrogant, not rude, not selfish, not irritable, not resentful, no joy in wrongdoing, rejoices with the truth, bears all things, believes all things, hopes all things, endures all things.
- Galatians 5:22–23: love, joy, peace, patience, kindness, goodness, faithfulness, gentleness, self-control.
- Colossians 3:12–15: compassionate hearts, kindness, humility, meekness, patience, bearing with one another, forgiving one another, love, peace, gratitude.
- 2 Peter 1:5–7: virtue, knowledge, self-control, steadfastness, godliness, brotherly affection, and love.

As you can see, there is a good deal of overlap and a number of common themes that provide a pretty clear picture of what godliness looks like. We don't have specifics on how long to pray each day or how much money to give to the poor. Christians often equate holiness with activism and spiritual disciplines. And while it's true that activism is often the outgrowth of holiness and spiritual disciplines are necessary for the cultivation of holiness, the pattern of piety in the Scripture is more explicitly about our character. We put off sin and put on righteousness. We put to death the deeds of the flesh and put on Christ. To use the older language, we pursue the mortification of the old man and the vivification of the new.

You can think of holiness, to employ a metaphor, as the sanctification of your body. The mind is filled with the knowledge of God and fixed on what is good. The eyes turn away from sensuality and shudder

at the sight of evil. The mouth tells the truth and refuses to gossip, slander, or speak what is coarse or obscene. The spirit is earnest, steadfast, and gentle. The heart is full of joy instead of hopelessness, patience instead of irritability, kindness instead of anger, humility instead of pride, and thankfulness instead of envy. The sexual organs are pure, being reserved for the privacy of marriage between one man and one woman. The feet move toward the lowly and away from senseless conflict, divisions, and wild parties. The hands are quick to help those in need and ready to fold in prayer. This is the anatomy of holiness.

Holiness Looks Like a Clean Conscience

We don't think about the conscience as much as we should. But the Bible has more to say about the "little voice in your head" than you might think. One of the great blessings of justification is a clean conscience before God. The accusations of the Devil can be silenced by the blood of the Lamb (Rev. 12:10–11; cf. Rom. 8:1; Zech. 3:2). But even after we've been reconciled to God, we must pay attention to our consciences. According to Romans 2:15, we all have the law written on our hearts so that our consciences can either accuse or excuse us. God speaks to us through the conscience, and when we ignore that voice we put ourselves in grave danger.

Of course, the conscience is not infallible. We can have an evil conscience that doesn't turn away from sin (Heb. 10:22). We can have a seared conscience that no longer feels bad for evil (1 Tim. 4:2). We can have a weak conscience that feels bad for things that aren't really bad (1 Cor. 8:7–12). And we can have a defiled conscience that loses its ability to discern right from wrong (Titus 1:15).⁸ The conscience is no substitute for the Bible and must never be in opposition to it. But a good conscience is a gift from God. As we pursue holiness we must always be mindful of God's voice speaking to us through a tender conscience informed by the Word of God. It will lead us not into tempta-

tion and will deliver us from evil.

It's critical that the Christian's conscience be clean. That's why Paul said, "I always take pains to have a clear conscience toward both God and man" (Acts 24:16). He often mentioned the testimony of his conscience as his "boast" and as an indication of his moral uprightness (Rom. 9:1; 2 Cor. 1:12; 4:2). Paul recognized he could be wrong in his self-assessment, but it was important to him not to be aware of anything against himself (1 Cor. 4:4). When we violate our sense of right and wrong, even if the action in itself is not sinful, we are guilty of sin. "Whatever does not proceed from faith is sin" (Rom. 14:23). That means, if you don't believe what you are doing is acceptable, then it's not acceptable for you to do it. You must not ignore your conscience.

Suppose you grew up thinking alcohol was wrong. I mean, always wrong, like, you'd rather drink Drano than Bud Light. But now you are at a church that says alcohol is not sinful, so long as you are of legal age and don't drink to excess. What should you do? If you are convinced that the Bible approves of alcohol in moderation, then you are free to drink (1 Tim. 5:23; cf. John 2:1–11).⁹ But if it still feels dirty to you, you should abstain. Even if the Bible gives the green light, the red light in your conscience should not be transgressed. This is why passages like 1 Corinthians 8 and 10 and Romans 14 rebuke "strong conscience" Christians who lead "weak conscience" Christians to do things that feel wrong to them. The danger is that, if you violate your conscience in this matter (even though the action is not forbidden), you'll learn to disobey your conscience in other matters.

Let me give you two examples from my own life where I have tried (and sometimes have failed) to listen to my conscience. The first has to do with movies, and the second with dating.

I'm not a big movie buff. I've seen my fair share, but if I have an evening free I'd rather read a book, play a game, or watch sports than take in a movie. My wife, on the other hand, likes movies, mostly BBC

costume dramas and other pretty innocent fare. But sometimes there will be scenes that unsettle me. Usually these are sexual or sensual in some way. It doesn't take much skin for me to feel guilty. Is this because as a guy I am more susceptible to visual temptation? Definitely that's part of it. Is my sensitive conscience a sign that I am progressing in sanctification? I'm not sure. I have to be careful (with movies in particular) that I don't assume my pangs of conscience mean everyone else tuned in is committing sin. But when my conscience is pricked I should not continue watching. A tender conscience is a terrible thing to waste.

Incidentally, I've learned over the years that the simplest way to judge gray areas like movies, television, and music is to ask one simple question: can I thank God for this?¹⁰ (We are to give thanks in all circumstances, right?) Not too long ago my wife and I went to the movie theater to watch one of the summer blockbusters. It was a fun PG-13 movie, and you'd probably say it didn't really have any bad parts. But it was very sensual and suggestive in several places. I got done with the movie (yes, I watched the whole thing) and thought, "Can I really thank God for this?" Now, I'm not a total kill-joy. I like to laugh and enjoy life. I can thank God for the Chicago Bears, Hot N' Readys, and Brian Regan. But I wonder if after most of our entertainment we could sincerely get down on our knees and say, "Thank you, God, for this good gift." Something to think about.

The other example concerns dating. When my wife and I were dating we struggled with boundaries in our physical relationship. As is the case for many couples (even Christian ones, and even those training for pastoral ministry), the struggle only intensified after we got engaged. I sought advice from several Christians I respected, some married and some engaged like me. They gave conflicting advice on "how far was too far." Obviously, sex was out of the question, and so were a lot of other things on the way to sex. But where should Chris-

tians draw the line? What I know now is that even though we stopped far short of sex, I did not lead well in our physical relationship. If nothing else, my wife and I sinned against our consciences, no matter if some of my friends could “go farther” and walk away guilt-free. It was only after we were married that we saw clearly our sin and I was able to ask my wife and the Lord for forgiveness.

When it comes to levels of physical intimacy before marriage, I believe many Christians are objectively sinning, whether they feel like they are or not. But I’ll say more on that later. What I want you to see at the moment is that questionable choices, or even acceptable ones, are sinful for you when they don’t feel right. Christians should not violate, nor pressure others to violate, what their consciences tell them is wrong.

Holiness Looks Like Obedience to God’s Commands

It sounds really spiritual to say God is interested in a relationship, not in rules. But it’s not biblical. From top to bottom the Bible is full of commands. They aren’t meant to stifle a relationship with God, but to protect it, seal it, and define it. Never forget: first God delivered the Israelites from Egypt, *then* he gave them the law. God’s people were not redeemed *by* observing the law, but they were redeemed *so they might obey* the law. “By this we know that we have come to know him, if we keep his commandments” (1 John 2:3). We can talk all day long about our love for God, but if we do not keep his commandments we are liars and the truth is not in us (v. 4). If we love Jesus, we’ll obey his Word (John 14:23). Just like, if you love your wife, you’ll keep your vow to be faithful to her as long as you both shall live. The demand for sexual fidelity does not pervert the marriage relationship; it promotes and demonstrates it. In the same way, God’s commands are given as a means of grace so that we might grow in godliness and show that we love him.

The rule for holiness is the law, in particular the Ten Commandments. Christians don't always agree on how to view the law (something I'll say more about in the next chapter), but historically the church has put the Ten Commandments at the center of its instruction for God's people, especially for children and new believers. For centuries discipleship instruction (catechesis) has been based on three things: the Apostles' Creed, the Lord's Prayer, and the Ten Commandments. If you wanted the basics of the Christian faith, you learned these three things. And if you wanted to know how to live a holy life, you followed the law of God summarized in the Ten Commandments.

You may think of the Ten Commandments as a painful memorization exercise for five-year-olds, but the "Ten Words" (or Decalogue) from Exodus 20 are central to the ethics of the New Testament. For Jesus and the apostles, the Ten Commandments provided a basic summary of God's ethical intentions for everyone everywhere.¹¹ When a rich young man asked Jesus what he must do to inherit eternal life, Jesus replied, "You know the commandments," and he listed the commands in the so-called second table of the law (Mark 10:19). The only "horizontal" command he didn't mention was "do not covet." And that's because he wanted to expose the rich man's greed. True, Jesus used the law in this instance for its convicting power more than anything else, but it still shows the place the Ten Commandments held as a summary of God's will (cf. 1 Tim. 1:8–11).

We see the same thing in Romans 13:9, where Paul rattles off four of the commandments and makes reference to "any other commandment." What's amazing is that Paul says in verse 8, "Owe no one anything, except to love each other, for the one who loves another has fulfilled the law." Then he moves on to the Ten Commandments. Obeying the commandments is how we fulfill the law of love, and love is at the heart of holiness (v. 10). If you care about love you will love to

obey the Ten Commandments.

Holiness Looks Like Christlikeness

If holiness looks like the restoration of the image of God in us, then it shouldn't be surprising that holiness also looks like Christlikeness, for Jesus Christ is the image of the invisible God (Col. 1:15) and the exact imprint of his nature (Heb. 1:3). The whole goal of our salvation is that we should be conformed to the image of God's Son (Rom. 8:29).

We see in Jesus the best, most practical, most human example of what it means to be holy. He is our model for love (John 13:34), our model for humility (Phil. 2:5–8), our model for facing temptation (Heb. 4:15), our model for steadfastness in the midst of suffering (1 Pet. 4:1–2), and our model for obedience to the Father (John 6:38; 14:31). We see all the virtues of holiness perfectly aligned in Christ. He was always gentle, but never soft. He was bold, but never brash. He was pure, but never prudish. He was full of mercy but not at the expense of justice. He was full of truth but not at the expense of grace. In everything he was submissive to his heavenly Father, and he gave everything for his sheep. He obeyed his parents, kept the law of God, and forgave his enemies. He never lusted, never coveted, and never lied. In all that Jesus Christ did, during his whole life and especially as his life came to an end, he loved God with his whole being and loved his neighbor as himself.

If somewhere down the road you forget the Ten Commandments or can't recall the fruit of the Spirit or don't seem to remember any particular attributes of God, you can still remember what holiness is by simply remembering his name.