

PURSUING HOLINESS

I CORINTHIANS 9:24-10:13

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Pursuing Holiness

I Corinthians 9:24-10:3

We have finished studying through "The Four Spiritual Laws." The progression of these laws led us to the understanding that the only way we can be right with God and to live life the way it was meant to be lived is to place our faith and trust in Jesus and to commit ourselves to serving Him as our Lord and Savior. Sadly, many modern day Christians think that praying a salvation prayer and being baptized covers them for eternity. For some reason, many feel that once they make this public confession of faith, they have their eternal fire insurance, and then go on living their lives just as they have always lived them. There is not much change in their lives and in fact, they pretty much look like everyone around them.

I'm not sure where that idea has slipped into the modern day church. However, that type of salvation is a counterfeit salvation and not authentic in any way. The Bible is clear that if a confession of faith is truly authentic, it will lead to a lifetime pursuit of holy living. True faith will produce of a constant growth of the believer's life. Given the fact that we have a sinful nature that is at war with God, our lives should be characterized by war against sin in our personal lives. I am not talking about warring against sin in the world. I am not talking about warring against social injustices; I'm taking about being at war with the sin in our own personal lives. In other words, what am I saying, thinking, or doing that is contrary to God's will for my life? You see, it's relatively easy to identify sin in others, sin in society, sin in institutions, and sin in the world. However, it is much more painful and difficult to look at the sin in our own lives.

And yet, if we want to be authentic believers, we have to take a brutally truthful inventory of the sin in our lives. We do this by listening to God speaking through us through studying Scripture, listening to sermons, bible teachers, and spiritual leaders; all the time praying that God reveal our sin to us. Listen to how David the Psalmist approaches this inventory process:

²³Search me, O God, and know my heart; test me and know my anxious thoughts.

²⁴See if there is any offensive way in me, and lead me in the way everlasting"

(Psalm 139:23-24 / NIV).

Is that the way we approach our pursuit of holiness? You see, the way in which we pursue holiness and obedience is a good way to gage how much we really love God. But the problem is that there are so many things in this world that distract us from loving God.

Let me give you an example of how our love can often be distracted by worldly things. I have a friend who is a real romantic. A bunch of us went out to dinner. In the middle of the dinner he asked for our attention. He got down on his knee, took his girlfriend's hand and said, "Honey, I may not be able to give you an expensive house like Bill. I don't have a career as good as Bill's and I certainly don't have the money Bill does. But I know that I love you and want you to be my wife." She looked at him tenderly and sincerely said to him, "Tell me more about Bill."

Sad to say, most of us rarely say, "Tell me more about Jesus," rather we often say things like, "Tell us more about the world."

I know I have explained this before so I'll just review it quickly. Salvation is a three-fold process if it's authentic saving faith. We are saved when we receive Jesus as our Lord and Savior. This happens once. So after we confess and believe in Jesus, we can say that we were saved. When we die or meet Jesus in the rapture, we will be saved. He will perfect our souls in the twinkling of an eye and He will join our perfected souls to new resurrection bodies. So we will be saved in the future. Between the day we confess Jesus as Lord and Savior and the day we see Him face to face, we are in the process now of being saved. We called this the sanctification process. If we are authentic believers then God is now making us and molding us into the image and nature of Jesus Christ. In other words, we are at war with sin and God the Holy Spirit puts both the desire and the ability to defeat sin in our lives. If we are not growing in Christ, then the chances are that we are not truly believers because if we are not in the process of being saved, then there is

no guarantee that we were ever saved nor will we be saved in the future. In other words, if we are not being sanctified by God in the present, then we were probably never justified nor will we be glorified. The main idea of this morning's text is this. **CHRISTIANITY IS A LIFELONG COMMITMENT TO JESUS AND A LIFELONG PURSUIT OF HOLY LIVING.** I hope that we come away with this understanding. Loving Jesus and pursuing holiness are intimately connected. If we are not pursuing holiness, if we are not at war with the sin in our lives, then we should not say that we love Jesus.

I. A LIFELONG JOURNEY INTO ETERNITY (VS 9:24-27)

The Authentication Of Our Salvation Prayer Is Revealed In The Way We Live Our Lives.

Let's look at the Apostle Paul's personal take on this. In chapter 9 verses 24-27 he demonstrates that the Christian life is a lifelong journey into eternity. In other words **THE AUTHENTICATION OF OUR SALVATION PRAYER IS REVEALED IN THE WAY WE LIVE OUR LIVES.**

Verse 24 reminds us that receiving Jesus as Lord and Savior is the beginning. We concluded our study through "The Four Spiritual Laws" by praying this prayer:

"Lord Jesus, I need You. Thank You for dying on the cross for my sins. I open the door of my life and receive You as my Savior and Lord. Thank You for forgiving my sins and giving me eternal life. Take control of the throne of my life. Make me the kind of person You want me to be."

Did you catch the last two lines of that prayer? "Take control of the throne of my life. Make me the kind of person You want me to be." That is a commitment on our part to cooperate with God as He makes us the men and women He wants us to be. The prize is to one day spend eternity in heaven with Him. In verse 24 Paul puts it this way:

"²⁴Remember that in a race everyone runs, but only one person gets the prize. You also must run in such a way that you will win" (I Corinthians 9:24 / NLT).

Paul seems to have really enjoyed his sports since he often uses sports' metaphors. Here he chooses to compare the Christian life to athletes in a race. The finish line for Paul is death or the Second Coming of Jesus. Here's his point. Let's say we were running in a marathon. The finish line is 26.2 miles from the start. How ridiculous would it be if at the start when the starter said, "Runners take your marks," fired the gun, and instead of running, we raised our hands in victory without running a step? How ridiculous would it be if when we passed the one mile marker and raised our hands in victory? To further make the point how absurd would it be for us to stop at the 26-mile marker and raise our hands in victory? The race is 26.2 miles. Unless we complete the 26.2 miles, there can be no victory.

If we understand that concept and if we understand the Bible to say that our race must continue to the end of our lives, then what makes us think that when we enter the race by receiving Jesus as Lord that we are done with the race? Paul says that we are to run in such a way as to get the prize. In other words, entering the family of God through confession and baptism is only the beginning of our salvation. In the Great Commission, Jesus said that making disciples consisted of baptizing them in the Name of the Father, Son, and Holy Spirit and then teaching them to obey all that He has commanded. Our racecourse is the entire course of our lives. We must dedicate ourselves to running to the end.

The motivation for running to the end is laid out in verse 25 as it describes the stakes as high. If we were to modernize Paul's metaphor, football players train hard starting in summer training to get in shape. Actually, most football players started to play in grammar school, then on to high school, and then on to college. To be sure it took the football player a lot to even make it to the preseason training camp. Then if he's lucky enough to make the team, he enters a grueling and

brutal season. He endures pain, injury, and incredible emotional pressure. His ultimate goal is to win the Super Bowl. He gets a trophy and a Super Bowl ring. For the athlete, all the pain, self-denial, discipline and torment were all worth it.

Our goal is much more important and valuable than any trophy, ring, or any human recognition or fame. Our crown is eternal life. If we participate in authentic saving faith demonstrated by a life of dedication to pursuing holiness, we will inherit eternal life in heaven in the company of Jesus our Lord and Savior.

What's the alternative? If we do not possess authentic faith, we will spend eternity in hell, being tormented day and night for an eternity separated from God forever. So Paul's thought is this - Eternal life is much more valuable than any human prize. If athletes give everything to win rings and trophies, then how much more seriously should Christians take their walk with Jesus?

And that brings us to verses 26 and 27 where Paul encourages us to work out our salvation with fear and trembling. That really sounds funny to us doesn't it? After all, the Apostle Paul is the one who said:

"⁸For it is by grace you have been saved, through faith—and this not from yourselves, it is the gift of God—⁹not by works, so that no one can boast" (Ephesians 2:8-9 / NIV).

And now he seems to be saying that we have to work ourselves to death in order to receive the prize of salvation. He describes his spiritual journey in terms of athletics again. First he says that he is not out for a leisurely run. He runs fast and with purpose. He says he is not out shadowboxing. He is in for full-contact fighting. He talks about serious training that involves a great deal of discipline and self-denial. He ends this section with this troubling sentence:

"²⁷... I beat my body and make it my slave so that after I have preached to others, I myself will not be disqualified for the prize" (I Corinthians 9:27 / NIV).

I don't want us to miss the force of Paul's statement here. He gave up everything to follow Christ. He lost his status as a religious scholar and his political standing. He was shunned, arrested, beaten, left for dead, shipwrecked, and ultimately martyred. And yet he is worried about being faithful to the end so he won't be disqualified. He took his relationship with Jesus seriously. Paul was a man of the Gospel. Could we say the same about our relationship with God? Could we say we are men and women of the Gospel? My guess is that most of us take our salvation for granted and we are not even aware of the fact that our spirits are at war with our sinful natures. After all his hard work of sacrificing, preaching the Gospel, and leading many to faith in Christ, Paul knew that it would never be enough to atone for his sin. He also knew that no matter how hard he worked at it, God would have to ensure Paul crossing the finished line.

Saint Augustine used to say, "Work as if everything depended on you. Pray as if everything depended on God." That really is a perfect balance. We can do nothing without Christ. But with Christ, all things are possible.

Calvinists call this pursuit of holiness to the end "Perseverance of the Saints." In other words, if one is truly saved, he or she will continue in the faith and continue to grow in holiness to the very end of their lives. They could not imagine a Christian who was not growing and pursuing holiness.

Paul does not want us to take our salvation for granted. He states it this way:

"¹²Therefore, my dear friends, as you have always obeyed—not only in my presence, but now much more in my absence—continue to work out your salvation with fear and trembling, ¹³for it is God who works in you to will and to act according to his good purpose" (Philippians 2:12-13 / NIV).

There is one command and one promise that balances out the truth of the sanctification of our salvation process. The command is that we are to be working out our salvation with fear and trembling. Have you ever been at war with sin in your life? What you learn quickly is that as you

start to push against sin, sin starts to push back against you. You realize that it is not an easy enemy. At the end of every day, when we see how badly we fail and how far short we fall from God's standards, it should drive us to fear and trembling. We should agonize over how disappointing we must be to a perfect and Holy Father.

And then it is time to apply the Gospel to our lives. That comes to the promise in this passage. It is God the Holy Spirit Who puts the very desire in our hearts to obey God. If we have the desire and if we are at war with sin in our lives, that desire comes from God. That is a sign that we are authentic believers because God is working in us. The second part of that promise is that God the Holy Spirit is also placing the ability to act according to His purpose and defeat sin. The Gospel message is that God has made up the deficit in our lives with the holiness of Jesus. If we are authentic believers, we will have the desire to get rid of sin in our lives, living lives that are pleasing to God, and be able to see our progress in those endeavors. I really don't know where in history we have lost sight of this biblical truth, but the fact is this. **THE AUTHENTICATION OF OUR SALVATION PRAYER IS REVEALED IN THE WAY WE LIVE OUR LIVES.**

I think one of the reasons we don't take the pursuit of holiness seriously is because modern theology has painted a very wrong picture of Jesus. We picture Him as this loving, gentle, meek, and mild person. When in fact Jesus will judge the living and the dead. Jesus is the One Who will say:

^{v41} ... Depart from me, you who are cursed, into the eternal fire prepared for the devil and his angels" (Matthew 25:41 / NIV).

^{v21}Not everyone who says to me, 'Lord, Lord,' will enter the kingdom of heaven, but only he who does the will of my Father who is in heaven. ^{v22}Many will say to me on that day, 'Lord, Lord, did we not prophesy in your name, and in your name drive out demons and perform many miracles?' ^{v23}Then I will tell them plainly, 'I never knew you. Away from me, you evildoers!'" (Matthew 7:21-23 / NIV).

Too many people feel free to tame Jesus into someone Who loves them but will not judge them. Jesus is the same God Who destroyed Sodom and Gomorrah. He is the same God that split the ground and swallowed up Korah and his followers. Jesus is the same God Who destroyed the earth and all humans except for eight in the flood. Jesus is the same God Who sent the Babylonians to burn and destroy Jerusalem. Jesus is the same God Who sent Israel into captivity. And Jesus is the same God Who will judge the living and the dead and send people to hell. If we distort the nature and person of Jesus, we will create for us a counterfeit Jesus and therefore our faith will be counterfeit.

II. AN EVER PRESENT WARNING (VS 10:1-10)

Pursuing Holiness Is Not Optional. It Is Commanded.

That's why in chapter 10 verses 1-10 Paul wants to keep Israel's failure to pursue holiness as an ever-present warning. The point is this. **PURSUING HOLINESS IS NOT OPTIONAL. IT IS COMMANDED.**

Verses 1-5 illustrate clearly those who made a false commitment. The incident Paul refers to here is the Exodus. If you remember from our study through Exodus, all the Israelites were delivered safely from their Egyptian captivity. Paul uses the word baptism here to describe their journey out of Egypt to freedom. You remember that God parted the Red Sea. All the Israelites passed through safely but the entire Egyptian Army drowned when God closed up the sea. God led them with His personal presence in the pillar of cloud by day and the pillar of fire by night. He made them into a nation and called them His children. He fed them with manna and He provided them with miraculous water sources and food sources.

In our modern day church terms, these would be church people. They prayed a prayer of salvation, were baptized, and enjoyed many of God's blessings. However, let me draw out attention to verse 5:

"⁵Nevertheless, God was not pleased with most of them; their bodies were scattered over the desert" (I Corinthians 10:5 / NIV).

That is both pretty graphic and pretty frightening. There are people in churches who appear to be good people who God many not recognize as His own. Think about how frightening this is. Many pastors, elders, Sunday School teachers, church members may not be authentic Christians. We can preach, teach, and serve. We may look good from the outside, and yet, we may still be enemies of God. Paul wants this to be a warning to church people. Remember, he is writing this to the church at Corinth. He is writing this to us. God does not play with sin nor does He tolerate it.

People who possess counterfeit faith will usually in the end give themselves away in several ways as described in verses 6-10. It would do all of us well to read through the books of Exodus and Numbers; then make a note of how ungrateful the Hebrews are from day one of their deliverance. God had delivered them from their brutal slavery in Egypt and made them a nation. And yet they never seemed to be grateful. In verses 6-7 of today's text, Paul is surely referring to several incidents. However, the most notable is when Moses was up on top of Mt. Sinai receiving God's instruction to the people; the people were down in the camp building a golden calf to worship. Further they started drinking, partying, going wild, and worshipping this golden calf they made.

We could easily say we don't make golden calves or worship idols. However, God's command is that we love Him with all our heart, soul, mind, and strength. I think this is perhaps the most common sin we all fall into. I've said this before but it's worth repeating. Take some real reflective time. Open up your day-planner, your checkbook, your credit card statement and examine them. Could we clearly demonstrate from them that we love God more than anyone or anything else?

A further test is to check our thought lives. Could we say we think more about God during the day than we do our husbands, wives, children, boyfriends, girlfriends, things we want to get or do?

If we give priority to anyone or anything then we are guilty of committing idolatry. I again have to publicly share with you my own shortcoming. If I were to examine my checkbook, credit card statement, my thought life and day-planner, I could demonstrate that I love me more passionately than I love God. I have been aggressively trying to change that but it is what it is, idolatry, nothing less or nothing benign. I'm quite sure this leads to other sin as well.

Next, verse 8 is certainly applicable to those of us who live in the United States and Western countries. Probably it is a problem throughout the world these days. Sexual immorality is a clear sign of counterfeit faith. As Israel traveled through the wilderness, their enemies could not stop them. However, while they were camped in Acacia, the men started having sex with the local Moabite women. God commanded Moses and the leaders to kill the immoral people. God also sent a plague. Before the day was over, Paul says that over 23,000 died. I have no idea how church people have come to look at sexual sin as if it's no big deal. Let me just read the section from Exodus:

"¹While the Israelites were camped at Acacia, some of the men defiled themselves by sleeping with the local Moabite women. ²These women invited them to attend sacrifices to their gods, and soon the Israelites were feasting with them and worshipping the gods of Moab. ³Before long Israel was joining in the worship of Baal of Peor, causing the LORD'S anger to blaze against his people.

⁴The LORD issued the following command to Moses: "Seize all the ringleaders and execute them before the LORD in broad daylight, so his fierce anger will turn away

from the people of Israel.”⁵ So Moses ordered Israel’s judges to execute everyone who had joined in worshiping Baal of Peor.

⁶Just then one of the Israelite men brought a Midianite woman into the camp, right before the eyes of Moses and all the people, as they were weeping at the entrance of the Tabernacle. ⁷When Phinehas son of Eleazar and grandson of Aaron the priest saw this, he jumped up and left the assembly. Then he took a spear ⁸and rushed after the man into his tent. Phinehas thrust the spear all the way through the man’s body and into the woman’s stomach. So the plague against the Israelites was stopped, ⁹but not before 24,000 people had died” (Numbers 25:1-9 / NLT).

Again, I have to warn us that sexual immorality is idolatry. We are worshiping lust and our own personal gratification. I know many people think that we can recover from being sexually immoral. Let me just say that is a lie. Even if our sexual immorality is in the past, the damage we have done and the chain of events we have set off in the world go on. Please don’t ever say to me that you have been sexually immoral in the past and now everything is fine. That’s a lie. We can never go back and fix the damage we have done and the lives we have ruined. Since the bible connects sexual immorality with idolatry, we have to say that if we can commit sexual immorality, we can worship false gods. If we can worship false gods, there is no telling what other evil we are capable of.

Verse 9 reminds us not to test God. I think it’s much more fruitful to just read you the incident Paul is referring to here:

⁴Then the people of Israel set out from Mount Hor, taking the road to the Red Sea to go around the land of Edom. But the people grew impatient along the way, ⁵and they began to murmur against God and Moses. “Why have you brought us out of Egypt to die here in the wilderness?” they complained. “There is nothing to eat here and nothing to drink. And we hate this wretched manna!”

⁶So the LORD sent poisonous snakes among them, and many of them were bitten and died” (Numbers 21:4-6 / NLT).

God freed them from slavery and all they did was complain against God. The sin here is that they thought they were smarter than God and they are in essence accusing God of not taking care of them.

This naturally leads to grumbling as described in verse 10. I can’t see how anyone who complains a lot and grumbles could call themselves Christian. If we are Christians, then we believe God is totally sovereign. That means that God is totally in control. Nothing happens to us without God’s permission. God has promised to never leave us nor forsake us. In fact God the Holy Spirit lives in us. God has also promised to work all things for good to us, no matter how horrible. When people complain or grumble, what they are actually saying is that God does not love them. God does not care for them and they know better than God. God doesn’t tolerate that kind of insubordination. If we call ourselves Christians, then we are saying that God is our King. He does not exist to serve us. We exist to serve Him, especially since Jesus bought our freedom with His blood. Earlier in this letter to the Corinthians Paul reminded them of this fact in arguing against their sexual immorality:

¹⁹... don’t you know that your body is the temple of the Holy Spirit, who lives in you and was given to you by God? You do not belong to yourself, ²⁰for God bought you with a high price. So you must honor God with your body” (I Corinthians 6:19-20 / NLT).

We were purchased by the precious blood of Christ. Anyone who takes that lightly really needs to worry about if we indeed are authentic Christians or counterfeit Christians. Remember, in the examples Paul used, these were all Hebrews delivered from Egypt. The comparison is meant to be to church people. We all claim to be Christian. We have all done a lot of Christian stuff. If we are Christians, then our lives should demonstrate that. The most blatant forms of idolatry are sexual immorality, testing God, complaining, and other examples in this same letter. He says:

⁹Don't you know that those who do wrong will have no share in the Kingdom of God? Don't fool yourselves. Those who indulge in sexual sin, who are idol worshipers, adulterers, male prostitutes, homosexuals, ¹⁰thieves, greedy people, drunkards, abusers, and swindlers—none of these will have a share in the Kingdom of God" (I Corinthians 6:9-10 / NLT). The point is clearly this. **PURSING HOLINESS IS NOT OPTIONAL. IT IS COMMANDED.**

III. AUTHENTICATING OUR FAITH (11-13)

If We Are Not At War With Our Personal Sin, Then We Are Not Pursuing Holiness. If We Are Not Pursuing Holiness Then Our Relationship With Christ Is Counterfeit.

Anybody who has a good marriage knows that it doesn't happen by accident or naturally. A good marriage takes a lot of work and a lot of years. I can guarantee that if both people involved in the marriage are not working hard at making the marriage good, it will be disastrous. Why would we think our relationship with God would be any different? A good and growing relationship with God takes a lot of intentional time and hard work. Could we say that we are intentionally working on our relationship with God? I hope so, because if we are not, then there is no reason to believe we are authentic Christians. Verses 11-13 say that this is a good way of authenticating our faith. **IF WE ARE NOT AT WAR WITH OUR PERSONAL SIN, THEN WE ARE NOT PURSUING HOLINESS. IF WE ARE NOT PURSUING HOLINESS THEN OUR RELATIONSHIP WITH CHRIST IS COUNTERFEIT.**

In verses 11-12 we are commanded to be alert. Why would Paul use these Old Testament examples as warnings to us? I think that when I first became a Christian, I used to read these accounts in the Old Testament and say, "How could those people be so stupid? God delivered them from slavery and all they did was grumble, complain, act out sexually and continually fall into idolatry. How could they be so stupid?" But as I grew in my faith, and even more so now that I am old, I can see me in all their stupidity. Paul says here in verse 12:

"So, if you think you are standing firm, be careful that you don't fall!" (I Corinthians 10:12 / NIV).

Listen to this very carefully. I don't care if we think our sins are big sins or little sins. God hates all sin and I'm pretty sure if we were honest with ourselves and are reading our Bibles, it won't take long to see how sinful we are. In fact, let me go out on a limb here. If you cannot identify big, huge, awful sins in your life, then I can guarantee that either you are not reading the Bible regularly or you have been blinded by Satan. If that's the case, then we should be alert and watchful. We should be allowing God to convict us of sin and then go to war with that sin. Listen to how Peter instructs us in being alert:

⁸Be careful! Watch out for attacks from the Devil, your great enemy. He prowls around like a roaring lion, looking for some victim to devour. ⁹Take a firm stand against him, and be strong in your faith. Remember that your Christian brothers and sisters all over the world are going through the same kind of suffering you are" (I Peter 5:8-9 / NLT).

There is no "woe is me" attitude in authentic Christians. We are at war with the sin in our lives. Being alert is important and verse 13 warns us against sin. The point is that if we belong to God we are His children. If we are his children then we should expect to have the same enemies our Father has. Satan empowered the crucifixion of Jesus. He hates Jesus and he hates us. As God's children and soldiers in His army, we must know what to do when we identify the sin in our lives and go to war against them. First of all, it is clear that we all face sin. Secondly, there is no excuse to fail. The promise of God is that if we fight, if we stand up against the sin, He will provide an escape route for us. The idea is that we are to stand up and fight against the sin in

our life. It's easy for Christians to point out sin in the lives of other people and the sin and injustice in society. However, what we are called on here today is to stand up against the sin in our own life. God will accomplish the victory. Our job is to obey God's job is to declare victory. But the clear point is this. **IF WE ARE NOT AT WAR WITH OUR PERSONAL SIN, THEN WE ARE NOT PURSUING HOLINESS. IF WE ARE NOT PURSUING HOLINESS THEN OUR RELATIONSHIP WITH CHRIST IS COUNTERFEIT.**

We talk about loving God. My hope is that we do a better job of loving God than we do the people in our lives. We need to learn what God means by love because **CHRISTIANITY IS A LIFELONG COMMITMENT TO JESUS AND A LIFELONG PURSUIT OF HOLY LIVING.**

What we have to do though is quit making up ideas of who Jesus is. The Bible describes Him perfectly and here is sample of what Jesus says about our demonstration of love:

¹⁵*"If you love me, obey my commandments" (John 14:15 / NLT).*

²³ *"All those who love me will do what I say. My Father will love them, and we will come to them and live with them." (John 14:23 / NLT).*

²⁴*Anyone who doesn't love me will not do what I say. And remember, my words are not my own. This message is from the Father who sent me" (John 14:24 / NLT).*

¹⁰*When you obey me, you remain in my love, just as I obey my Father and remain in his love" (John 15:10 / NLT).*

It is critical to know if we are counterfeit Christians or authentic Christians. It seems easy. If we are pursuing holiness the way Jesus describes it, then we can say our faith is authentic. If we are making up our own rules for living then we are not. We are to be holy because the God we worship is holy.