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A CLASSIC BOOK—FOR A NEW GENERATION

Maybe you have never read *The Pursuit of Holiness*. But chances are that your parents or your youth pastor have read it. It's been around for a long time, and it has been changing people's lives for decades. We decided it was time to make it a book that you could pick up and experience your own life-change. This is that book—*The Chase*.

We gave it a new title and a great cover, but we also made sure that the words and the stories really meet you where you are. *The Chase* still has all the same ideas that Jerry put into his book back in the 70s, but now those ideas are expressed in a way that you can understand and relate to.

Get into *The Chase*. Find out what it means to pursue God in your everyday life. Learn how to be more like Jesus—to be more holy. Read it by yourself or in a small group. Let this book help to develop your faith, as *The Pursuit of Holiness* has done for so many people.



INTRODUCTION

Maybe you don't live on a farm. Maybe you've never even been to one. But you should be able to get this analogy:

Farmers work hard without knowing how things will turn out. A farmer plows his field, plants seeds, fertilizes, and gets rid of weeds that can kill healthy crops—but in the end he completely depends on forces outside himself. He knows he can't cause the seed to start growing. He can't make it rain. He can't force the sun to shine at just the right times for growing and harvesting the crop. To be a successful farmer and businessman, he totally depends on God for all these things to take place.

Yet if the farmer doesn't do everything he needs to do—plow, plant, fertilize, and cultivate—he can't expect a harvest at the end of the season. He's in sort of a partnership with God. The farmer has a chance of benefiting only when he has fulfilled his own responsibilities.

Farming is a joint venture between God and the farmer. The farmer can't do what God must do, and God won't do what the farmer is responsible for.

Chasing after holiness is like that. Holiness is something we need God to do, yet on the flip side we need to do some of the work ourselves. If God isn't present, true holiness can't be present. Yet if we rely solely on God and don't put any effort into it ourselves, holiness isn't possible either.

God has marked out the path for us to run down, but he's given us

the responsibility of the chase. We have to do the running ourselves.

What exactly is holiness anyway? One of the basic definitions of *holy* is “set apart for a religious purpose.” Basically, we’re called to be like God. Instead of living a life for our own wants and needs, God calls us to be like him.

As Christians, we talk about how we’re forgiven. Maybe you’ve even heard the phrase that says Christians have “power over sin.” Even though it doesn’t always feel like we have power over sin, the Bible says that the Holy Spirit gives us power to overcome sin we encounter all the time. Sometimes, though, we see this as a “silver bullet” solution. It’s easy to think we don’t have to change anything to defeat the sin in our lives. We think we can go on living our lives as we please, asking God to forgive our sins, and God will take care of everything. We almost see our salvation as a ticket to heaven instead of a new and better way of living. There are two main reasons for this kind of thinking.

First, we don’t want to accept responsibility for our sins. It’s easier to leave that to God. Often we pray for victory when instead we should be acting in obedience. We might say that we “fall into sin”—like it’s some big hole that opens up in front of us and we can’t do anything to prevent ourselves from falling in. Get real! Sometimes sin feels good and we want to do it. But we have a responsibility to live in the knowledge that God has called us to a new way of life. And we have a responsibility to live out that life.

The second reason is that we don’t understand what we’re supposed to do and what God will do for us. A thought that runs through Scripture says, “We need Christ for holiness. Everything that we bring to God is rags.” But another thought, one from God, is just as prevalent: “If you love me, you’ll obey what I command.” So we have to ask which

thought we need to listen to. After you read this book, I think you'll agree that we have to seek out what God is truly saying. As we come to see what the Bible teaches and then face up to our responsibility, will we see any progress in the chase after holiness?

The title for this book comes from the thought in Hebrews 12.

Take a new grip with your tired hands and stand firm on your shaky legs. Mark out a straight path for your feet. Then those who follow you, though they are weak and lame, will not stumble and fall but will become strong.

Try to live in peace with everyone, and seek to live a clean and holy life, for those who are not holy will not see the Lord.

(12:12-14, NLT)

What do you see when you look at these verses? There are two things. The first is action. The writer of Hebrews was telling us to get up and run. Chase after the prize. Our responsibility is to be active as we pursue what God calls us to. The second is what we get out of this—the goal. Do you see it there? It's what we all long for: *a glimpse of God!* If we take God at his word and chase after the things that he wants us to be about, we get to see God.

Remember that the chase is a long-distance race. Don't think you'll get to the finish line in this life and become perfect. That's impossible. What we're called to is a life of holiness. This means that we'll constantly be changing, growing, and learning how to live a holy life. Like a runner trains to get stronger, you'll get stronger even while you chase after holiness. It's a process.

If I tried to tell you that I'd arrived when it comes to living a per-

fectly holy life, I'd be lying to you. What I know for sure is that God has clearly laid out in Scripture this concept of chasing after holiness. I hope you'll look at this as a journey we're on together. This book is really a travelogue of thoughts and ideas I've put down on paper to help others on the journey. I hope you'll find it helpful as you run along your path.

To get the most out of exploring holiness, I encourage you to go through this book with some friends, if possible. The writer of Proverbs said, "You use steel to sharpen steel, and one friend sharpens another" (Proverbs 27:17). Look back at the verses from Hebrews 12. That writer also said we're supposed to help each other out. If you really want to live a holy life, talk openly with your friends about what messes you up and what you do well with.

HOLINESS IS FOR YOU

Sin can't tell you how to live. After all, you're not living under that old tyranny any longer. You're living in the freedom of God.

—ROMANS 6:14

Have you ever been to a retreat and come home filled with all kinds of new ideas about how to live out your Christian life? You remember the last night of worship and how close you felt to God. In your mind, you know that you can study the Bible and that you're supposed to love other people (just like Jesus loved them). It's easy, you tell yourself. You'll go back to the real world and just do it. No problem!

Then reality hits. Monday morning comes and you wake up. It was so easy last week at the retreat. But as the alarm blares in your ears, being loving is the last thing you want to think about. Mindlessly, you eat breakfast and walk out the door, twist the key in the ignition, and just like the car, your day is started.

What in the world is that guy doing? He just cut me off! I'll show him, I'm gonna ride his bumper to let him know I don't like what he did. Oh, wait, what was it the speaker said at the retreat? That other driver was created by God, and I need to be loving. Forget that—he just cut me off! Loving—he doesn't deserve it.

And so your week goes. The memory of what you learned is tucked safely away in your mind, but it never seems to reach your heart. Life threw you a curveball once again, and you were all too quick to swing. Strike one.

After only a few hours back in reality, you ask the question “Does the Bible actually have answers for real life?” You think, *Isn't it hypocritical to feel one way yet live another—to know I'm supposed to love others, while deep inside I can't stand them?* We all know what a hypocrite looks like, and we've all been one at some point. But we also know that there must be another way—some way to just chase after a holy life all the time and not only at retreats, on Sunday mornings, or when we hang out with our Christian friends.

All too often, though, sin gets the upper hand. Obedience, along with holiness, goes out the window.

The Bible does have answers for us. It promises both hope and help. We can walk in obedience to God's Word and live a life of holiness. In fact, God expects every Christian to live a holy life. But before that totally trips you up, realize that holiness is not only expected; it's the birthright of every Christian. We're born into holiness. We can actually do it. Paul's statement is true: sin can't tell you how to live.

The concept of holiness may seem archaic and impossible. It's hard to even think of someone who lives a holy life. If you decided to make a list of people who are living a holy life, chances are that you'd come up with an extremely short list. We live in a day where sex and profanity are everywhere we look on TV, in magazines, and online. To think that we could live a life set apart for God seems almost ridiculous. We all come up with reasons why it's okay to do certain things. Most of us separate our lives into compartments and live out of those different areas, depending on the people we're with. Some friends think that it's okay to listen to Korn, Slipknot, or Britney Spears; others think that pushing the borders of sexual activity is okay.

Some people think that trying to chase after holiness will result in

a “holier than thou” attitude. And sometimes they’re right. Yet holiness is an idea found in the Bible. The word “holy,” in various forms, occurs more than six hundred times in Scripture. One entire book, Leviticus, is devoted to the subject, and the idea of holiness is woven elsewhere throughout the fabric of Scripture. More important, God specifically commands us to be holy (see Leviticus 11:44). It may seem crazy or impossible to try to live a holy life, but God gives us the ability to do it.

Discussions of exactly how to be holy have suffered from many next-to-impossible concepts. In some circles, holiness means avoiding a series of specific sins. You might have heard your parents tell stories about rules against dancing or going to a movie theater. These sound ridiculous now, but most groups have some set of unspoken rules. For some, holiness means a particular style of dress and certain mannerisms. For others, it means unattainable perfection, which can be discouraging every time you sin. When we follow this rules approach to holiness, we’re in danger of becoming like the Pharisees with their self-righteous attitude and trivial do’s and don’ts.

All of these ideas, while accurate to some degree, miss the true concept of holiness. Oddly, they also provide excuses for not even trying to live a holy life. But you can’t let yourself fall into that trap. God expects more of you.

So what is holiness? To be holy is to be morally blameless.¹ It’s being separated from sin and set apart for God. We’ve done a lot of talking about holiness without looking at what the Bible says about it. Check out what Paul said in 1 Thessalonians 4:2-8:

You know the guidelines we laid out for you from the Master

Jesus. God wants you to live a pure life.

Keep yourselves from sexual promiscuity.

Learn to appreciate and give dignity to your body, not abusing it, as is so common among those who know nothing of God.

Don't run roughshod over the concerns of your brothers and sisters. Their concerns are God's concerns, and he will take care of them. We've warned you about this before. God hasn't invited us into a disorderly, unkempt life but into something holy and beautiful—as beautiful on the inside as the outside.

If you disregard this advice, you're not offending your neighbors, you're rejecting God, who is making you a gift of his Holy Spirit.

Look at how Peter contrasted obedience with the “old grooves of evil” in 1 Peter 1:14-16: “Don’t lazily slip back into those old grooves of evil, doing just what you feel like doing. You didn’t know any better then; you do now. As obedient children, let yourselves be pulled into a way of life shaped by God’s life, a life energetic and blazing with holiness. God said, ‘I am holy; you be holy.’”

These verses show that living a holy life means living a God-focused life. It’s not about doing what everyone else around you is doing (or not doing). It’s all about living out of what God is calling you to. Paul talked about sexual promiscuity and a disorderly life. Peter talked about evil. We need to live a life that focuses on the teachings God gives us through the Bible as well as through the conviction of the Holy Spirit. Living a holy life, then, means living a life that’s in agreement with, and obedience to, the Bible’s moral teachings as well as in contrast to the sinful ways of the world. As Paul put it in Ephesians 4:20-24:

That's no life for you. You learned Christ! My assumption is that you have paid careful attention to him, been well instructed in the truth precisely as we have it in Jesus. Since, then, we do not have the excuse of ignorance, everything—and I do mean everything—connected with that old way of life has to go. It's rotten through and through. Get rid of it! And then take on an entirely new way of life—a God-fashioned life, a life renewed from the inside and working itself into your conduct as God accurately reproduces his character in you.

So, if holiness is basic to the Christian life, why don't we experience it more from day to day? Why do we feel constantly beaten up in our struggles with sin? Why do we seem to be more like the world than like God? While this might sound overly simple, the answers to these questions can be grouped into three basic areas.

Our first problem is that our attitude toward sin is more self-centered than God-centered. It's easy to worry more about our "victory" over sin than about the fact that our sins grieve God's heart. We don't want to face up to the fact that we're sinners. After all, we live in a success-crazed culture—we should be able to handle this ourselves. But this attitude takes the focus off God and puts it on ourselves. It's not about God anymore; it's all about us.

We have to start seeing our sin as sinning against God. Listen to David's words from Psalm 51. Imagine praying this to God:

*You're the One I've violated, and you've seen
it all, seen the full extent of my evil.
You have all the facts before you,
whatever you decide about me is fair.*

*I've been out of step with you for a long time,
 in the wrong since before I was born.
 What you're after is truth from the inside out.
 Enter me, then; conceive a new, true life. (51:4-6)*

While David knew that his sin involved other people, he also knew that his sin ultimately was against God. Open up your Bible and spend some time praying about that psalm. Ask God for his perspective on sin. Ask him to help change your thoughts about sin.

God wants us to walk in obedience, not victory. Obedience is oriented toward God; victory is oriented toward ourselves. This may seem like a microscopic difference. But most of us have a subtle, self-centered attitude at the root of many of our difficulties with sin. Until we face this attitude and deal with it, we can't consistently walk in holiness.

Of course, I'm not saying, "God doesn't want us to experience victory." But victory comes as a by-product of obedience. As we concentrate on living obedient, holy lives, we'll certainly experience the joy of victory over sin.

Our second problem is that we've misunderstood the idea of "living by faith" (see Galatians 2:20) to mean that we don't have to make any effort at holiness. Sometimes we've even suggested that effort on our part is "of the flesh"—trying to succeed without God's help.

We have a personal responsibility for our walk of holiness. One Sunday my pastor said, "You can put away any habit that controls you if you really want to." I quickly agreed, because he was talking about a specific habit that I didn't struggle with. But then the Holy Spirit put this thought in my heart: "Not so fast! You can put away the sinful habits that *you* deal with, if you accept personal responsibility for

them." Once I figured out that I had this responsibility, the chase after holiness was on!

Our third problem is that we don't take some sins seriously. We mentally categorize sins into areas that we think are more or less acceptable. It all depends. What about the MP3s that you swapped online or a report you downloaded from the Internet? And we all tell "little white lies" almost every day. Maybe you think, *If it doesn't hurt anyone else, then it's okay for me to do it.*

But the Bible says it's "the little foxes that ruin the vineyards" (Song of Songs 2:15, NIV). In other words, compromising on the little issues easily leads to greater sins. And who gets to decide that a little white lie isn't a serious sin in God's eyes?

Commenting on some of the more minor dietary laws God gave to the Israelites, Andrew Bonar said,

It is not the importance of the thing, but the majesty of the Lawgiver, that is to be the standard of obedience. . . . Some, indeed, might reckon such minute and arbitrary rules as these as trifling. But the principle involved in obedience or disobedience was none other than the same principle which was tried in Eden at the foot of the forbidden tree. It is really this: Is the Lord to be obeyed in all things whatsoever He commands? Is He a holy Lawgiver? Are His creatures bound to give implicit assent to His will?²

Let's ask the big question now: Are you willing to call sin "sin," not because it's big or small, but because God's law forbids it? We can't categorize sin if we're going to live a life of holiness. God won't let us get away with that kind of attitude.

We'll address the following problems in greater detail later. But take a few minutes to think about these issues right now.

- Will you start looking at sin as an offense against God instead of just a personal defeat?
- Will you begin taking personal responsibility for your sin, realizing that as you do, you must depend on the grace of God?
- Will you start obeying God in all areas of life, however insignificant an issue may be?

As we move on, we're going to look at God's holiness. Holiness starts with him and not with us. Only as we see his holiness—his absolute purity and moral hatred of sin—will we be gripped by the awfulness of sin against him. That's the first step in our chase after holiness.