

# Personal Holiness: It's not an impossible dream

*Is it possible to live a holy life in every way, to "be holy as I am holy" as the Bible says? Yes it is, but only as we understand the relationship between God's power and our effort.*

**T**wo hundred years before Christ, the legendary general Hannibal set out with forty thousand troops, plus horses and elephants, to invade the arrogant Roman empire in its own backyard. He was determined to lead his entourage through "impassable" mountains and defeat an "unbeatable" enemy, in spite of "impossible" odds.

Closing in on the Swiss Alps, scouts saw the avalanches, frigid weather, and hostile tribes and concluded the army should retreat.

Hannibal disagreed. Looking out from his tent in full view of the mountains, he declared his famous words: "I see no Alps!"

As the army came closer to the defiant elevation, the scouts went out again, returning discouraged when they

could not discover a passageway. But again their Carthaginian commander stood in the war council—with the mountains in full view—and reiterated his conviction: "I see no Alps!"

When they finally arrived at the base of the imposing mountain range, Hannibal assembled his army of soldiers and elephants. From atop his magnificent horse, he encouraged them to press on to victory.

"Some say there are mountains that are impassable," he told his waiting troops. "They say they reach to the heavens and there is no way to conquer them. I know of no such mountains!"

Turning and looking over his shoulder he called out again, "I see no Alps!"

One of the soldiers caught the vision and repeated the words.

**Larry Tomczak**

Throughout the ranks, slowly at first, others picked up the cry. Momentum built as they raised their weapons and declared, "I see no Alps! I see no Alps!"

Soon the whole valley echoed with the unified shout of the warriors, "I see no Alps!"

Because of Hannibal's determination, his men went forth and accomplished their "impossible, unattainable" goal, though at a terrible cost. Fifteen thousand of them died while crossing the mountains. Those who survived entered foreign territory and defeated the Romans in northern, central, and finally southern Italy. At the Battle of Cannae, they destroyed almost fifty thousand troops in a day—the worst defeat ever suffered by the Roman empire!

Hannibal, a barbarian whose "faith" was vainglorious and worldly, nonetheless inspired his troops to sacrificial effort. Without condoning his ruthlessness, we can acknowledge his resolve. In our lives, sin and temptation can tower over us like the Alps towered over Hannibal's army. Realizing Jesus is returning for a church without "blemish, but **holy** and blameless" (Eph 5:27), we must respond to the Holy Spirit as he beckons us to "see beyond the Alps." The "Comforter"—"one who stands alongside to instill courage [like a general]"—is preparing us as an army to do battle for the **Holy** One of Israel.

Across the land genuine followers of Jesus Christ are speaking out in mounting unison: "I see no Alps—those obstacles in my way—I'm on a 'Way of Holiness' (Is 35:8) to bring glory to his name."

### THE PROCESS OF HOLINESS

**J**ust as he who called you is holy, so be holy in all you do; for it is written: 'Be holy, because I am holy' (1Pe 1:15-16).

For years Christians have read this passage and then looked up with an expression befitting the Book of Lamentations.

Some have tried (unsuccessfully) to become holy by teeth-gritting determination, striving in the flesh to conquer sin.

Others have gone the route of creating and enforcing rigid sets of rules—"don't do this; don't go there" only to see their lives degenerate into ascetic legalism. Colossians 2:20-23 dismisses these "human commands" as being completely inadequate for Christian living.

Still others have compromised Christian character and brought reproach on Christ's name by rationalizing sinful habits. Declaring themselves "eternally secure," they have discredited the high calling to holy living as some antiquated, mystical state, quite unattractive and

unattainable this side of eternity.

But today multitudes are gaining a revelation of the "splendor of his holiness" (Ps 96:9). On one side is a *positional holiness*. This is our instantaneous holy, righteous standing before a holy God that is our gift when we trust in Jesus Christ. The other side is *progressive holiness*. This is God's working in us "to will and to act according to his good purpose" (Php 2:13), to conform us to the character of Christ.

How can we actively cooperate with him in the process? Hebrews 12:14 tells us: "Make every effort to live in peace with all men and to be holy; without holiness no one will see the Lord." This suggests three thoughts.

First, Spirit-led effort is required to become holy. Though no one can attain holiness apart from God's initiative and power working in his life, neither will he attain it without effort on his part. ("Letting go and letting God" is just another excuse for passivity!) "For the grace of God that brings salvation has appeared to all men. It teaches us to say 'No' to ungodliness and worldly passions, and to live self-controlled, upright and godly lives in this present age" (Tit 2:11-12).

Secondly, holiness is a lifelong process. It's the adventure of cooperating with the Holy Spirit as he both sanctifies us by the Word of God and transforms us by our willing obedience. "Sanctify them by the truth; your word is truth" (Jn 17:17).

Finally, the writer of Hebrews issues a solemn warning to those who might minimize holiness: "Without holiness no one will see the Lord." The more we become preoccupied with Jesus and his Word, loving and worshipping him and wanting to please him, the more we want to be holy.

### "BUT I ALWAYS FAIL"

**B**ut how can I gain the victory over those areas where I repeatedly fall?"

It is in these areas where we can most feel the awful sense of hopelessness caused by sin's power. Satan capitalizes on these by vicious whisperings: "Overcoming *this* sin is impossible. It's proof that you'll never live holy."

While it is true that in ourselves we cannot live a holy, overcomer's life, God has made provision for our holiness if we'll walk in faith and humble dependence upon him. Jesus came both to forgive *and* to liberate us from sin's power.

Paul's "Declaration of Independence From Sin's Power" in Romans six exhorts us to personal holiness by: (1) *remembering* the old nature has been crucified (6:6); (2) *reckoning* ourselves dead to sin but alive to God (6:11)—

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# NAVIGATING THE GRAY AREAS

by Larry Tomczak

God's Word gives us helpful principles that we can apply to "gray areas." Asking ourselves the following questions could save us from plunging into trouble later on.

1. Is it beneficial—spiritually, mentally, and physically—to me as a Christian? (1Co 6:12)
  2. Can I do it in fullness of faith? (Ro 14:23) If I doubt, better do without!
  3. Will it enslave me and bring me under its power? (1Co 6:12)
  4. Does it glorify God? (1Co 10:31)
  5. Is it good stewardship of time and/or money? (1Co 4:2)
  6. Will it dull my spirit and cause me to lose my edge in God? (Mt 5:8)
  7. Will it grieve (sadden) the Holy Spirit? (Eph 4:30)
  8. Will it edify others—does it seek their good? (1Co 10:33)
  9. Is it worth imitating? (1Co 11:1)
  10. Can it cause others to stumble? (Rom 14:21)
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believing we are no longer sin's slave but united to God who strengthens us; (3) *resisting* the temptation to yield our members to sin (6:12-13); and (4) *offering* our members as instruments of righteousness unto God (6:13), which leads to holiness (6:19).

What Paul is saying here is vital for us to grasp: *As a Christian I have the opportunity to sin but not the obligation!*

As a new Christian I wrote a paraphrase of Romans 6:6-7 on my hallway mirror: "I don't have to serve sin today, for I have been set free!" I'd confess it daily. After a few months, the reality of this verse hit me as my mind was renewed to believe this as more than a

promise of future dreams fulfilled. I grasped it as a fact from the Word of God.

## HANDLING GRAY AREAS

**F**rom suggestive television programs to public-school textbooks, we daily confront situations that affect us and our children. How do we resolve issues not specifically addressed in the Bible?

How about certain movies and videos? Is "*Rambo*" off-limits? Is an R-rated flick always prohibited?

How about "Christian" rock music? Is Stryper of the devil or of God?

What about television movies if they're edited? What about Phil Donahue when he's discussing "kinky" subjects?

How about roller rinks that play worldly music?

Can we buy tickets to a boxing match, hockey game or other more violent sports?

What of fashionable dress? How about a mini-skirt—one inch above the knee? How about two inches? Four?

Should children play with toy guns?

How about going out dancing? How about dancing at home with my wife?

What about some magazines? You only get *Sports Illustrated*? What do you do with the swimsuit issue?

Are beer, wine and California coolers okay (in moderation) for those over 21?

Should somebody devise a "Complete

Book of Lists for Christians" and spell out every taboo?

Religion, with its list of "dos and don'ts," may change our outward appearance, but it never changes the heart. Jesus taught us in the Sermon on the Mount that God's commands are intended not just to regulate outward conduct but primarily to rule the inner disposition of the heart. It is not enough that we don't kill, steal or commit adultery. We must also deal with hatred, covetousness and lust. Jesus denounced the religious Pharisees of his day because they "clean the outside of the cup and dish, but inside they are full of greed and self-indulgence" (Mt 23:25).

Christianity centers in on what we do and why we do it. The only motive acceptable to our Lord is "for the glory of God" (1Co 10:31) and the essence of sin is that it "fall[s] short of the glory of God" (Ro 3:23).

Many times our motives can be judged by the results of our activities. If what we do causes us to grow in faith and love toward God and one another, we "walk in the light, as he is in the light" (1Jn 1:7). But if our activities alienate us from God's Word and inhibit our relationships with other Christians, we had better let them go. The Bible does provide guidelines for judging questionable matters (see box with this article).

My wife, as a new believer, worked for a doctor who she discovered was referring patients for abortions, though he himself did not perform them. Doris knew her livelihood depended on her job, yet she couldn't shake the discomfort in her spirit because of her employer's activities. Although she did not find a specific "chapter and verse" to prohibit her from continuing to work for him, eventually her conscience led her to resign. She secured the doctor's respect as she graciously explained her conviction, and soon discovered God's unfailing provision through another, more Christ-honoring employment situation.

## THE TWO BATTLEFRONTS

Let's keep in mind that the battle for holiness is fought on two fronts—without and within (actions and attitudes). Often we focus on the obvious sins of the body, yet dismiss or trivialize the more "acceptable," subtle sins of the heart.

If the Holy Spirit is dealing with us in the outward—stealing, cheating (income tax included—Ro 13:7), sexual immorality, gluttony, materialism, laziness, unfaithfulness—let's rise up and respond to his leading that we might "be an instrument for noble purposes, made holy, useful to the Master and prepared to do any good work" (2Ti 2:21).

If he is dealing with us more in the inward realm—sinful anger, envy, jealousy, unforgiveness, pride, criticism—let's not trifle with sins or excuse them, because God hates them. Let's cultivate in our hearts the same hatred of sin God has. Sin can reach out to entice us, like Potiphar's wife who caught Joseph by his cloak and begged him to sleep with her. But we can proclaim, as Joseph did: "How then could I do such a wicked thing and sin against God?" (Ge 39:9)

There has never been a day like today in the history of the Church. Our finest hours lie ahead of us as a Church of purity and power emerges. Together let's respond to the Holy Spirit's leadership to pursue personal holiness.

Impossible?

Unattainable?

I see no Alps!



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