
Holiness 101

“and may the Lord make you increase and abound in love to one another and to all men, as we do to you, so that he may establish your hearts unblamable in holiness before our God and Father, at the coming of our Lord Jesus with all his saints.”

1 Thessalonians 3:12

Holiness is often thought of as an “up in the clouds” topic that we hear our priests talk about and something that we rightly associate with the saints. We might even think that holiness is something reserved for “holy people” like Pope John Paul II or Mother Teresa and maybe our parish priest, but not something for us. But the good news is that holiness is God’s plan for every person He created! “Me, a saint?!” Take heart, the saints didn’t see themselves as saints either. Saint Thérèse of Lisieux wrote in her autobiography, *The Story of a Soul*:

“You know, Mother, I have always wanted to become a saint. Alas! I have always noticed that when I compared myself to the saints, there is between them and me the same difference that exists between a mountain whose summit is lost in the clouds and the obscure grain of sand trampled underfoot by passers-by. Instead of becoming discouraged, I told myself: God cannot inspire unrealizable desires. I can, then, in spite of my littleness, aspire to holiness.”¹

Saint Thérèse of Lisieux

¹ St. Thérèse of Lisieux, *Story of a Soul*, John Clarke, O.C.D., trans., 3rd ed. (Washington: ICS Publications, 1996), 207.

This is from “the greatest saint of modern times,” according to Pope Saint Pius X. You are in good company if you feel that becoming a saint—which is what becoming holy is all about—is a bit overwhelming. Fortunately, we need not rely on our own power. Only through the grace of God can we aim at holiness, and only through His grace will we actually become holy. Our Lord told Saint Paul, “My grace is sufficient for you, for my power is made perfect in weakness” (2 Cor. 12:9).

1. From childhood we are encouraged to dream about what we might one day become. What are your goals in life?

What do you think is your mission in life?

In what ways have you been pursuing your goals and living your mission?

2. What do you think holiness is? Write your definition.

3. According to Titus 2:11, Hebrews 12:14, and 1 Peter 1:16, who is called to holiness?

Have you ever looked at yourself in a carnival mirror? Your head looks way too big and your body looks too long and skinny. Thinking of this image helps me to understand holiness. You see, God knows exactly what our souls are supposed to “look like,” with our desires properly ordered and our hearts overflowing with love for our Creator and neighbor. Yet, when we continue in our sin and disordered passions, our souls look less like the “image of God” and more like the carnival distortion.

The New Testament word for “holy” is *hagios* (Gk.) and means “set apart, sanctified.” At our Baptism, we were made holy and brought into God’s covenant family (1 Cor. 6:11), set apart to do the good works prepared for us beforehand (Eph. 2:10). However, we are all too well aware of the weaknesses of human nature—what is sometimes called *concupiscence* (cf. Catechism, nos. 1264, 1426). Saint Paul himself laments:

[B]ut I see in my members another law at war with the law of my mind and making me captive to the law of sin which dwells in my members. Wretched man that I am! Who will deliver me from this body of death? Thanks be to God through Jesus Christ our Lord! (Rom. 7:23-25).

And so we try with God’s grace to live up to the family standards established by Our Heavenly Father, but through concupiscence sometimes fall short of these standards. Throughout our lives, however, we will establish good habits and learn to obey all that God commands us and so become *righteous*. But holiness is an important step beyond righteousness. Holiness is when you

are right before God in obeying all the “family rules”: You love the Father and mother (Mary) and your brothers and sisters (neighbors) perfectly—you are “wholly” in love with God and His will. When our hearts and actions perfectly reflect God in us, our lives and souls no longer look like a carnival distortion of the “image and likeness of God,” but rather reflect the beautiful person we were created to be. (Catechism, nos. 1987-2029 are a must read!)

4. Matthew 23 contains a stinging rebuke to the Pharisees, a Jewish sect in Jesus’ day. According to Jesus in Matthew 23:23-28, how did the Pharisees misunderstand true holiness?

How do Christians sometimes misunderstand perfection?

5. “All Christians in any state or walk of life are called to the fullness of Christian life and to the perfection of charity. All are called to holiness: ‘Be perfect, as your heavenly Father is perfect’” (Catechism, no. 2013, citations omitted). Becoming like Jesus, the Holy One (Mk. 1:24), is the goal of the Christian life. Read Matthew 19:16-22.

a. What does Jesus tell the young man about the way to enter eternal life?

b. What commandments does Jesus tell the young man to obey?

c. What did Jesus tell the young man he had to do if he wished to be perfect?

d. The young man was told that he would have treasures in heaven if he did what Jesus said he had to do to be perfect. What is it that the young man lacked?

e. What was Jesus really asking of the young man? Why was this so difficult?

f. What is Jesus asking you to do, if you wish to be perfect? What do you lack?

6. Before we can pursue holiness in particular ways, we must first know the kind of heart we need to cultivate. According to the following verses, how do we prepare ourselves for pursuing holiness?

- a. Sirach 2:1-6
- b. Matthew 6:24
- c. 2 Chronicles 7:14
- d. Matthew 5:6
- e. 1 Thessalonians 5:4-10

List some ways in which you could apply these truths practically in daily life.

7. Our pursuit of holiness can become discouraging when we fail over and over again. "Isn't Jesus sick of me yet?" is a question we fight from asking ourselves too frequently. During these times of discouragement, when the devil is enjoying his way with us, we must remind ourselves of Jesus' love. Thankfully, He gives us life experiences and His Word to help us see the depth of His love. According to the following verses, what is the nature of God's love and how is it expressed?

- a. John 3:16-17

- b. Ephesians 2:4-7
- c. Romans 5:6-8
- d. Revelation 7:9-11

“And I tell you, once we see ourselves so boundlessly loved, and see how the slain Lamb has given Himself on the wood of the Cross, the fire floods us with light, leaving no room for darkness. So enlightened by that venerable fire, our understanding expands and opens wide. And once we have experienced and accepted the light, we so clearly discern what is in God’s will that we want to follow no other footsteps than those of Christ crucified, for we see well that there is no other way we can go. . . . We see that God wants only that we be made holy, and that to give us this holiness of grace God humbled Himself to become one with us. And this humility of His pulls our pride out by the roots. He is the rule we must all follow.”²

Saint Catherine of Siena

8. Our perfection is the will of God, and yet it seems very difficult. What do the following passages tell us are some of the common obstacles we confront on the road to holiness?

- a. Matthew 19:16-22
- b. 1 Peter 5:8

² *The Letters of St. Catherine of Siena*, vol. 1, Suzanne Noffke, O.P., trans. (Binghamton, NY: Center for Medieval and Early Renaissance Studies, 1988), 155.

c. 1 John 2:15-16

What are the causes of these struggles? What are some other “battles” on the path to perfection? How do we combat them?

“Holiness consists in carrying out God’s will with joy. Faithfulness forges saints. . . . The first step toward holiness is the will to attain it. With a will that is whole we love God, we opt for Him, we run toward Him, we reach Him, we possess Him. Often, under the pretext of humility, of confidence, of abandonment, we forget about using our will. But it all depends on these words—I want or I do not want. I have to pour out all my energy into the words ‘I want.’ We cannot decide to become saints without a great effort of renunciation, of resisting temptations, of combat, persecution, and of all sorts of sacrifices. It is not possible to love God except at one’s own expense.”³

Mother Teresa of Calcutta

9. “Be all that you can be . . . in the Christian life!” Go ahead and hum the slogan. Have you ever found yourself inspired by a homily or book to be all that God wants you to be and yet lacked the motivation to actually do anything about your feelings? The Christian life is full of little battles against the will. Read the Parable of the Sower in Mark 4:3-20. List the four types of soil,

³ Mother Teresa, *Heart of Joy*, José Luis Gonzalez-Balado, ed. (Ann Arbor: Servant Books, 1992), 92.

Soil	Response	Result	Jesus' Explanation
1.	1.	1.	1.
2.	2.	2.	2.
3.	3.	3.	3.
4.	4.	4.	4.

In what practical ways can we keep ourselves from being a seed that falls on “rocky soil?”

“Thorny soil?”

What would your life look like if the seed of God’s Word were sown on good soil in your heart?

10. Take some time to examine your life and your heart. Is this Bible study starting to get on your nerves because you're holding something back from God? Or are you excited about seeking holiness and surrendering your life completely to God, no matter the cost?

11. Think about the subjects discussed in this week's lesson and prayerfully choose one or two ways you want to pursue God this week. Offer God your resolutions, concerns, fears, dreams, and love in prayer and let the fruit of that prayer be a week lived in courageous love for God.

Memory Verse

“Strive for peace with all men, and for the holiness without which no one will see the Lord.”

Hebrews 12:14