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Prayer and holiness – John Gray examines the link, and shares some practical tips.

The old definition that ‘holiness is separation from sin’ is not right. Nor is the logic that lies behind it. The argument begins with familiar words like those of God to Moses in Leviticus 19:1,2:

The LORD said to Moses, “Speak to the entire assembly of Israel and say to them: ‘Be holy because I, the LORD your God, am holy’.”

The argument then goes that for God to be holy means that he is separate from sin, and that is true. The next step says that for us to be holy means that we too need to be separate from sin, and that is true. The conclusion reached is that we ought not associate with sinners. Holiness is seen as separation from sin and sinner. That is not true. Such thinking takes God’s people into either:

1. A ghetto mentality, where we wait for people to come to us, expecting them to change before they actually get to us;
- Or**
2. Rabbit warren Christianity, where people are so concerned about purity that they spend all day in a warren avoiding any contact with the world. They leave their Christian home and go to school or work with Christians, lunch with Christians, go home with Christians, go to a Christian Bible study and go to bed.

Now, we need to take Jesus’ words in Matthew 5:27-30 seriously (about gouging out your right eye if it causes you to sin). But these words ought not to be used as an excuse to avoid people who do not yet know Jesus. We are to be holy as he is holy. How was Jesus holy? With lost people, as in Luke 15:1-2, where the Pharisees more or less say, “Doesn’t he know if you sit in the garbage tip long enough you end up smelling like one?!”

That incident leads into three fairly heavy parables (the Lost Sheep, the Lost Coin, the Lost Son), the last of which has a terrible sting in the tail for those who are caught up in ghettos or rabbit warrens. Jesus tells us in these parables that lost people matter to him and his Father – so much so that Jesus comes looking for them. The point in the last parable for God’s people is that we too are to be concerned for the lost – concerned enough to mix with them and not stand apart from them, as the prodigal son’s older brother did.

Holiness is separation from sin, but not from people. We need to be with others, building relationships of integrity with them, so that they will hear what we say when the opportunity to share the Gospel arises. If we don’t, chances are they will not hear what we have to say. Most of us are like that. If you’re walking down the street and someone wants to ask you a question for a survey, how do you respond? I realise that some jump in boots and all, but most will ignore the surveyor. Why do we generally avoid surveyors? Because there is no relationship. We don’t trust them and we don’t know what they will try to sell us. It’s no different when it comes to the Gospel. If unchurched people do not know a Christian, then in all probability, they will not listen to one.

One of the key elements in Billy Graham's strategy is that people should bring their friends to the crusade. They go because they have a relationship with a Christian.

It takes time to be with non-Christians, which immediately throws a lot of Christians into a spin. Which Bible study do I give up? Which committee do I give up? Sure, we need to be part of a Bible study group, but do we need to be part of more than one? We need to be exercising a ministry within the body, but does God require that we spend all our time doing that? We've got to get into contact with lost people. Go where they go – concerts, movies, McDonalds, Pizza Huts, pubs... Maybe God wants us to play sport with lost people rather than his people. He probably wants us to join a club full of lost people such as the Lions, Apex or the local public school P & C. Talk to them about life and let them hear your understanding of it without preaching at them.

And again, we come back to the issue of holiness. If our life is not consistent with what we say, we lose all credibility. Our lives are to be consistent and authentic lives. With that in mind, George Barna writes in his new book, *The Frog in the Kettle*, that "Christians must change the way we live and serve nearly as much as non-believers must alter their perspectives" (Regal Books, p 166). And as D.L. Moody once said, "Of one hundred men, one will read the Bible; the ninety-nine will read the Christian." How we are perceived by others will determine whether or not they will listen to us when we share the Gospel.

The Key

How are we to be holy and still relate to lost people? What is the key to such a life?

"Authentic Christianity begins with spiritual authenticity – a vital daily relationship with Jesus Christ. But a vital relationship with Jesus Christ takes time – not left-over, throw-away time, but quality time for solitude, contemplation and reflection" (Bill Hybels, *Honest to God? IVP*, p 14).

We can point to passages like Titus 2:14 which tell us we are a redeemed and sanctified people. But we need to listen to other passages like Titus 2:11-12 which tell us that we need to work at our holiness: "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."

That takes time, for it takes time to learn how to say 'no' to a lifestyle or individual actions which bring God and his Gospel into disrepute. So, the unfriendliness of a church, lying, one sex putting down the other with lines like 'that's no lady, that's my wife', slander and gossip, using people and loving things, inconsistency – all these need to go.

It takes time to learn how to say 'no' to worldly passions. Passions in themselves are not wrong, but worldly passions – passions and desires which focus on the things of this age or world, giving no thought to the world to come – these passions are wrong. Many of us are pushed for time, for there is so much on – weddings, church, work, sport, school... But we need to make time to read and study Christ and to put into practice what we read.

We need to say 'no' to these things because they are so repulsive to God. To be involved in them is to slap God in the face. It is as good as saying to our Father, "Your Son's blood did not really matter". All this will take even more time if you were converted later in life, because it's harder to break old habits.

How do we know when to say 'no' and when to say 'yes'? In other words, how are we to know how to be holy? Paul writes in Titus 1:1 that knowledge of the truth leads to godliness. We need to read and study the Bible and then respond appropriately. That requires time.

Time

Many of us are pushed for time, for there is so much on – weddings, church, work, sport, school...But we need to make time to read and study Christ and to put into practice what we read. I'm aware that this runs contrary to the world's thought patterns, where time is money. Anyone who wants to 'make it' needs to go at 10,000 rpms all the time. At such a pace though, there's no place or time for the word of God and the Holy Spirit to teach you. Jesus made reference to that in the parable of the four soils (Mark 4). The path was hard because it was a busy place and the word had no chance to penetrate it. As a result the path produced no fruit.

To build an authentic relationship with Christ we have to declare war against whatever worldly entanglements keep us from daily fellowship with him. We have to buck the agendas and values of society and slow down long enough to commune with him (see *Honest to God?*, p 15).

Some Practical Things

Let me share a few things that I have learnt from others and am finding extremely valuable. While I aim to do them, I also want to say that I do not always succeed. Nevertheless, I press on with them for they are helping to bear fruit in me. Not all these things will work for everyone because we're all different. But if you are like me, they may well be of value to you.

1. Meditating

This means thinking over or dwelling on the word of God so we can put it into practice – making sufficient time to allow the truth to grab us and change us. Sometimes it is useful to spend a whole week meditating on one passage. J. I. Packer has this to say about meditation:

Meditation is a lost art today, and Christian people suffer grievously from their ignorance of the practice. Meditation is the activity of calling to mind, and thinking over, and dwelling on, and applying to oneself, the various things that one knows about the works and ways and purposes and promises of God. It is an activity of holy thought, consciously performed in the presence of God, under the eye of God, by the help of God, as a means of communion with God. Its purpose is to clear one's mental and spiritual vision of God, and to let His truth make its full and proper impact on one's mind and heart. It is a matter of talking to oneself about God and oneself; it is, indeed, often a matter of arguing with oneself, reasoning oneself out of moods of doubt and unbelief into a clear apprehension of God's power and grace.

Knowing God Hodder and Stoughton, p 20.

2. Writing

It is useful to spend time writing out reflections from the previous day – conversations, incidents, thoughts, mistakes that might be avoided, sins that need to be repented of, and godly things to aim for again. Writing your reflections down forces you to slow down from 10,000 rpms to about 500 rpms. At 500 rpms a person is slowed down enough to speak with and listen to Christ. Prayer times are much

more earnest, humbling and honest. Bill Hybels has some more detail on this in his book *Too Busy Not To Pray* (IVP, p 97ff.)

3. Praying

For those who suffer from an Israelitic mind during prayer times – a mind that spends a lot of time wandering in the wilderness and getting nowhere fast – writing out your prayers in full may be a useful discipline. I am trying hard to write out my prayers in full following either the pattern of the Lord's Prayer or the ACTS pattern (Adoration, Confession, Thanksgiving and Supplication). It's great to do, for time is spent praising the Holy God and thanking him for his graciousness. Some deep repenting is done and then I am free to speak to him about other matters.

4. Being Kept Accountable

I am very much aware that I am a man of weak flesh. I have all the good intentions in the world but all too often I succumb to an undisciplined lifestyle. To help with this, I've been meeting fortnightly with an 'accountability group' – a group of men from my small (home) church.

I meet with these men for a whole host of reasons: they help me rub shoulders with what another man has called 'humanoids', as opposed to clergy; it's terrific to develop significant friendships with other men in the congregation; and it helps me keep my preaching on target, for I know what some of my people are going through.

It is the highlight of my fortnight; for when we meet we are keen to help each other live the faith. We ask the tough questions. How is your relationship with Christ going? How about your relationship with your wife and children? How can we better pray for you or support you? Do you have contact with lost people? We talk about issues like being a dad of teenage children or dealing with problems at work in godly ways.

To be part of a group of adult men growing in the faith has been an enormous buzz. A great spin-off is the depth of support and commitment that develop in such a group. A few months ago, one man phoned in the middle of the day seeking a listening ear and advice about a business deal. I was able to ring one man and let him know about a pastoral lunch with a young woman from the parish. It was good to let it be known that all was above board (yes, I told my wife too). Just recently I had to make a major decision about ministry. To have these men pray for me, support me and give me their understanding of what they thought God was leading me to do was just brilliant. All in all, this accountability group is time extremely well spent.

These disciplines are not ends in themselves or aimed at achieving warm mystical fuzzies. They are tools aimed at helping a person develop a holy lifestyle in the late twentieth century. They help keep your focus on Jesus Christ and on the people around you. Holiness is separation from sin but not from people. If we are to speak to our nation in a way that rings true we need to take time to be the holy men and women Jesus died to make us.