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

Chapter Five

THE PLEASURE OF GOD AND THE POSSIBILITY OF GODLINESS

One of my greatest joys in ministry is serving alongside my fellow elders. The leaders I get to work with at my church are wonderful examples of grace and godly maturity. Even when we have hard things on the agenda (which is often), I always look forward to our meetings. The work is good, the discussions are sharpening, the fellowship is sweet.

And usually there are cookies and donuts.

Because these men are godly, they are humble. This humility inevitably shows through when we talk about the scriptural qualifications for eldership in 1 Timothy 3 and Titus 1. The elders, and those training to be elders, often feel inadequate compared to the New Testament standards. The requirements seem like good goals, but in the end, lofty ideals that they won't ever reach.

When these objections come up, I try to tell the men that I agree with them sort of, but not really. It's appropriate for us to admit, "I'm not always gentle. I have been quarrelsome before. I'm not as hospitable as I'd like to be. My household doesn't always feel well managed." No one is perfect. So in that way none of us can live up to the Bible's depiction of holiness—not the elders, not the pastor, not John Stott or Billy Graham. But why do we think the qualifications for eldership entail absolute perfection? Surely Paul gave these instructions because he thought some men would be recognized as meeting these requirements. He wasn't asking for sinless messiahs, but he expected that some men in the church would be examples of the qualities he outlined.

I imagine we all know people we think are "holy" even if we

wouldn't dare give ourselves the label. In one sense, that's admirable humility. It's never a good sign when you meet someone eager to regale you with tales of his eminent holiness. But this kind of caution can easily lead us to the unbiblical conclusion that godliness is not actually possible, that we cannot keep the law in any respect. It's one thing to be humble about our piety. It's another to think piety is impossible. The truth is God's people *can* be righteous—not perfectly, but truly, and in a way that genuinely pleases God.

A GOSPEL-CENTERED PANCAKE

With all the best intentions, we tend to flatten the biblical view on holiness until we squeeze out the dynamic nature of life with God. In an effort to own up to our own abiding sinfulness and highlight the gospel of free grace, we remove any notion that we can obey God or that he can delight in our good works. So we end up believing something like this:

I am a spiritual failure, but, praise God, Jesus came to save spiritual failures like me! I cannot obey God's commands for one nanosecond. I never truly love God with all my heart or my neighbor as myself. Even my righteous deeds are like filthy rags. If you could see my heart, you'd see that my sins are as bad as anyone else's or worse! I am a spiritual screw-up through and through, unfaithful to my faithful God. But the good news is, God has saved me because of Christ's death and resurrection. I am his adopted child, forgiven and clean. Nothing I ever do can make God love me any more—or any less—than he already loves me in Christ. Even though I continue to sin, I can never disappoint my heavenly Father, for he looks at me and sees the righteousness of his beloved Son. What unspeakable good news!

“So what's wrong with this?” you may ask incredulously. Well, as a

general statement confessing sin and clinging to the righteousness of Christ, it is absolutely true and beautiful. If I heard a paragraph like this my first reaction would be to praise God for such a powerful reminder of gospel grace. But if someone asked me to probe deeper, I'd caution that this statement is not very careful. And where our theology is not careful, our Christian lives are often adversely affected. In this case, the theological confusion can short-circuit a passionate pursuit of personal holiness.

IMAGINE THE POSSIBILITIES

If we are to be passionate in our pursuit of personal holiness, the first thing we must establish is that holiness is possible. It sounds humble to say, "I cannot obey God for one nanosecond in my life," but it's not true. Acting like holiness is out of reach for the ordinary Christian doesn't do justice to the way the Bible speaks about people like Zechariah and Elizabeth, who "were both righteous before God, walking blamelessly in all the commandments and statutes of the Lord" (Luke 1:6). It doesn't take seriously the Lord's commendation of Job as "a blameless and upright man, who fears God and turns away from evil" (Job 1:8). And there's Paul, who frequently commends his churches and his ministry partners for their obedience and godly example. It sure seems like holiness is a possibility for God's people.

Likewise, Jesus teaches that the wise person hears his words and does them (Matt. 7:24). James says the same thing (James 2:22–25). There's no hint that doing God's word was only a hypothetical category. Quite the contrary, we are told to disciple the nations so that they might *obey* everything Jesus commanded (Matt. 28:19–20).

God expects the Christian to be marked by virtues like love, joy, and peace (Gal. 5:22–23) instead of being known for sexual immorality, idolatry, theft, and greed (1 Cor. 6:9–11). The Christian should no longer be trapped in habitual lawlessness (1 John 3:4). "By this it is

evident who are the children of God, and who are the children of the devil: whoever does not practice righteousness is not of God, nor is the one who does not love his brother” (1 John 3:10). God expects us to be holy and gives us the grace to be holy. After all, he created us for good works (Eph. 2:10), and he works in us to will and to work for his good pleasure (Phil. 2:13). Christians *can* be rich in good works (1 Tim. 6:18; Acts 9:36). We *can* walk in a way worthy of our calling (Eph. 4:1). We *can* be trained to live in a way that is holy and acceptable to God (Rom. 12:1–2).

A PERFECT STORM

If the possibility of holiness is so plain in the Bible, why do we find it so hard to believe? Probably the biggest reason is because we equate obedience with perfection. If walking in a worthy manner means I never lose my temper, I never lust, I am never lazy, and I never do any good thing with mixed motives, well then of course holiness is impossible. Likewise, if God-pleasing holiness means I have to be filled to the brim with every virtue, without any room for improvement, I’m wasting my time even attempting to be holy. Expecting perfection from ourselves or others is not what holiness is about.

Does it ever feel like you don’t have enough hours in the day to obey God? I feel that all the time. I don’t mind the “do not” commands. They seem reasonable. I don’t have to block off time in my day *not* to murder someone. But I get hung up on all that seems to be required of me to be a great dad, a super husband, a fabulous prayer warrior, a tremendous evangelist, and a devoted social activist. I always feel like I could pray more; I could evangelize more; I could share my resources more. But God doesn’t expect us to be the best in everything in order to be free from paralyzing guilt. As we saw in chapter 2, it’s our Christ-like character that counts.

“Sounds great,” you might say, “but have you seen my character?”

It's not without a few pimples." I know the feeling. I've never had a day where I felt kind enough, joyful enough, or loving enough. And if I ever have a day where I feel I've accomplished everything in the previous sentence, it's probably a pretty good sign that either I'm extremely far from holiness . . . or I'm in heaven.

But God does not expect our good works to be flawless in order for them to be good. If God only accepted perfect obedience from his children, the Bible would have nothing good to say about Job or David or Elizabeth or anyone else except for Jesus. I like what the Westminster Confession of Faith says about good works. On the one hand, sanctification will always be imperfect in this life. There will always be remnants of corruption in us. But by the power of the sanctifying Spirit of Christ, true believers will genuinely grow in grace. Our good works are accepted by God, not because they are "wholly unblameable and unproveable in God's sight," but because God is pleased through Christ to accept our sincere obedience, although it contains many weaknesses and imperfections.¹ God not only works obedience in us by his grace, it's also by his grace that our imperfect obedience is acceptable in his sight. And even the smallest act of obedience is an event worth celebrating. Perhaps we are slow to see any good in us because we don't understand how bad we were. Your tiny spiritual life may seem less negligible when you consider that it comes from a heart that used to be spiritually dead. That you and I have any law-abiding willing and doing is a miracle of God's grace.

FILTHY RAGS OR FULLY PLEASING?

Many Christians believe that all their righteous deeds are nothing but filthy rags. After all, that's what Isaiah 64:6 seems to say: even your best deeds are dirty and worthless. But I don't think this is what Isaiah means. The "righteous deeds" Isaiah has in mind are most likely the perfunctory rituals offered by Israel without sincere faith and without

wholehearted obedience. In Isaiah 65:1–7 the Lord rejects Israel’s sinful sacrifices. They are an insult to the Lord, smoke in his nostrils, just like the ritual “obedience” of Isaiah 58 that did not impress the Lord because his people were oppressing the poor. Their “righteous deeds” were “filthy rags” (64:6, KJV) because they weren’t righteous at all. They looked good but were a sham, a literal smoke screen to cover up their unbelief and disobedience.

But we should not think that every kind of “righteous deed” is like a filthy rag before God. In fact the previous verse, Isaiah 64:5, says “you [God] meet him who joyfully *works righteousness*, those who remember you in your ways.” It is not impossible for God’s people to commit righteous acts that please God. John Piper explains:

Sometimes people are careless and speak disparagingly of all human righteousness, as if there were no such thing that pleased God. They often cite Isaiah 64:6 which says our righteousness is as filthy rags. It is true—gloriously true—that none of God’s people, before or after the cross, would be accepted by an immaculately holy God if the perfect righteousness of Christ were not imputed to us (Romans 5:19; 1 Corinthians 1:30; 2 Corinthians 5:21). But that does not mean that God does not produce in those “justified” people (before and after the cross) an experiential righteousness that is not “filthy rags.” In fact, he does; and this righteousness is precious to God and is required, not as the ground of our justification (which is the righteousness of Christ only), but as an evidence of our being truly justified children of God.²

It is a dangerous thing to ignore the Bible’s assumption, and expectation, that righteousness is possible. Of course, our righteousness can never appease God’s wrath. We need the imputed righteousness of Christ. More than that, we cannot produce any righteousness in our own strength. But as born-again believers, it is possible to please God

by his grace. Those who bear fruit in every good work and increase in the knowledge of God are fully pleasing to God (Col. 1:10). Presenting your body as a living sacrifice pleases God (Rom. 12:1). Looking out for your weaker brother pleases God (14:18). Obeying your parents pleases God (Col. 3:20). Teaching the Word in truth pleases God (1 Thess. 2:4). Praying for the governing authorities pleases God (1 Tim. 2:1–3). Supporting your family members in need pleases God (5:4). Sharing with others pleases God (Heb. 13:16). Keeping his commandments pleases God (1 John 3:22). Basically, whenever you trust and obey, God is pleased.³

We can think it's a mark of spiritual sensitivity to consider everything we do as morally suspect. But this is not the way the Bible thinks about righteousness. More importantly, this kind of spiritual resignation does not tell the truth about God. A. W. Tozer is right:

From a failure to properly understand God comes a world of unhappiness among good Christians even today. The Christian life is thought to be a glum, unrelieved cross-carrying under the eye of a stern Father who expects much and excuses nothing. He is austere, peevish, highly temperamental and extremely hard to please.⁴

But this is no way to view the God of the Bible. Our God is not a capricious slave driver. He is not hyper-sensitive and prone to fits of rage on account of slight offenses. He is slow to anger and abounding in steadfast love (Ex. 34:6). "He is not hard to please," Tozer reminds us, "though He may be hard to satisfy."⁵

Why do we imagine God to be so unmoved by our heart-felt attempts at obedience? He is, after all, our heavenly *Father*. What sort of father looks at his daughter's homemade birthday card and complains that the color scheme is all wrong? What kind of mother says to her son, after he gladly cleaned the garage but put the paint cans on the wrong shelf, "This is worthless in my sight"? What sort of parent rolls

his eyes when his child falls off the bike on the first try? There is no righteousness that makes us right with God except for the righteousness of Christ. But for those who have been made right with God by grace alone through faith alone and therefore have been adopted into God's family, many of our righteous deeds are not only *not* filthy in God's eyes, they are exceedingly sweet, precious, and pleasing to him.

THE HAZARD OF MORAL EQUIVALENCE

There are two other confusions about sanctification we need to clear up in this chapter. The first is the mistaken notion that every sin is the same in God's eyes. This sentiment is popular with many Christians. For some it's a sign of genuine humility—"I deserve God's wrath too. So how can I judge your mistakes?" For others this is a way to dodge the hits that come when you dare to speak out against certain sins—"Yes, I do think homosexuality is wrong, but it's no worse than any other sin." And for still others, it's simply a soft form of relativism—"Those who live in glass houses shouldn't throw stones, you know."

Like many popular adages, this one about all sins being equal before God is not entirely wrong. Every sin is a breach of God's holy law. And whoever fails to keep the law in one point is guilty of breaking all of it (James 2:10). So any sin committed against an infinite God deserves punishment. We're all born sinners. We all sin. Every sin deserves death. That's why the truism is half-true.

But it's also a lot not true. As R. C. Sproul puts it, "The idea of gradation of sin is important for us to keep in mind so we understand the difference between *sin* and *gross sin*."⁶ All our sins are offensive to God and require forgiveness. But over and over the Bible teaches that some sins are worse than others.

- God waited four hundred years before giving the Israelites the Promised Land because the iniquity of the Amorites was not yet

complete (Gen. 15:16). They were sinners all along, but eventually their sins merited drastic punishment.

- The Mosaic legislation prescribes different penalties for different infractions and requires different sacrifices and payments to make restitution.
- Numbers 15 recognizes the difference between unintentional sins and those done “with a high hand” (Num. 15:29–30). Dropping a four-letter word when you hit your thumb with a hammer is not as bad as giving God the middle finger (though neither is recommended).
- Some sins in Israel’s history were more notorious than others. Judging from the Lord’s outrage, sacrificing your children to Molech was probably worse than losing your patience with them (Jer. 32:35).
- Jesus intimates that some people will be judged more severely on the day of judgment because they had more reason to believe (Matt. 10:15). We will all be judged according to the light we have.
- Though not saved by his good works, Cornelius was nevertheless “a devout man who feared God” (Acts 10:2). Even among non-Christians there is a difference between being a decent human being and being a dirty, rotten scoundrel.

Here’s the problem: when every sin is seen as the same, we are less likely to fight any sins at all. Why should I stop sleeping with my girlfriend when there will still be lust in my heart? Why pursue holiness when even one sin in my life means I’m Osama bin Hitler in God’s eyes? Again, it seems humble to act as if no sin is worse than another, but we lose the impetus for striving and the ability to hold each other accountable when we tumble down the slip-n-slide of moral equiva-

lence. All of a sudden the elder who battles the temptation to take a second look at the racy section of the Lands' End catalog shouldn't dare exercise church discipline on the young man fornicating with reckless abandon. When we can no longer see the different gradations among sins and sinners and sinful nations, we have not succeeded in respecting our own badness; we've cheapened God's goodness. If our own legal system does not treat all infractions in the same way, surely God knows that some sins are more heinous than others. If we can spot the difference, we'll be especially eager to put to death those sins which are most offensive to God.

SONS, NOT ILLEGITIMATE CHILDREN

The second confusion that needs clearing up is whether or not forgiven, justified, reconciled, adopted, born-again believers can displease God. The logic seems sound: "I am clothed in Christ's righteousness. Nothing can separate me from the love of God. So no matter what I do, God sees me as his pure, spotless child." It's true that there is no condemnation for those who are in Christ Jesus (Rom. 8:1), but this does not mean God will condone all our thoughts and behaviors. Though in Christ he overlooks our sins in a judicial sense, he is not blind to them.²

Scripture is clear that God is displeased when his people sin. We can "grieve" the Holy Spirit of God (Eph. 4:30). Though God is always for us in Christ (Rom. 8:31-34), Christ can still have things against us (Rev. 2:4). The fact that God disciplines his children (Heb. 12:7) means he can sometimes be displeased with them. But there's a flip side too. The fact that God disciplines his children means he loves us enough to correct us. If God never took note of our sin, he would never discipline. And if he left us without discipline, we would be illegitimate children and not true sons (v. 8). Love does not equal unconditional affirmation. Love entails the relentless pursuit of what is for our good.

And our good is always growth in godliness. “Those whom I love,” Jesus said to the church at Laodicea, “I reprove and discipline, so be zealous and repent” (Rev. 3:19).

Maybe this theological distinction will help. Through faith we are joined to Christ and have union with him. That bond is unbreakable. Our union with Christ is an established fact, guaranteed for all eternity by the indwelling of the Spirit. When we sin, our *union* with Christ is not in jeopardy. But our *communion* is. It is possible for believers to have more or less of God’s favor. It is possible for us to have sweet fellowship with God, and it’s possible to experience his frown—not a frown of judgment, but a “for-us” frown that should spur us on to love and good deeds (Heb. 10:24).⁸ I love John Calvin’s phrase that God, while not ceasing to love his children, can still be “wondrously angry” toward them. God will never hate us, but he will mercifully frighten us with his wrath so that we might “shake off our sluggishness.”⁹ God disciplines us for our good, so that we may share his holiness (12:10). As the Westminster Confession of Faith puts it, those fully and irrevocably justified “may by their sins come under God’s fatherly displeasure and not have a sense of His presence with them until they humble themselves, confess their sins, ask for forgiveness, and renew their faith in repentance” (Westminster Confession 11.5).

One of the main motivations for obedience is the pleasure of God. If we, in a well-intentioned effort to celebrate the unimpeachable nature of our justification, make it sound as though God no longer concerns himself with our sins, we’ll put a choke on our full-throttle drive to holiness. God is our heavenly Father. He has adopted us by his grace. He will always love his true children. But if we are his true children we will also love to please him. It will be our delight to delight in him and know that he is delighting in us.

FEELING CLEAN

Perhaps you started the chapter feeling encouraged that holiness is actually possible. It was a welcome relief to learn that many of our righteous deeds are not filthy at all. But now you're back in Eeyore mode, worried that your whole justified life will be a disappointment to God (and that you'll never find your tail). I don't want to leave you feeling discouraged—convicted perhaps, but not despondent. Yes, we can grieve the Spirit (Eph. 4:30), but the normal state for the Christian should be one of blessing and enjoying God's favor (which, by the way, is not the same as health, wealth, and prosperity).

I quote from the Puritans a lot in this book because they are powerful examples of pursuing holiness. And yet, I have to admit that Puritanism at its worst could be overly introspective and unnecessarily punishing on the conscience. If you try hard enough you can find idols of the heart lurking behind every good deed. Some Christians are prone to go on lengthy idol hunts and can't feel good unless they feel bad about something. That's why I tell my congregation at times, "You don't have to feel conviction for every sermon. Some of you are actually obedient and faithful in this area." Not perfectly, of course, but truly and sincerely.

At the end of 2 Corinthians Paul challenges his readers to, "Examine yourselves, to see whether you are in the faith" (2 Cor. 13:5). Many of us take this as a stern warning to figure out if we are real believers. And no doubt some of us need the wake-up call. But look at what Paul says next in that verse: "Test yourselves," he says. "Or do you not realize this about yourselves, that Jesus Christ is in you?" See, the so-called super-apostles were beating up on Paul, telling the Corinthians he was a ministerial misfit (see 2 Cor. 11:1–15). In response, Paul tells the Corinthians to look at themselves. "Hey guys, I am your minister, right? And you're Christians, right? Examine yourselves. You'll see that you are in the faith and I've been faithful." Paul challenged the Corinthians to examine themselves *because he expected them to pass*

the test.

Of all the crazy things Paul said, 1 Corinthians 4:4 may be the most jolting. Here's the apostle Paul—Mr. Wretched Man That I Am, Mr. There Is No One Good, No Not One—and he tells the Corinthians, “I am not aware of anything against myself.” Seriously?! You can't think of anything, Paul? Not a single idol buried somewhere under ten layers of your subconscious? Now let's not miss the next line: “but I am not thereby acquitted. It is the Lord who judges me.” So Paul isn't claiming to be okay just because he feels okay. But he is saying he has a clear conscience. He obeys God and sticks close to his Word. This doesn't mean he's perfect. No doubt, he's bringing his sins daily before the Lord to be cleansed from all unrighteousness (1 John 1:8–9; Matt. 6:12). But he's not walking around feeling like a spiritual loser. He's not burdened with constant low-level guilt because he's not doing enough or because he detected a modicum of pride over lunch.

What's the secret to such freedom? Paul is not summoning the power of positive thinking or feeling good because he's got some judgment-free God. No, the reason for Paul's confidence is directly related to his character. As a general rule, holiness is his lifestyle. And as a godly man, he's getting along well with God. I think this is what 1 Thessalonians 3:13 means when it says that God will “establish your hearts blameless in holiness before our God and Father, at the coming of our Lord Jesus with all his saints.” Paul is not talking about positional holiness at this point, but about progressive holiness, which is why verse 12 speaks of the Lord making us “*increase and abound in love for one another and for all.*” God's children will never be as pristinely and unfailingly holy as God, but we should be holy. Christians should display a consistent pattern of obedience, along with a quick habit of going to God for cleansing when they are disobedient. This is how we can be established “blameless in holiness” and have the same confidence Paul enjoyed in 1 Corinthians 4.

The Bible clearly teaches that holiness is possible. This is good news, not bad news. You have permission to see evidences of grace in your life. You are allowed (and expected) to be obedient. You will never be perfect in this life. You cannot do anything to earn God's love. But as a redeemed, regenerate child of God you don't have to be a spiritual failure. By the mercies of God you can "present your bodies as a living sacrifice, holy and acceptable to God, which is your spiritual worship" (Rom. 12:1).

¹The points in the last three sentences correspond to Westminster Confession 23.3; 23.3 and 26.6 respectively.

²John Piper, *Future Grace* (Sisters, OR: Multnomah, 1995), 151.

³See Wayne Grudem, "Pleasing God by Our Obedience," in *For the Fame of God's Name: Essays in Honor of John Piper*, ed. Sam Storms and Justin Taylor (Wheaton, IL: Crossway, 2010), 277.

⁴A. W. Tozer, *The Best of A. W. Tozer, Volume 1* (Grand Rapids, MI: Baker, 1978), 121.

⁵Ibid.

⁶Sproul, *Holiness of God*, 206 (emphasis his). See also the Westminster Larger Catechism, Q/A 150, which explains that, "All transgressions of the law of God are not equally heinous; but some sins in themselves, and by reason of several aggravations, are more heinous in the sight of God than others." The next question and answer details what those "aggravations" are.

⁷See, for example, John Flavel's *A Blow at the Root of Antinomianism* (1691). Flavel lists ten errors made by the anti-law men of his day. They include: "That God sees no sin in believers, whatsoever sins they commit" (Error 5); "That God is not angry with the elect, nor doth he smite them for their sins" (Error 6); and "That believers need not fear either their own sins, or the sins of others" (Error 8). Found online at http://www.truecovenant.com/gospel/flavel_blow_at_the_root.html (accessed July 11, 2011).

⁸See Grudem, "Pleasing God," 283–292.

⁹*Institutes* 3.2.12.