

SUPPOSE AN UNHOLY MAN WENT TO HEAVEN

J. C. Ryle (1816-1900)

*“Without holiness no man
shall see the Lord.”*

—Hebrews 12:14

SUPPOSE for a moment that you were allowed to enter heaven without holiness. What would you do? What possible enjoyment could you feel there? To which of all the saints would you join yourself, and by whose side would you sit? Their pleasures are not your pleasures, their tastes are not your tastes, their character not your character. How could you possibly be happy if you had not been holy on earth?

Now perhaps you love the company of the light and careless, the worldly-minded and the covetous, the reveler and the pleasure-seeker, the ungodly and the profane. There will be none such in heaven.

Now perhaps you think the saints of God too strict and particular and serious. You rather avoid them; you have no delight in their society. There will be no other company in heaven.

Now perhaps you think praying, Scripture reading, and hymn singing dull and melancholy and stupid work, a thing to be tolerated now and then, but not enjoyed. You reckon the Sabbath a burden and a weariness; you could not possibly spend more than a small part of it in worshipping God. But remember, heaven is a never-ending Sabbath. The inhabitants thereof rest not day and night, saying, “Holy, holy, holy, Lord God Almighty” and singing the praise of the Lamb (Rev 4:8). How could an unholy man find pleasure in occupation such as this?

Think you that such a one would delight to meet David, Paul, and John, after a life spent in doing the very things they spoke against? Would he take sweet counsel with them and find that he and they had much in common? Think you, above all, that he would rejoice to meet Jesus, the crucified One, face to face, after cleaving to the sins for which He died, after loving His enemies and despising His friends? Would he stand before Him with confidence and join in the cry, “This is our God...we have waited for him, we will be glad and rejoice in his salvation” (Isa 25:9)? Think you not rather that the tongue of an unholy man would cleave to the roof of his mouth with shame, and his only desire would be to be cast out? He would feel a stranger in a land he knew not, a black sheep amid Christ’s holy flock. The voice of cherubim and seraphim—the song of angels,

archangels, and all the company of heaven—would be a language he could not understand. The very air would seem an air he could not breathe.

I know not what others may think, but to me it does seem clear that heaven would be a miserable place to an unholy man. It cannot be otherwise. People may say, in a vague way, they “hope to go to heaven,” but they do not consider what they say...We must be heavenly-minded and have heavenly tastes in the life that now is, or else we shall never find ourselves in heaven in the life to come.

And now, before I go any further, let me say a few words, by way of application. For one thing, let me ask everyone who may read these pages, *are you holy*? Listen, I pray you, to the question I put to you this day. Do you know anything of the holiness of which I have been speaking?

I do not ask whether you attend your church regularly, whether you have been baptized and received the Lord’s Supper, whether you have the name of Christian. I ask something more than all this: are you holy, or are you not? I do not ask whether you approve of holiness in others; whether you like to read the lives of holy people, to talk of holy things, and to have on your table holy books; whether you mean to be holy and hope you will be holy someday. I ask something further: are you yourself holy this very day, or are you not?

And why do I ask so straightly, and press the question so strongly? I do it because the Scripture says, “Without holiness no man shall see the Lord” (Heb 12:14). It is written, it is not my fancy; it is the Bible, not my private opinion; it is the Word of God, not of man: “Without holiness no man shall see the Lord.”

Alas, what searching, sifting words are these! What thoughts come across my mind as I write them down! I look at the world and see the greater part of it lying in wickedness. I look at professing Christians and see the vast majority having nothing of Christianity but the name. I turn to the Bible and I hear the Spirit saying, “Without holiness no man shall see the Lord.”

Surely it is a text that ought to make us consider our ways and search our hearts. Surely it should raise within us solemn thoughts and send us to prayer. You may try to put me off by saying you feel much and think much about these things, far more than many suppose. I answer, “This is not the point. The poor lost souls in hell do as much as this. The great question is not what you think and what you feel, but what you *do*.”

You may say it was never meant that all Christians should be holy, and that holiness such as I have described is only for great saints and people of uncommon gifts. I answer, “I cannot see that in Scripture. I read that *every man* who hath this hope in Christ purifieth himself” (1Jo 3:3). “Without holiness *no man* shall see the Lord.”

You may say it is impossible to be so holy and to do our duty in this life at the same time; the thing cannot be done. I answer, “You are mistaken; it can be done.” With Christ on your side, nothing is impossible. It has been done by many. David, Obadiah, Daniel, and the servants of Nero’s household are all examples that go to prove it.

You may say if you were so holy you would be unlike other people. I answer, “I know

it well. It is just what you ought to be. Christ's true servants were always unlike the world around them—a separate nation, a peculiar people (Deu 14:2; Ti 2:14)—and you must be so too if you would be saved!”

You may say at this rate very few will be saved. I answer, “I know it. It is precisely what we are told in the Sermon on the Mount.” The Lord Jesus said so eighteen hundred years ago. “Strait is the gate, and narrow is the way, which leadeth unto life, and few there be that find it” (Mat 7:14). Few will be saved because few will take the trouble to seek salvation. Men will not deny themselves the pleasures of sin and their own way for a little season...

You may say these are hard sayings; the way is very narrow. I answer, “I know it. So says the Sermon on the Mount.” The Lord Jesus said so eighteen hundred years ago. He always said that men, if they would be His disciples, must take up the cross daily (Luk 9:23) and that they must be ready to cut off hand or foot¹ (Mat 18:8). It is in religion as it is in other things: there are no gains without pains. That which costs nothing is worth nothing.² ❧

¹ To cut off hand or foot is not to be taken literally, but figuratively. The author rightly says “must be ready” to do so, that is, must have the attitude that places following Christ above everything else in life.

² We must always remember the difference between salvation and sanctification. Salvation is offered freely because Christ has paid the penalty for His children's sins at the cross. Yet, following Christ in this world is costly: we die to this world's sinful pleasures, willing to forsake everything to follow Him if necessary.