

Holiness: The False and the True - Part 1 of 2

by Harry Ironside

Harry Ironside shares his journey of seeking true holiness and the struggles he faced in understanding salvation and sanctification.

Scripture: Proverbs 1:24-32, Matthew 5:8, Luke 19:10, John 3:16, Romans 3:19, Galatians 5:16-17, Philippians 3:12-14, 2 Timothy 3:15, Hebrews 12:14, 1 John 1:8-10

Topics: "Holiness", "Salvation"

Description

Harry Ironside shares his early struggles and experiences in seeking holiness during the first six years of his Christian life. He reflects on the profound impact of his father's legacy and his mother's prayers, which instilled in him a desire to live for God. Despite his initial understanding of salvation, he grappled with the difference between believing about Jesus and truly believing in Him as his personal Savior. Ironside recounts his journey through religious experiences, the pursuit of sanctification, and the realization that true holiness is not merely about outward appearances but a deep, personal relationship with Christ. He emphasizes the importance of recognizing one's own sinful nature and the need for continual reliance on God's grace.

Transcript

It is my desire, in dependence on the Lord, to write a faithful record, so far as memory now serves me, of some of God's dealings with my soul and my strivings after the experience of holiness, during the first six years of my Christian life, ere I knew the blessedness of finding all in Christ. This will make it necessary at times, I have little doubt, to "speak as a fool"--even as the apostle Paul did: but as I reflect on the need for such a record, I think I can say with him, "Ye have compelled me."

If I may be privileged to thereby save others from the unhappy experiences I passed through in those early years, I shall feel abundantly repaid for the effort it will take to thus put these heart-experiences before my readers.

From a very early age God began to speak to me through His Word. I doubt if I could go back to the first time when, to my recollection, I felt something of the reality of eternal things.

My father was taken from me ere his features were impressed upon my infant mind. But I never have heard him spoken of other than as a man of God. He was known in Toronto (my birthplace) to many as "The Eternity Man." His Bible, marked in many places, was a precious legacy to me; and from it I learned

to recite my first verse of Scripture, at the age of four. I distinctly recall learning the blessed words of Luke 19:10, "For the Son of man is come to seek and to save that which was lost." That I was lost, and that Christ Jesus came from heaven to save me, were the first divine truths impressed on my young heart.

My widowed mother was, it seems to me, one of a thousand. I remember yet how I would be thrilled as she knelt with me as a child, and prayed, "O Father, keep my boy from ever desiring anything greater than to live for Thee. Save him early, and make him a devoted street-preacher, as his father was. Make him willing to suffer for Jesus' sake, to gladly endure persecution and rejection by the world that cast out Thy Son; and keep him from what would dishonor Thee." The words were not always the same, but I have heard the sentiment times without number.

To our home there often came servants of Christ--plain, godly men, who seemed to me to carry with them the atmosphere of eternity. Yet in a very real sense they were the bane of my boyhood. Their searching, "Henry, lad, are you born again yet?" or the equally impressive, "Are you certain that your soul is saved?" often brought me to a standstill; but I knew not how to reply.

California had become my home ere I was clear as to being a child of God. In Los Angeles I first began to learn the love of the world, and was impatient of restraint. Yet I had almost continual concern as to the great matter of my salvation.

I was but twelve years old when I began a Sunday-school and set up to try to help the boys and girls of the neighborhood to a knowledge of the Book I had read ten times through, but which had still left me without assurance of salvation.

To Timothy, Paul wrote, "From a child thou hast known the Holy Scriptures, which are able to make thee wise unto salvation, through faith which is in Christ Jesus" (2 Tim. 3:15). It was this latter that I lacked. I had, it seemed to me, always believed, yet I dared not say I was saved. I know now that I had always believed about Jesus. I had not really believed in Him as my personal Saviour. Between the two there is all the difference that there is between being saved and lost, between an eternity in Heaven and endless ages in the lake of fire.

As I have said, I was not without considerable anxiety as to my soul; and though I longed to break into the world, and was indeed guilty of much that was vile and wicked, I ever felt a restraining hand upon me, keeping me from many things that I would otherwise have gone into; and a certain religiousness became, I suppose, characteristic. But religion is not salvation.

I was nearly fourteen years old when, upon returning one day from school, I learned that a servant of Christ from Canada, well known to me, had arrived for meetings. I knew, ere I saw him, how he would greet me; for I remembered him well, and his searching questions, when I was younger. Therefore I was not surprised, but embarrassed nevertheless, when he exclaimed, "Well, Harry, lad, I'm glad to see you. And are you born again yet?"

The blood mantled my face; I hung my head, and could find no words to reply. An uncle present said, "You know, Mr. M--, he preaches himself now a bit, and conducts a Sunday School!"

"Indeed!" was the answer. "Will you get your Bible, Harry?"

I was glad to get out of the room, and so went at once for my Bible, and returned, after remaining out of the room as long as seemed decent, hoping thereby to recover myself. Upon my re-entering the room, he

said, kindly, but seriously, "Will you turn to Rom. 3:19, and read it aloud?"

Slowly I read, "Now we know that what things soever the law saith, it saith to them who are under the law: that every mouth may be stopped, and all the world may become guilty before God." I felt the application, and was at a loss for words. The evangelist went on to tell me that he too had been once a religious sinner, till God stopped his mouth, and then gave him a sight of Christ. He pressed on me the importance of getting to the same place ere I tried to teach others.

The words had their effect. From that time till I was sure I was saved, I refrained from talking of these things, and I gave up my Sunday-school work. But now Satan, who was seeking my soul's destruction, suggested to me, "If lost and unfit to speak of religious things to others, why not enjoy all the world has to offer, so far as you are able to avail yourself of it?"

I listened only too eagerly to his words, and for the next six months or thereabouts no one was more anxious for folly than I, though always with a smarting conscience.

At last, on a Thursday evening in February 1890, God spoke to me in tremendous power while out at a party with a lot of other young people, mostly older than myself, intent only on an evening's amusement. I remember now that I had withdrawn from the parlor for a few moments to obtain a cooling drink in the next room. Standing alone at the refreshment table, there came home to my inmost soul, in startling clearness, some verses of Scripture I had learned months before. They are found in the first chapter of Proverbs, beginning with verse 24 and going on to verse 32. Here wisdom is represented as laughing at the calamity of the one who refused to heed instruction, and mocking when his fear cometh. Every word seemed to burn its way into my heart. I saw as never before my dreadful guilt in having so long refused to trust Christ for myself, and in having preferred my own wilful way to that of Him who had died for me.

I went back to the parlor, and tried to join with the rest in their empty follies. But all seemed utterly hollow, and the tinsel was gone. The light of eternity was shining into the room, and I wondered how any could laugh with God's judgment hanging over us, like a Damocles' sword suspended by a hair. We seemed like people sporting with closed eyes on the edge of a precipice, and I the most careless of all, till grace had made me see.

That night, when all was over, I hurried home, and crept up-stairs to my room. There, after lighting a lamp, I took my Bible, and, with it before me, fell upon my knees.

I had an undefined feeling that I had better pray. But the thought came, "What shall I pray for?" Clearly and distinctly came back the answer, "For what God has been offering me for years. Why not then receive it, and thank Him?"

My dear mother had often said, "The place to begin with God is Romans 3, or John 3." To both these scriptures I turned, and read them carefully. Clearly I saw that I was a helpless sinner, but that Christ for me had died, and that salvation was offered freely to all who trusted in Him. Reading John 3:16 the second time, I said, "That will do. O God, I thank Thee that Thou has loved me, and given Thy Son for me. I trust Him now as my Saviour, and I rest on Thy Word, which tells me I have everlasting life."

Then I expected to feel a thrill of joy. It did not come. I wondered if I could be mistaken. I expected a sudden rush of love for Christ. It did not come either. I feared I could not be really saved with so little emotion.

I read the words again. There could be no mistake. God loved the world, of which I formed a part. God gave His Son to save all believers. I believed in Him as my Saviour. Therefore I must have everlasting life. Again I thanked Him, and rose from my knees to begin the walk of faith. God could not lie. I knew I must be saved.

Holiness: The Great Desideratum

Being saved myself, the first great desire that sprang up in my heart was an intense longing to lead others to the One who had made my peace with God.

At the time of which I write, the Salvation Army was in the zenith of its energy as an organization devoted to going out after the lost. It had not yet become popular, a society to be patronized by the world and used as a medium for philanthropic work. Its officers and soldiers seemed to have but one aim and object--to lead the weary and despairing to the Saviour's feet. I had often attended its services, and in fact had frequently, though but a child, given a "testimony" by quoting Scripture and urging sinners to trust Christ, even while I was in the dark myself. Naturally therefore, when the knowledge of salvation was mine, I went at the first opportunity, the night after my conversion, to an "Army" street-meeting, and there spoke for the first time, in the open air, of the grace of God so newly revealed to my soul.

I suppose, because I was but a lad of fourteen and fairly familiar with the Bible, and also somewhat forward--unduly so, I have little doubt--I was at once cordially welcomed among them, and soon became known as "the boy preacher," a title which, I fear, ministered more to the pride of my heart than I had any idea of at the time. For, in fact, in my new-found joy I had no conception that I still carried about with me a nature as sinful and vile as existed in the breast of the greatest evildoer in the world. I knew something of Christ and His love; I knew little or nothing of myself and the deceitfulness of my own heart.

As nearly as I can now recollect, I was in the enjoyment of the knowledge of God's salvation about a month when, in some dispute with my brother, who was younger than I, my temper suddenly escaped control, and in an angry passion I struck and felled him to the ground. Horror immediately filled my soul. I needed not his sarcastic taunt, "Well, you are a nice Christian! You'd better go down to the Army and tell what a saint you've become!" to send me to my room in anguish of heart to confess my sin to God in shame and bitter sorrow, as afterwards frankly to my brother, who generously forgave me.

From this time on mine was an "up-and-down experience," to use a term often heard in "testimony meetings." I longed for perfect victory over the lusts and desires of the flesh. Yet I seemed to have more trouble with evil thoughts and unholy propensities than I had ever known before. For a long time I kept these conflicts hidden, and known only to God and to myself. But after some eight or ten months, I became interested in what were called "holiness meetings," held weekly in the "Army" hall, and also in a mission I sometimes attended.

At these gatherings an experience was spoken of which I felt was just what I needed. It was designated by various terms: "The Second Blessing"; "Sanctification"; "Perfect Love"; "Higher Life"; "Cleansing from Inbred Sin"; and by other expressions.

Substantially, the teaching was this: When converted, God graciously forgives all sins committed up to the time when one repents. But the believer is then placed in a lifelong probation, during which he may at any time forfeit his justification and peace with God if he falls into sin from which he does not repent. In order, therefore, to maintain himself in a saved condition, he needs a further work of grace called sanctification.

This work has to do with sin the root, as justification had to do with sins the fruit.

The steps leading up to this second blessing are, firstly, conviction as to the need of holiness (just as in the beginning there was conviction of the need of salvation); secondly, a full surrender to God, or the laying of every hope, prospect and possession on the altar of consecration; thirdly, to claim in faith the incoming of the Holy Spirit as a refining fire to burn out all inbred sin, thus destroying in toto every lust and passion, leaving the soul perfect in love and as pure as unfallen Adam.

This wonderful blessing received, great watchfulness is required lest, as the serpent beguiled Eve, he deceive the sanctified soul, and thus introduce again the same kind of an evil principle which called for such drastic action before.

Such was the teaching; and coupled with it were heartfelt testimonies of experiences so remarkable that I could not doubt with genuineness, nor that what others seemed to enjoy was likewise for me if I would fulfil the conditions.

One lady told how for forty years she had been kept from sin in thought, word, and deed. Her heart, she declared, was no longer "deceitful above all things, and desperately wicked," but was as holy as the courts of heaven, since the blood of Christ has washed away the last remains inbred sin. Others spoke in a similar way, though their experiences were much briefer. Bad tempers had been rooted out when a full surrender was made.

Evil propensities and unholy appetites had been instantly destroyed when holiness was claimed by faith.

Eagerly I began to seek this precious boon of holiness in the flesh. Earnestly I prayed for this Adamic sinlessness. I asked God to reveal to me every unholy thing, that I might truly surrender all to Him. I gave up friends, pursuits, pleasures--everything I could think of that might hinder the incoming of the Holy Ghost and the consequent blessing. I was a veritable "book-worm," an intense love for literature possessing me from childhood; but in my ignorant desire I put away all books of pleasurable or instructive character, and promised God to read only the Bible and holiness writings if He would only give me "the blessing." I did not, however, obtain what I sought, though I prayed zealously for weeks.

At last, one Saturday night (I was away from home, living with a friend, a member of the "Army"), I determined to go out into the country and wait on God, not returning till I had received the blessing of perfect love. I took a train at eleven o'clock, and went to a lonely station twelve miles from Los Angeles. There I alighted, and, leaving the highway, descended into an empty arroyo, or water-course. Falling on my knees beneath a sycamore tree, I prayed in an agony for hours, beseeching God to show me anything that hindered my reception of the blessing. Various matters of too private and sacred a nature to be here related came to my mind. I struggled against conviction, but finally ended by crying, "Lord, I give up all--everything, every person, every enjoyment, that would hinder my living alone for Thee. Now give me, I pray Thee, the blessing!"

As I look back, I believe I was fully surrendered to the will of God at that moment, so far as I understood it. But my brain and nerves were unstrung by the long midnight vigil and the intense anxiety of previous months, and I fell almost fainting to the ground. Then a holy ecstasy seemed to thrill all my being. This I thought was the coming into my heart of the Comforter. I cried out in confidence, "Lord, I believe Thou dost come in. Thou dost cleanse and purify me from all sin. I claim it now. The work is done. I am sanctified by Thy blood. Thou dost make me holy. I believe; I believe!" I was unspeakably happy. I felt that

all my struggles were ended.

With a heart filled with praise, I rose from the ground and began to sing aloud. Consulting my watch, I saw it was about half-past three in the morning. I felt I must hasten to town so as to be in time for the seven o'clock prayer-meeting, there to testify to my experience. Fatigued as I was by being up all night, yet so light was my heart I scarcely noticed the long miles back, but hastened to the city, arriving just as the meeting was beginning, buoyed up by my new-found experience. All were rejoiced as I told what great things I believed God had done for me. Every meeting that day added to my gladness. I was literally intoxicated with joyous emotions.

My troubles were all ended now. The wilderness was past, and I was in Canaan, feeding on the old corn of the land. Nevermore should I be troubled by inward drawings toward sin. My heart was pure. I had reached the desirable state of full sanctification. With no foe within, I could direct all my energies toward vanquishing the enemies without.

This was what I thought. Alas, how little did I know myself; much less the mind of God!

Sunshine and Clouds

For some weeks after the eventful experience before described, I lived in a dreamily-happy state, rejoicing in my fancied sinlessness. One great idea had possession of my mind; and whether at work or in my leisure hours, I thought of little else than the wonderful event which had taken place. But gradually I began to "come back to earth," as it were. I was now employed in a photographic studio, where I associated with people of various tastes and habits, some of whom ridiculed, some tolerated, and others sympathized with, my radical views on things religious.

Night after night I attended the meetings, speaking on the street and indoors, and I soon noticed (and doubtless others did too) that a change came over my "testimonies." Before, I had always held up Christ, and pointed the lost to Him. Now, almost imperceptibly, my own experience became my theme, and I held up myself as a striking example of consecration and holiness! This was the prevailing characteristic of the brief addresses made by most of the "advanced" Christians in our company. The youngest in grace magnified Christ. The "sanctified" magnified themselves. A favorite song will make this more manifest than any words of mine. It is still widely used in Army meetings, and finds a place in their song or hymnbooks. I give only one verse as a specimen:

The people I know don't live holy;

They battle with unconquered sin,

Not daring to consecrate fully,

Or they full salvation would win.

With malice they have constant trouble,

From doubting they long to be free;

With most things about them they grumble;

Praise God, this is not so with ME!

Will the reader believe me when I say that I sang this wretched doggerel without a thought of the sinful pride to which it was giving expression? I considered it my duty to continually direct attention to "my experience of full salvation," as it was called. "If you don't testify to it, you will lose the blessing," was accepted as an axiom among us.

As time went on, I began to be again conscious of inward desires toward evil--of thoughts that were unholy. I was nonplused. Going to a leading teacher for help, he said, "These are but temptations. Temptation is not sin. You only sin if you yield to the evil suggestion." This gave me peace for a time. I found it was the general way of excusing such evident movings of a fallen nature, which was supposed to have been eliminated. But gradually I sank to a lower and lower place, permitting things I would once have shunned; and I even observed that all about me did the same. The first ecstatic experiences seldom lasted long. The ecstasy departed, and the "sanctified" were very little different from their brethren who were supposed to be "only justified." We did not commit overt acts of evil: therefore we were sinless. Lust was not sin unless yielded to: so it was easy to go on testifying that all was right.

I purposely pass briefly over the next four years. In the main they were seasons of ignorantly happy service. I was young in years and in grace. My thoughts of sin, as well as of holiness, were very unformed and imperfect.

Therefore it was easy, generally speaking, to think that I was living without the one, and manifesting the other. When doubts assailed, I treated them as temptations of the devil. If I became unmistakably conscious that I had actually sinned, I persuaded myself that at least it was not willful, but rather a mistake of the mind than an intentional error of the heart. Then I went to God in confession, and prayed to be cleansed from secret faults.

When but sixteen years of age I became a cadet; that is, a student for officership in the Salvation Army. During my probation in the Oakland Training Garrison I had more trouble than at any other time. The rigorous discipline and enforced intimate association with young men of so various tastes and tendencies, as also degrees of spiritual experience, was very hard on one of my supersensitive temperament. I saw very little holiness there, and I fear I exhibited much less. In fact, for the last two out of my five months' term I was all at sea, and dared not profess sanctification at all, owing to my low state. I was tormented with the thought that I had backslidden, and might be lost eternally after all my former happy experiences of the Lord's goodness. Twice I slipped out of the building when all were in bed, and made my way to a lonely spot where I spent the night in prayer, beseeching God not to take His Holy Spirit from me, but to again cleanse me fully from all inbred sin. Each time I "claimed it by faith," and was brighter for a few weeks; but I inevitably again fell into doubt and gloom, and was conscious of sinning both in thought and in word, and sometimes in unholy actions, which brought terrible remorse.

Finally, I was commissioned as lieutenant. Again I spent the night in prayer, feeling that I must not go out to teach and lead others unless myself pure and holy. Buoyed up with the thought of being free from the restraint I had been subjected to so long, it was comparatively easy this time to believe that the work of full inward cleansing was indeed consummated, and that I was now, if never before, actually rid of all carnality.

How readily one yields himself to self-deception in a matter of this kind! From this time on I became a more earnest advocate of the second blessing than ever; and I remember that often I prayed God to give my dear mother the blessing He had given me, and to make her as holy as her son had become. And that

pious mother had known Christ before I was born, and knew her own heart too well to talk of sinlessness, though living a devoted, Christlike life!

As lieutenant for a year, and then as captain, I thoroughly enjoyed my work, gladly enduring hardship and privation that I fear I would shrink from now; generally confident that I was living out the doctrine of perfect love to God and man, and thereby making my own final salvation more secure. [Note: Perhaps I ought to explain for the benefit of the uninitiated that a "captain" has charge of a corps, or mission. A "lieutenant" assists a "captain."] And yet, as I now look back, what grave failures I can detect--what an unsubdued will--what lightness and frivolity--what lack of subjection to the word of God--what self-satisfaction and complacency! Alas, "man at his best estate is altogether vanity."

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