

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

by Harry Ironside

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*Harry Ironside's sermon explores the struggles and eventual understanding of true holiness found in Christ rather than in personal efforts or teachings of perfectionism.*

**Scripture:** Romans 7:18

**Topics:** "Grace", "Holiness"

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## Description

Harry Ironside shares his personal journey of grappling with the concept of holiness, revealing the struggles and disillusionment he faced while adhering to the teachings of the holiness movement. He recounts a period of intense self-examination and disappointment, realizing that the pursuit of sinless perfection was unattainable and led to despair for many, including himself. Through a transformative experience at a rest home, he discovered that true holiness and peace come not from self-effort but from faith in Christ alone. This revelation brought him liberation from the burdens of false expectations and a deeper understanding of grace. Ultimately, Ironside emphasizes that holiness is found in Christ, not in human striving.

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## Transcript

I was between eighteen and nineteen years of age when I began to entertain serious doubts as to my actually having attained so high a standard of Christian living as I had professed, and as the Army and other Holiness movements advocated as the only real Christianity. What led to this was of too personal and private a nature to publish; but it resulted in struggle and efforts toward self-crucifixion that brought disappointment and sorrow of a most poignant character; but it showed me beyond a doubt that the doctrine of death to nature was a miserable sophism, and that the carnal mind was still a part of my being.

Nearly eighteen months of an almost constant struggle followed. In vain I searched my heart to see if I had made a full surrender, and tried to give up every known thing that seemed in any sense evil or doubtful. Sometimes, for a month at a time, or even longer, I could persuade myself that at last I had indeed again received the blessing. But invariably a few weeks would bring before me once more that which proved that it was in my particular case all a delusion.

I did not dare open my heart to my assistants in the work, or to the "soldiers" who were under my guidance. To do so I felt would be to lose all influence with them and to be looked upon as a backslider. So, alone and in secret, I fought my battles and never went into a holiness meeting without persuading myself that now at least, I was fully surrendered and therefore must have the blessing of sanctification.

Sometimes I called it entire consecration and felt easier. It did not seem to be claiming too much. I had no conception at the time of the hypocrisy of all this.

What made my distress more poignant was the knowledge that I was not the only sufferer. Another, one very dear to me, shared my doubts and anxieties from the same cause. For that other it eventually meant utter shipwreck of the faith; and one of the loveliest souls I ever knew was lost in the mazes of spiritualism. God grant it may not be forever, but that mercy may be found of the Lord in that day!

And now I began to see what a string of derelicts this holiness teaching left in its train. I could count scores of persons who had gone into utter infidelity because of it. They always gave the same reason: "I tried it all. I found it a failure. So I concluded the Bible teaching was all a delusion, and religion was a mere matter of the emotions." Many more (and I knew several such intimately) lapsed into insanity after floundering in the morass of this emotional religion for years--and people said that studying the Bible had driven them crazy. How little they knew that it was lack of Bible knowledge that was accountable for their wretched mental state--an absolutely unscriptural use of isolated passages of Scripture!

At last I became so troubled I could not go on with my work. I concluded to resign from the Salvation Army, and did so, but was persuaded by the colonel (note: answering to a bishop in some other denominations.) to wait six months ere the resignation took effect. At his suggestion I gave up corps work and went out on a special tour--where I did not need to touch the holiness question. But I preached to others many times when I was tormented by the thought that I might myself be finally lost, because, "without holiness no man shall see the Lord"; and, try as I would, I could not be sure I possessed it. I talked with any who seemed to me to really have the blessing I craved; but there were very few who, upon an intimate acquaintanceship, seemed genuine. I observed that the general state of "sanctified" people was as low, if not often lower, than that of those whom they contemptuously described as "only justified."

Finally, I could bear it no longer, so asked to be relieved from all active service, and at my own request was sent to the Beulah Home of Rest, near Oakland.

It was certainly time; for five years' active work, with only two brief furloughs, had left me almost a nervous wreck, worn out in body and most acutely distressed in mind.

The language of my troubled soul, after all those years of preaching to others, was, "Oh that I knew where I might find Him!" Finding Him not, I saw only the blackness of despair before me; but yet I knew too well His love and care to be completely cast down.

### The Struggle Ended

I had now been for over five years laboring in the organization with which I had linked myself, and ever seeking to be certain that I had attained a sinless state. In some twelve different towns and cities I had served, as I thought, faithfully, endeavoring to reach the lost, and to make out of them staunch Salvationists when converted. Many happy experiences had been mine, coupled, however, with some most gloomy disappointments, both as to myself and others. Very few of our "converts" stood. "Backsliders" often outnumbered by far our "soldiers." The ex-Salvation Army was many times larger than the original organization.

One great reason for this I was blind to for a long time. But at last it began to be clear to me that the holiness doctrine had a most baneful influence upon the movement. People who professed conversion

(whether real or not the day will declare) struggled for months, even years, to reach a state of sinlessness which never was reached; and at last they gave up in despair and sank back in many instances to the dead level of the world around them.

I saw that it was the same with all the holiness denominations, and the various "Bands," "Missions," and other movements, that were continually breaking off from them. The standard set was the unattainable. The result was, sooner or later, utter discouragement, cunningly-concealed hypocrisy, or an unconscious lowering of the standard to suit the experience reached. For myself, I had been ensnared by that last expedient for a long time. How much of the second there was I do not dare to say. But eventually I fell a victim to the first. And I can now see that it was a mercy I did so.

When I went to the Home of Rest, I had not yet fully given up seeking for perfection in the flesh. I really expected great things from the six months' furlough granted me, in order to "find myself," as it were.

Closely allied to the Home were other institutions where holiness and faith-healing were largely dwelt upon. I felt sure that in so hallowed an atmosphere great things would be accomplished.

In the rest home I found about fourteen officers, broken in health, seeking recuperation. I watched the ways and conversation of all most carefully, intending to confide in those who gave the best evidence of entire sanctification. There were some choice souls among them, and some arrogant hypocrites. But holiness in the absolute sense I saw in none. Some were very godly and devoted. Their conscientiousness I could not doubt. But those who talked the loudest were plainly the least spiritual. They seldom read their Bibles, they rarely conversed together of Christ. An air of carelessness pervaded the whole place. Three sisters, most devoted women, were apparently more godly than any others; but two of them admitted to me that they were not sure about being perfectly holy. The other one was non-committal, though seeking to help me. Some were positively quarrelsome and boorish, and this I could not reconcile with their profession of freedom from inbred sin. I attended the meetings held by the other workers I have mentioned. There the best of them did not teach sinless perfection; while the manifestly carnal gloried in their experience of perfect love! Sick people testified to being healed by faith, and sinning people declared they had the blessing of holiness! I was not helped, but hindered, by the inconsistency of it all.

At last I found myself becoming cold and cynical. Doubts as to everything assailed me like a legion of demons, and I became almost afraid to let my mind dwell on these things. For refuge I turned to secular literature, and sent for my books, which some years before I had foresworn on condition that God would give me the "second blessing." How little I realized the Jacob-spirit in all this! God seemed to have failed; so I took up my books once more, and tried to find solace in the beauties of essays and poetry, or the problems of history and science. I did not dare to confess to myself that I was literally an agnostic; yet for a month at least I could only answer, "I do not know" to every question based on divine revelation.

This was the legitimate result of the teaching I had been under. I reasoned that the Bible promised entire relief from indwelling sin to all who were wholly surrendered to the will of God. That I had thus surrendered seemed to me certain. Why then had I not been fully delivered from the carnal mind? It seemed to me that I had met every condition, and that God, on His part, had failed to perform what He had promised. I know it is wretched to write all this: but I see no other way to help others who are in the same state that I was in for that awful month.

Deliverance came at last in a most unexpected way. A lassie-lieutenant, a woman some ten years my senior in age, was brought to the Home from Rock Springs, Wyoming, supposedly dying of consumption.

From the first my heart went out to her in deep sympathy. To me she was a martyr, laying down her life for a needy world. I was much in her company, observed her closely, and finally came to the conclusion that she was the only wholly sanctified person in that place.

Imagine my surprise when, a few weeks after her arrival, she, with a companion, came to me one evening and begged me to read to her; remarking, "I hear you are always occupied with the things of the Lord, and I need your help." I, the one to help her! I was dumbfounded, knowing so well the plague of my own heart, and being fully assured as to her perfection in holiness. At the very moment they entered my room I was reading Byron's Childe Harold. And I was supposed to be entirely devoted to the things of God! It struck me as weird and fantastic, rather than as a solemn farce--all this comparing ourselves with ourselves, only to be deluded every time.

I hastily thrust the book to one side, and wondered what to choose to read aloud. In God's providence a pamphlet caught my attention which my mother had given me some years before, but which I had dreaded to read lest it might upset me; so afraid had I been of anything that did not bear the Army or Holiness stamp. Moved by a sudden impulse, I drew it forth and said, "I'll read this. It is not in accordance with our teaching; but it may be interesting anyway."

I read page after page, paying little attention, only hoping to soothe and quiet this dying woman. In it the lost condition of all men by nature was emphasized. Redemption in Christ through His death was explained. Then there was much as to the believer's two natures, and his eternal security, which to me seemed both ridiculous and absurd. The latter part was occupied with prophecy. Upon that we did not enter. I was startled after going over the first half of the book when Lieut. J--exclaimed, "O Captain, do you think that can possibly be true? If I could only believe that, I could die in peace!"

Astonished beyond measure, I asked, "What! do you mean to say you could not die in peace as you are? You are justified and sanctified; you have an experience I have sought in vain for years; and are you troubled about dying?" "I am miserable," she replied, "and you mustn't say I am sanctified. I cannot get it. I have struggled for years, but I have not reached it yet. This is why I wanted to speak to you, for I felt so sure you had it and could help me!"

We looked at each other in amazement; and as the pathos and yet ludicrousness of it all burst upon us, I laughed deliriously, while she wept hysterically. Then I remember exclaiming, "Whatever is the matter with us all? No one on earth denies himself more for Christ's sake than we. We suffer, and starve, and wear ourselves out in the endeavor to do the will of God; yet after all we have no lasting peace. We are happy at times; we enjoy our meetings; but we are never certain as to what the end will be."

"Do you think," she asked, "that it is because we depend upon our own efforts too much? Can it be that we trust Christ to save us, but we think we have to keep saved by our own faithfulness--?"

"But," I broke in, "to think anything else would open the door to all kinds of sin!"

And so we talked till, wearied out, she arose to go, but asked if she and others might return the next evening to read and talk of these things we had gone over--a permission which was readily granted.

For both Lieut. J--and myself that evening's reading and exchange of confidences proved the beginning of our deliverance. We had frankly owned to one another, and to the third party present, that we were not sanctified. We now began to search the Scriptures earnestly for light and help. I threw all secular books to

one side, determined to let nothing hinder the careful, prayerful study of the word of God. Little by little, the light began to dawn. We saw that we had been looking within for holiness, instead of without. We realized that the same grace that had saved us at first alone could carry us on. Dimly we apprehended that all for us must be in Christ, or we were without a ray of hope.

Many questions perplexed and troubled us. Much that we had believed we soon saw to be utterly opposed to the word of God. Much more we could not understand, so completely warped had our minds become through the training of years. In my perplexity I sought out a teacher of the Word who, I understood, was in fellowship with the writer of the pamphlet I have referred to above. I heard him with profit on two occasions, but still was in measure bewildered, though I began to feel solid ground beneath my feet once more. The great truth was getting a grip of me that holiness, perfect love, sanctification, and every other blessing, were mine in Christ from the moment I had believed, and mine forevermore, all because of pure grace. I had been looking at the wrong man--all was in another Man, and in that Man for me! But it took weeks to see this.

A booklet entitled Safety, Certainty, and Enjoyment proved helpful to both of us, and was a source of cheer. Other tracts were given me, and read with earnest purpose, looking up every reference, searching context and other passages of like, or apparently opposite, character, while daily we cried to God for the knowledge of His truth. Miss J--saw it ere I did. The light came when she realized that she was eternally linked with Christ as Head, and had eternal life in Him as the Vine, in her as the branch. Her joy knew no bounds, and she actually improved in health from that hour, and lived for six years after; finally going to be with the Lord, worn out in seeking to lead others to Christ. Many will be disappointed to know that she maintained her connection with the Army to the last. She had a mistaken (I believe) notion that she should remain where she was, and declare the truth she had learned. But ere she died she repented of this. Her last words to a brother (A.B.S.) and me, who were with her very near the end, were: "I have everything in Christ--of that I am sure. But I wish I had been more faithful as to the truth I learned about the Body--the Church. I was misled by zeal which I thought was of God, and it is too late to be faithful now!"

Four days after the truth burst upon her soul in that Home of Rest, I, too, had every doubt and fear removed, and found my all in Christ. To go on where I was, I could not. Within a week I was outside of the only human system I had ever been in as a Christian, and for many years since I have known no head but Christ, no body but the Church which He purchased with His own blood. They have been happy years; and as I look back over all the way the Lord has led me, I can but praise Him for the matchless grace that gave me to see that perfect holiness and perfect love were to be found, not in me, but in Christ Jesus alone.

And I have been learning all along my pilgrim journey that the more my heart is taken up with Christ, the more do I enjoy practical deliverance from sin's power, and the more do I realize what it is to have the love of God shed abroad in that heart by the Holy Spirit given to me, as the Earnest of the glory to come. I have found liberty and joy since being freed from bondage that I never thought it possible for a soul to know on earth, while I have a confidence in presenting this precious truth for the acceptance of others that contrasts with the uncertainty of the past.

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