

The Pursuit of Righteousness

Lesson 6 in "More Like Jesus"

Lesson Aim: To confirm in our hearts that the growing Christian will not be satisfied to simply avoid evil in his life. Rather, his heart and mind will actively pursue his becoming more like Jesus.

Key Verse: But you, man of God, flee from all this, and pursue righteousness, godliness, faith, love, endurance and gentleness.
I Tim. 6:11

Positives and Negatives

Many churches focus on the avoidance of certain sins to the extent that *this* characterizes their Christianity. To them, "faithfulness" is defined primarily by the things they do *not* do.

But think about it! Was Jesus best known for what He *did*, or did *not* do? The answer is obvious; He was best known for what He was and what he did! For example, His humility, deeds of mercy and spirit of servanthood, marked Him.

In most churches you know, is there an expectation that Christians will practice humility, mercy, and servanthood? Do they focus on the development of Christian character, the fruit of the Spirit, and Godly relationships? Do they invest few, or many resources toward those ends?

In many churches, isn't one recognized as "a good Christian" if he has "accepted Christ" and avoided the "thou shalt not's" of the church? Aren't serious flaws in heart and character accepted and unchallenged, even among leaders? Don't pride, unforgiveness and greed shape the lives of many, with little sense of shame?

But is that authentic Christianity? If we truly follow Jesus, don't we need to actively pursue righteousness in matters of heart, character, and relationships? Aren't we to

hate unforgiveness, striving, contention, deception and pride like we hate profanity, and immorality? Consider Prov. 6:16-19!

Read Romans 12:9-21 too. What would your church be like if these relational principles were practiced? How many problems in the church would be dealt with if we maintained this standard? Aren't we often satisfied with much less?

Will we be satisfied with a negative religion, where faithfulness is defined by what we don't do? Or will we be positive, pressing on toward the likeness of Jesus and determined to see His integrity, love, patience, and servanthood (for example) worked into our lives?

Scriptures to Consider

Note that each of the following texts has both a negative and a positive element. Observe also the expectation that we will take initiative toward righteousness.

Romans 12:9 - Hate what is evil; cling to what is good.

II Cor. 6:16-7:1 Awesome, "soak" on 7:1!

I Timothy 6:11-12 - But you, man of God, flee from all this, and pursue righteousness, godliness, faith, love, endurance and gentleness. ¹² Fight the good fight of the faith. Take hold of the eternal life to which

you were called when you made your good confession in the presence of many witnesses.

II Timothy 2:22 - Flee the evil desires of youth and pursue righteousness, faith, love and peace, along with those who call on the Lord out of a pure heart.

Hebrew 12:14-15 - Make every effort to live in peace with everyone and to be holy; without holiness no one will see the Lord.
¹⁵ See to it that no one falls short of the grace of God and that no bitter root grows up to cause trouble and defile many.

I Peter 3:9 - Do not repay evil with evil or insult with insult. On the contrary, repay evil with blessing, because to this you were called so that you may inherit a blessing (See vv 8-12)

Consider the difference between *fleeing* evil and just *avoiding* it. If you were walking down a path and saw a poisonous snake in your way, would you be more inclined to turn around and run, or to just tiptoe around it to avoid it? How does that relate to your attitude toward evil?

The Lion and the Gazelle

Consider Paul's word "pursue" in I Tim. 6:11-12 and II Tim. 2:22. What image do you see when you think of "pursue?" How about a lion chasing a gazelle?

The gazelle runs hard, leaping and turning, with the lion right behind him. The lion may be weary, but he's hungry too! Possibly he's ready to make his final pounce, but at that moment the gazelle exerts a little extra energy and avoids him. On and on they go. *That's "pursuit!"*

Possibly God speaks to you of your need for gentleness, a forgiving heart, or a peaceable spirit. You begin to pursue it; confessing your need to God; repenting of your old ways; studying the Word; possibly reading a good book on the subject; praying and communing with God about the matter;

and even sharing with a brother or sister whom you respect.

You are pursuing a forgiving heart, for example. You crave that expression of righteousness, as a hungry lion craves a gazelle! As God works in you, you become a more and more forgiving person.

However, about the time you think you are getting close to Christlike forgiveness, a difficult situation arises and you yield to unrighteous anger and unforgiveness. As the gazelle escapes the lion, a forgiving heart seems to have escaped you. But, as the hungry lion that perseveres until he has his prey, you keep on. As the lion eventually finds satisfaction in his gazelle, you will have the reward of the peace and joy that accompany a forgiving heart! Consider Matthew 5:6.

Three Ingredients

There are several necessary ingredients in the pursuit of righteousness.

- 1) Acknowledge areas where you fall short of godliness. Ask God to show you *specific* needs in your attitudes; habits; ways of responding to people or situations; thought patterns; matters of integrity; values; use of time, money or other resources; how you handle your sexuality; your use of power, and so forth.
- 2) Don't be satisfied to simply cover up your sinfulness or to avoid its expression. Run from evil and the settings and situations that facilitate its expression in you. Ask God to help you hate all that is evil in your life; even the secret matters of your heart.
- 3) Deliberately bring godliness into your life. Ask God to show you an expression of Christlikeness to replace each expression of ungodliness. Consider Eph. 4:20-24, 28-32.

Remember this. Many Christians never get victory because they don't actively pursue the expressions of godliness that could replace the sin in their life! They might want to flee evil, but they don't actively pursue righteousness.

Later lessons in this series will give steps that are helpful in the process of replacing the old with the new. For now though, read Philippians 2:13 and be encouraged!

A Needed Transition - O.T. to N.T.

There is a significant difference between the "thou shalt not" of the Old Testament, and the "thou shalt" of the New. (See Matthew 5:21-24, 43-45) Here's the focus and motivation of both Testaments:

Old Testament	<u>New Testament</u>
- More negative, "Thou shalt not"	- <u>More positive, "Thou shalt"</u>
- Fear, threat of punishment	- <u>Reward, promise of blessing</u>
- External, guided by rules	- <u>Internal, guided by new heart</u>

Simply stated, the many laws of the Old Testament *had* to be given, to try to restrain God's people and help them treat each other decently. The power of the old nature was just too much. They needed the external rules with the threat of punishment because they didn't have the inner strength.

I John 2:7-11 is an exciting text in the transition from Old to New Testament living. In verse seven, John says that love is *not* a new commandment. But then in verse eight he says it *is* a new commandment. The point is, God *always* wanted His people to relate to each other in love, but under the law they were not able to. It is *not* new in terms of God's intention; it *is* new in terms of man's ability.

Praise His Name, the presence of Jesus in us is a new power to live in the way that God always wanted His people to live!

John says, "which is true in Him and in you," meaning that the power that was at work in Jesus to enable Him to love the unlovely, is also at work in us!

Jesus fulfilled the law by giving us the power to do what the law called us to do. (Consider Mt. 5:17-20) We now have the resources in our heart to treat each other in the way God intends and we no longer need the external rules. The intent of the law has been met through grace!

We formerly refrained from stealing because of fear of the law. Now, because of love we wish our neighbor well and pray for his success. And as Eph. 4:28 says, because we have a new heart, we work with our hands so we have something to share with others instead of stealing from them!

How much are we shaped by the mentality of "law" and how much by the spirit of grace? Are we truly a "New Testament people" intent on practicing righteousness; or are we more Old Testament, defining Christianity by what we don't do?

We won't move very far into spiritual maturity until we take hold of the truth that authentic Christianity implies actively pursuing righteousness as we deliberately forsake *unrighteousness*.

Wrapping It Up

Some lazy people expect the good things of life to just come to them without effort. Others don't expect much out of life, so they don't put much into it either!

There are lazy *Christians*, too. They think God will work His goodness in them if they just go to church. Others have little vision for righteousness, so they make little effort to receive it. They miss a lot of the spiritual riches of this life and the life to come.

Read I Tim. 6:11-12 again. Note words like "flee," "pursue," "fight," and "take hold." Feel the initiative, action and perseverance.

"Today" is the day for God's people to stand up with a new vision for living in a dynamic relationship with Him. It is time to deal humbly and honestly with our attitude toward the darkness within us. Repenting of our tolerance of unrighteousness in our own hearts, and in the community of faith, we must take hold of a new vision for authentic Christianity.

Facing the light of the glorious gospel of Jesus Christ, we will find our backs turned toward the darkness that had so grievously characterized us. For those who make this choice, righteousness, peace and joy will follow in new measure, with increasingly fruitful service and great future reward.

Prayer:

Jesus, my Savior and Lord, I again hear your call to change. This time it's a change of attitude toward evil, and righteousness.

Jesus, please work into my heart a new vision for godly living and help me to hate all evil, even the secret things of my heart. Help me to truly be a New Testament believer. An authentic disciple of yours.

Jesus, I want to more actively follow you and pursue your likeness. Forgive me for my presumption and laziness. Remind me often of your call to righteousness.

Thank you for your patience and kindness toward me as I learn more about you and your plan for me. And thanks for the confidence of increased joy and fruitfulness as I grow to become more like you.

Questions for Thought and Discussion

- 1) What *about* this thing of defining Christianity as avoiding the negatives instead of by pursuing the positives? Is that a problem in your church – and in your life?
- 2) What are some “thou shalt not’s” in your church? What are yours?
- 3) Which scripture in this lesson spoke most powerfully to you?
- 4) What is your testimony about how God has helped you replace a negative in your life, with a positive?
- 5) Do you have a “gazelle” in your life at this time?
- 6) How important are the “Three Ingredients” on page 22? Are they emphasized in your church?
- 7) What are some ways that we choose to be close to evil; compromising our loyalty to Jesus by participating in things that are contrary to His righteousness?

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