

# Holiness: It's Hindrances

by G. Campbell Morgan

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*The hindrance to holiness is disobedience to the truth and refusal to fulfill the conditions for holiness.*

**Scripture:** Romans 7:24, Galatians 5:7

**Topics:** "Holiness", "Spiritual Hindrances"

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## Description

G. Campbell Morgan addresses the hindrances to holiness, emphasizing that many Christians, despite initially running well in their faith, have allowed various influences to impede their spiritual progress. He highlights the dangers of returning to bondage and the importance of personal examination to identify what hinders one's pursuit of holiness. Morgan asserts that holiness is not only possible but essential for a vibrant Christian life, and he challenges believers to confront the obstacles--be they people, habits, or worldly temptations--that detract from their spiritual growth. He concludes with a call to recognize that failing to pursue holiness ultimately defames Christ and diminishes the witness of the church in the world.

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## Transcript

THIS IS AN OUTBURST OF APPEAL IN THE MIDST OF AN ARGUMENT, and incidentally reveals a failure which has many other causes and manifestations than those with which this particular letter deals. The causes in this case were Judaizing teachers. The manifestations were that these people were going back into bondage, putting their neck under a yoke from which they had been set free. The actual failure the apostle described in the words: "Ye were running well; who did hinder you?" There had been a slackening of the pace, a relaxing of endeavor. These people were characterized by dimness of vision, weakening of virtue, and absence of victory. Their Christian life was not what it ought to be, and that fact troubled the heart of the apostle. He was never anxious about orthodoxy of intellect, except as it affected orthodoxy of heart and of life. If he was eager that the one and only Gospel should be preached, with an almost fierce invective cursing the men who preached "another Gospel," it was not an intellectual anger growing out of a conviction that he alone was right, but an anger born of his conviction that when men ceased to obey the truth the fine bloom was brushed from their characters, and they themselves suffered deterioration.

In this final study in the subject of holiness, let us give ourselves to personal examination, turning from theory to experience. We have defined holiness as that rectitude of character which issues in rectitude of conduct. We have declared that we believe holiness of character to be possible because it is the will of God for His children, because the work of Christ was in order to produce it, and because the ministry of

the Spirit is for the administration of the work of Christ, and so for the realization of it. We have declared that the New Testament teaches that the conditions are those of renunciation of known wrong, the absolute surrender of the life to the Lordship of Jesus, and quiet, restful trust in Him. We have, moreover, considered the character of holiness in contrast to that of the man who lacks it as the selfless life, Christ-centered, and therefore love-centered and light encompassed, the character full of beauty.

Immediately we turn from theory to experience we face the fact of how far we are from realizing the character of holiness. We have seen the vision, but we have not gained the victory, and Paul's inquiry is one that we may pertinently apply to ourselves, "Who did hinder you?" In other words, if holiness be necessary to righteousness, if holiness be possible in the economy of God, if holiness be possible on the fulfilment of conditions, if holiness of character be that fair and gracious attitude of spirit which the New Testament reveals, and we lack it, why do we lack it?

In attempting to answer this inquiry, I propose first to deal with some of the answers commonly given, and, second, to examine the suggestiveness of Paul's inquiry as revealing the true answer.

It is often affirmed that the teaching of Scripture does not warrant the expectation that such character is possible to us here and now.

That statement is already answered by the teaching of the New Testament which we have considered. Nevertheless, the position is maintained on the supposed authority of certain passages of Scripture which do seem to call in question the possibility. I cannot, in the course of one brief study, touch on all of these passages, but there are three principal ones which we may take by way of illustration. There is, first, the passage in the Roman letter at the close of the seventh chapter in which the apostle says: "I am carnal, sold under sin. . . . To me who would do good, evil is present." All the statements of that closing paragraph are constantly quoted, and are sincerely and honestly adduced as arguments against the possibility of having holiness of character here and now. I hope I am making myself clear that in any attempt to deal with this objection I approach the subject in sympathy with those who feel the difficulty. Some of the sweetest Christian people I have ever known have quoted that paragraph to prove it was impossible to be holy even while they were already holy.

Then there is the autobiographical message, in which Paul distinctly and clearly says: "Not that I have already obtained, or am already made perfect . . . I count not myself yet to have apprehended . . . but I press on, if so be that I may apprehend that for which also I was apprehended by Christ Jesus," thus disclaiming perfection.

And, finally, there is the passage in which John says: "If any man sin, we have an Advocate with the Father, Jesus Christ, the righteous One."

How shall we answer the sincere and honest difficulty of such as refer us to these or similar statements? First, by declaring, as a canon of interpretation, that no isolated passage or passages of Scripture can contradict its general teaching. If for a moment we could stand clear of examination of isolated passages, and think of the one message of the Bible to men, what would it be? "Or if we could gather up into one brief and comprehensive sentence the whole force of Christ's message to men, to His own disciples, how should we express-it? "Ye therefore shall be perfect, as your heavenly Father is perfect." I also have quoted isolated passages, but I have done so because I believe they express the whole burden of the message of the Word to men. Never from beginning to end does it excuse anything sinful in the life. It tells the story--thank God that it does--of men of like passions with myself; and it tells the story of their sin. It is

one of the peculiar beauties of the Bible that if it presents a man, it presents him as he is. When an artist painted Cromwell, and painted out all the roughnesses on his face, he daubed the canvas, and said: "Paint me blotches and all, or paint me not at all." In the Bible men are painted blotches and all. But if the experience revealed in the Bible is the experience of men who failed and fell, how do we know that they failed and fell? What do we mean by failing and falling? We see the failure because we also know the ideal which the Bible reveals. All the things which in the lives of these men were wrong we know to be so because the standard set up is that of perfection. Dr. Margoliouth, in his book, Lines of Defence of the Biblical Revelation, has a remarkable passage about David, as being a man after God's own heart. Dealing with those who declare that a man who sinned as David sinned with Bathsheba could not have been a man after God's own heart, he asks if it is conceivable that any other Eastern monarch of that particular age would have taken up the Position of penitence and contrition that David did, and declares that the excellence of David is seen in his attitude in the presence of sin.

The application of that illustration in the present argument is that we know the sin of David because we know the purity of the Divine ideal for him. His action is counted sinful by men who accept the Divine standard of holiness. We know the wrong of every man whose life story is told in the Bible, because we know also what God's thought for man is.

The Bible presents one Figure, Whose humanity was according to the Divine purpose and pattern, and I see the failure of all others because they stand in the fierce light of the purity and the holiness of that Life.

While that is the revelation of Scripture, taking it in its entirety, it cannot be that any single passage to be found in all its course can contradict that great ideal, or declare to men that the holiness which the Bible demands is not possible to them.

But there is another way in which this difficulty is answered. If we take each of these passages carefully, we shall see that none of them really contradicts the teaching of the Bible. It is very unfair to read the closing part of the seventh chapter of the letter to the Romans without running right on into that which follows. I read the solemn words: "I am carnal, sold under sin. . . . That which I do, I know not: for not what I would, that do I practise"; and so on and on, until at last the whole agony of the experience described expresses itself thus: "O wretched man that I am! Who shall deliver me out of the body of this death?" But the passage does not end there. The answer is immediately given. "I thank God through Jesus Christ our Lord." Then going back, and summarizing the whole description that has preceded that answer, the apostle writes: "So then I myself with the mind serve the law of God, but with the flesh the law of sin." Yes, but the apostle does not end even there. Read right on: "There is therefore now no condemnation to them that are in Christ Jesus. For the law of the Spirit of life in Christ Jesus made me free from the law of sin and of death." We are perfectly well aware of the fact that expositors differ entirely as to whether, in the closing part of the seventh chapter, Paul is describing an experience prior to regeneration, or an experience after regeneration. For a moment I do not care which. I admit the experience at the closing part of the seventh chapter. There is an experience which a man voices thus: "To me who would do good, evil is present. For I delight in the law of God after the inward man; but I see a different law in my members, warring against the law of my mind"; but it is not the ultimate experience of Christianity. The ultimate experience of Christianity is this: "The law of the Spirit of life in Christ Jesus made me free from the law of sin and of death." We have no right to quote as descriptive of the normal Christian life a passage that describes an experience from which the next passage declares deliverance to be possible. The apostle is leading us through the struggle that we all know to the revelation of the victory that we all may know if we will.

Again, in the Philippian passage, whereas it is true that the apostle says, "Not that I have already obtained, or am already made perfect . . . I count not myself yet to have apprehended," he also says: "One thing I do, forgetting the things which are behind, and stretching forward to the things which are before, I press on toward the goal"; and holiness is perfectly described in those words. When he says he has not yet apprehended, what does he mean? Follow his statement to its end, and the answer is given. "Who shall fashion anew the body of our humiliation that it may be conformed to the body of His glory?" That is to say, the work of Jesus Christ in a man will never be ultimately perfected until he sees Christ face to face with no veil between, with all the limitation of the present life forever over. The ultimate in my Christian character lies beyond this life in the spacious and far reaching mystery of the life to come. Holiness today is not perfection of consummation, but it is perfection of condition. It is the right attitude of a human life. Holiness does not mean that there can be no advancement. Holiness is the condition for advancement, that health of the spiritual life which makes growth possible. And this is what the apostle is teaching in the Philippian letter; he is healthy, but not full-grown; holy, but not glorified.

Or if we turn to the passage in the letter of John, it is quite true John wrote words of comfort, even for sinning believers: "If any man sin, we have an Advocate with the Father, Jesus Christ the righteous"; but is it fair to make an "if" a permission? What are the words immediately preceding? "My little children, these things write I unto you, that ye may not sin." I submit to you, and leave my argument at that point, that it is quite unfair to quote the gracious provision made for sinning souls as an argument in favor of the impossibility of holiness. Constantly I have to thank God that it is written, "We have an Advocate with the Father", but if I make-hear me patiently and carefully-if I make the fact of the advocacy of Jesus an excuse for sin, I am guilty of the most terrible treachery and blasphemy. "These things write I unto you that ye may not sin"; but the "if" which follows is not an argument, declaring that sin is necessary.

It is declared by others that the experience of Christian people does not warrant the expectation.

I speak to my own heart as also to yours when I say, in answer to that declaration, that it is a reflection on those who make it. If we say that we do not believe holiness to be possible because we have never met people who are really holy, in all kindness but in all earnestness I declare that declaration to be a reflection on the company we have been keeping, or a revelation of our own spiritual blindness. I think that is the difficulty very often when a man says he has never known men and women who lived holy lives. There was a day when a prophet, depressed by overwork, said: "I only am left. I am not better than my fathers." And what was the answer? "Yet will I leave me seven thousand . . . which have not bowed unto Baal." Let us make no mistake. There are multitudes of holy men and women-men and women of beautiful, Christly character, the very Salt of the earth, its gracious light How is it, then, that people say there are no holy men and women; No one will deny that Jesus of Nazareth was holy; yet the men of His own time said of Him: "Behold, a gluttonous man and a winebibber, a friend of publicans and sinners!" What was the meaning of such criticism? An ancient prophet of Israel declared, concerning the coming Messiah, "There is no beauty that we should desire Him." Do you imagine for a moment that the prophet meant the Messiah would lack beauty? By no means. What then? That men would be so blind that they could not see it. Paul, in writing to the Corinthians, declares that the spiritual man is spiritually discerned; and if you have seen a holy man, it was because his holiness was discerned of your own spiritual life. If you fail to discover the beauty of holiness, it is because you are unholy.

I have seen a novice in an art gallery criticizing a picture by a great master, and I have been sure of this, that while he thought he criticized the picture, the picture really criticized him. When I am told that there are no saints, I reply that the saints are close by our side, living in our home, touching us every day; but

we are color-blind, and the blue and the scarlet and the purple and the fine-twined linen have no loveliness for us because the dust of death is in our eyes.

But even if it were true that holy men and women are not to be found, then remember this, that prevalent imperfection is no justification of imperfection. Is there no holy man in your circle of acquaintance? Then you be the first. Oh, but it is objected, what other men have not been we cannot be. That we do not believe in any other realm of life. If our argument is that what no man has done, no man can do, then no master picture will ever be painted, no mountain will ever be climbed, no discovery will ever be made! All high things are made possible by the men and women who lead, who make highways, who blaze their way through forests that have never before been traversed. Be a pioneer and leader. Dare to stand alone. All the resources of God are at your disposal. Take hold of them, or, rather, let them take hold of you and be the first.

There are others who say that holiness is not a condition to be professed; that if they had the experience they would not talk about it.

My answer to that is this: Holiness does not need to be talked about; it talks. You remember Emerson's words--I do not quote the *pisissima verba*, but the spirit of what he said--"I cannot hear what you say for listening to what you are." I repeat, holiness does not need to be talked about; it talks. I quite agree with you that the nearer a man lives to his Lord, the less he announces his nearness in actual words; but the more evident it is in tone and temper, and these are the things of holiness. But I pray you, do not urge the fact that if you possessed it you would not talk about it as an indication of the impossibility of possessing the character of holiness. Holiness is a rare and beautiful spirit which permeates and pervades the whole life, and sheds its fragrance everywhere. I remember twenty years ago, in a home in which I was staying, that in one room I always detected the fragrance of roses, and I said to my host one day, "I wish you would tell me how it is that I never come into this room without seeming to detect the fragrance of roses." He smiled, and said: "Ten years ago I was in the Holy Land, and while there I bought a small phial of otto of roses. It was wrapped in cotton wool, and as I was standing there unpacking it, suddenly I broke the bottle. I took the whole thing up, cotton wool and all, and put it into this vase." There stood a beautiful vase, and he lifted the lid, and the fragrance of the roses filled the room. That fragrance had permeated the clay of the vase, and it was impossible to enter the room without consciousness of it. If Christ be in us, the fragrance of the Rose of Sharon will pervade and permeate our whole life. We need not talk about it; but if there be no fragrance, the reason is not that if there were you would not talk of it.

There are yet others who say that they have no desire for the character described.

That is a most terrible confession. The death of desire is the prelude of death. Let any who lack desire ponder carefully the words of Jesus: "Blessed are they that hunger and thirst after righteousness, for they shall be filled."

In conclusion, let us examine the actual wording of Paul's inquiry. Mark well the preliminary affirmation: "Ye were running well." That to me is a most suggestive statement, and it is true of every Christian man and woman. The beginning of Christian life is ever characterized by desire and endeavor after holiness. When we begin to live a Christian life we see the goal, and we take a corresponding attitude. The men and the women who to-day decide for Christ hand their lives over in order to be what? That they may be holy. There is vast territory to be subdued, enemies to be fought and mastered, much to be done; but they see the vision, and they fall in line.

"Ye were running well." What is the trouble with you? You are a member of a church, you are still a Christian man, I do not question it for a moment, but all the bloom has gone from your character. You have become hard and mechanical and indifferent. There was a time when you sighed over your own shortcoming and failure, but not now. Why not?

"Ye were running well." Every man who first sees the face of Jesus enters into a measure of the experience of holiness. The vision of His face, the glory of His own purity is in itself an Inspiration which is of the nature of holiness. Why the failure?

Now, notice the apostle's final admission, "that ye should not obey the truth." In that phrase you have the revelation of the whole secret of arrested development and failure. If I--who have seen the face of Jesus, and have desired to be like Him, an ave set my face in the attitude He demands--am faltering in character, it is because I have refused to fulfil the conditions. There is something in my life that I retain which I know is unlike Him, and contrary to His will. There is some command He has laid on me which I have not obeyed. There broke on my vision some morning a great light on the hills, calling me to climb and leave the valleys, and I lingered in the valleys until the light on the hills had faded. That is the secret. The new-born soul possesses the character of holiness; but let that new-born soul turn the back on light, disobey in any particular the Word of the Lord, turn for a moment the face from the gleaming glory of the ultimate ideal, and the result is a weakening and a relaxing of effort, and the character suffers deterioration. The blame is never on Him; it is always on us.

Thus we end this whole series with the central inquiry of this text. "Who did hinder you?" That is a purely personal inquiry. I can do none other than repeat it in your hearing. You must answer it alone. Perhaps "Who did hinder you?" Perhaps "What did hinder you?" Perhaps "Who? " Some person, some friend, father, mother, wife, child, lover, partner in business? "Who did hinder you?" Or perhaps what? What enticement of the world, the flesh, the devil? Some short cut to a kingdom of power, some deft manipulation of truth that was not all a lie, some lowering of the high standard of the ideal in order to make a momentary gain which was wholly of the dust. What did hinder you?

I repeat, the preacher can only inquire. It is not for me to hear the answer, but the answer must be given in the light and in loneliness. But I pray you remember this, that holiness is not merely a privilege, it is a duty. To fail is to fail of the realization of your own life. I mention that only to dismiss it, for it is the lowest argument of all. The most weighty argument is that to fail of holiness is to defame Christ on the highways and in the city. You name His name, but if your children see in you unloveliness of temper, God help you; you had better quit naming His name, and give your child a chance.

That is the terror of this whole matter. I do not know; sometimes I wonder whether I am quite right about this, but I cannot help it. I must be true to conviction. I am more and more anxious that men should see that the reason of their Christianity is not their salvation, but their influence on other men. You defame Christ if you name His name and sing His song, and do not realize His character. And to fail of holiness is to wrong the world, to dim the only light it has, and make the salt, the aseptic salt that should give goodness its chance, savorless. And mark the infinite satire of Christ. "If the salt have lost its savor, wherewith shall it be seasoned? It is fit only to be cast out and trodden under foot of man." And that is what happens to Christian men and women who name the name of Christ, and are not salt. They are trodden under foot of men; they are despised by their day and generation. The world itself holds us in supreme contempt if we profess to be Christian and are not holy.

What, then, ought to be the immediate outcome of this series of studies? That we should answer this question, Who or what hath hindered you? that in some hour of quiet meditation and loneliness we should drag into the light the thing that hinders--friend, habit, or enticement-- that we should put it away. To that exercise may this series of studies lead very many of us for the glory of Christ.

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