

– Chapter 1 –



The Privilege of Purity

What thoughts come to mind when you hear the word “purity”? Is it a positive word to you? If you were discussing the environment, you would most likely think of purity as an advantage or privilege because a pure environment is essential for good health. A great deal of effort has been made to educate people about our environment. This education has helped us have a greater appreciation for pure water and pure air, and to take steps to protect and clean our environment. However, purity in the context of our spiritual lives is not always associated with privilege. This is because there are obstacles that can keep us from seeing the truth about spiritual purity and the many ways it can enrich our lives.

Deception: Worldliness makes you strong.

A widely accepted myth claims that a worldly woman is strong and secure, while a woman who pursues purity is naïve and vulnerable. Movies, magazines and television all promote this message. However, if we closely examine this myth, we can see it is not true. A better way to describe a worldly woman is hardened, not strong. The Bible describes a hardening process that goes on in our hearts when we sin (Hebrews 3:7-13), and the more we sin, the harder our hearts become. The result is rivalry, jealousy, self-hatred and indifference – not strength or security.

We can look at examples all around us to see that worldliness does not make us strong. In Hollywood, for example, we have seen young stars at the age of eighteen begin to embrace more and more worldliness in order to promote their careers to adult audiences; yet their lives do not exemplify strength. Many times the result is just the opposite. Their lives are on the edge of destruction because of their choices. Some young stars get to a point where they desperately need to purify some aspect of their lives or they will soon be destroyed. They may be beautiful, talented and successful in their careers, but these things do not produce strength.

These are extreme cases, but there are less obvious examples all around us. We can look at the lives and relationships of worldly women and see their need for more strength. Their worldliness has not made them stronger women. It has actually eroded the quality of their lives.

Challenge: Purity has been too narrowly defined

Many people think of purity only as sexual purity. However, spiritual purity includes pure motives, pure speech, pure thoughts, a pure heart and more. The problem of limiting our view of purity to sexual purity is that it changes how you read and process certain scriptures. The danger of this is that a Christian can be abstaining from premarital sex or adulterous sex, but still be living a very impure life. We will see throughout this study that we are called to purify every area of our lives.

Another problem of defining purity too narrowly is a tendency for some people to give up on the idea of obeying God. They think it's too late to be pure. But that is not true. No matter what your age or what you have done in your life, it's never too late to pursue purity and to begin enjoying the benefits and promises of God.

As a Christian, purity is one of our greatest challenges, no matter how old we are or whether or not we are married. If you are young, put your whole heart into striving for purity. It won't be any easier when you are older or get married. Putting off pursuing purity is like saying you plan to wait till you are old to begin exercising. That is not a good plan! And if you put off becoming pure, it will not only be more dif-

difficult when you are older, you will also miss many blessings throughout your life.

Challenge: The changing moral standards

Another difficulty we face regarding our purity is the shifting standard of what is morally acceptable. Many things that were not acceptable forty years ago are now part of our popular culture. This is true of our entertainment, fashion, dating and marriage relationships. In 2003, it was reported that 60% of our nation believed that cohabitation before marriage was morally acceptable, 40% believed adultery was morally acceptable, and 30% believed homosexuality was morally acceptable.¹ Forty years ago, the standards for morality were higher. Our moral standards are moving but not in God's direction. Yet God's standards do not change:

Do you not know that the wicked will not inherit the kingdom of God? Do not be deceived: Neither the sexually immoral nor idolaters nor adulterers nor male prostitutes nor homosexual offenders nor thieves nor the greedy nor drunkards nor slanderers nor swindlers will inherit the kingdom of God. [Emphasis added.]

1 Corinthians 6:9-10

This scripture warns us of two things. First, we can be deceived about what is morally acceptable. Second, there is a high cost of impurity – it can cost us heaven. Despite this, our moral standards have continued to move away from God's standards. This makes the battle for purity even more challenging, and it becomes more important than ever that we are aware of it. As moral standards decay, we need to be all the more engaged in this spiritual battle.

Since there is a moving standard, what should our goal be regarding our level of purity? Do we strive for the standards of fifty years ago or even a hundred years ago? To answer this, let me ask you another question: How pure do you want your water to be? If I offered you a choice of two glasses of water, one from a contaminated water supply and the other of pure water, which would you choose? Of course you would choose the pure water, and the purer the water the better! Our need for purity in our environment is obvious, but that is not true of

our spiritual purity. So we must become as educated about our need for spiritual purity as our need for a healthy and pure environment.

The Bible has a lot to say about purity and offers us wisdom to fight this battle. It even answers the above question regarding the level of purity we should aim for:

Dear friends, now we are children of God, and what we will be has not yet been made known. But we know that when he appears, we shall be like him, for we shall see him as he is. Everyone who has this hope in him purifies himself, just as he is pure. [Emphasis added.]

1 John 3:2-3

This verse tells us that God is our standard, so our spiritual goal is absolute purity. That helps us see why we don't look back fifty or one hundred years to set our standards. Instead, we go right to the source of true purity – our goal is to become pure like God. This may seem unrealistic, but remember the benefits we enjoy in a pure environment. The greater the purity, the greater the benefits! Spiritual purity is far more important, and offers amazing blessings that we do not want to miss.

Let's consider some of the blessings we gain from purity. The number one benefit is that the pure in heart will see God (Matthew 5:8). And if that were the only blessing of purity, it would be more than enough. That will be an incredible day when we get to go before God. But this is not the only benefit. There are many more blessings we can enjoy each day. One daily benefit we enjoy is the Holy Spirit. Consider the following verses about the Holy Spirit:

Peter replied, "Repent and be baptized, every one of you, in the name of Jesus Christ for the forgiveness of your sins. And you will receive the gift of the Holy Spirit." [Emphasis added.]

Acts 2:38

But the fruit of the Spirit is love, joy, peace, patience, kindness, goodness, faithfulness, gentleness and self-control. Against such things there is no law. Those who belong to Christ Jesus have crucified the sinful nature with its passions and desires. Since we live by the Spirit, let us keep in step with the Spirit. [Emphasis added.]

Galatians 5:22-25

For God did not give us a spirit of timidity, but a spirit of power, of love and of self-discipline. [Emphasis added.]

2 Timothy 1:7

We often honor someone who has been baptized by giving them little gifts to commemorate the occasion. God goes all out to commemorate this special event – he gives them the gift of the Holy Spirit (Acts 2:38). You will receive no greater gift in your lifetime! And this gift does not sit on a shelf. No, the Holy Spirit will strengthen you (Ephesians 3:16), guide you (John 16:13) and help you overcome sin (Romans 8:13). You could not even begin to purify yourself without this gift from God. And it not only helps you overcome sin, it also fills you with the best things in life: love, joy, peace, patience, kindness, goodness, faithfulness, gentleness and self-control.

Imagine living a life void of any of these qualities. Life without one of them would have challenges. For example, consider all the ways the quality of self-control helps us have a better life. The same is true of every one of these qualities. These are blessings we can enjoy every day.

Deception: Purity means you will miss out on life

Many see spiritual purity as a price to pay, and fear they will miss out on something exciting if they choose to live a pure life. This is a powerful deception because no one wants to miss out on life. But this is just another one of Satan's schemes. Would you feel like you were missing out if you did *not* get to drink dirty water or breathe dirty air? Would your life be incomplete without this experience? Of course not! Purity in our environment is a privilege. The same is true of our spiritual purity. It is not a price to pay, but rather the path to a privileged life. Those who choose not to pursue purity are missing out on some of life's greatest blessings. Consider both God's promises and the call to purity in the following passage:

. . . As God has said: "I will live with them and walk among them, and I will be their God, and they will be my people."

"Therefore come out from them and be separate, says the Lord. Touch no unclean thing, and I will receive you."

“I will be a Father to you, and you will be my sons and daughters, says the Lord Almighty.”

Since we have these promises, dear friends, let us purify ourselves from everything that contaminates body and spirit, perfecting holiness out of reverence for God. [Emphasis added.]

2 Corinthians 6:16 - 7:1

Promises:

I will live with you.

I will walk with you.

I will receive you.

You will be my daughters.

God is offering himself to you in a loving, nurturing relationship – a Father/child relationship. He also promises to live with you, walk with you and receive you. These are great promises. I especially like the one that says he will receive me. Knowing the Lord Almighty

will receive me is very comforting. If I went to Washington to see the President, I don't think there is much of a chance that he would receive me. I doubt that the Governor or Mayor would answer my phone calls either. But the Lord Almighty has made me a promise that he will receive me. He receives my prayers every day, and someday he will receive my soul. And until that day comes, he promises to live with me, walk with me and be my Father.

Notice that the Lord *Almighty* makes these promises to us. He wants us to know that these are not empty words. He can back up his promises. He is powerful:

*Lift your eyes and look to the heavens: Who created all these?
He who brings out the starry host one by one, and calls them
each by name. Because of his great power and mighty strength,
not one of them is missing.*

Isaiah 40:26

The vastness of the universe continues to unfold to us through technological advances. The latest estimate for the number of stars is given as seven followed by twenty-two zeros. It is difficult to comprehend how large that number is. Scientists say it is about ten times the number of grains of sand on all the earth's beaches and deserts combined.² Next time you are at a beach, pick up a handful of sand and let it run through your fingers. Consider how many grains of sand there are on just one beach. Then try to imagine ten times the number

of grains of sand on all the beaches and deserts in the world. The Lord Almighty, who made the unfathomable number of stars, wants to be your father. He promises to walk with you, live with you and receive you.

How are we to respond to these great promises? Twice in 2 Corinthians 6:16 - 7:1 we are told to purify ourselves. God wants us to purify ourselves from *everything* that contaminates us – *everything*. When we look at all the areas of our lives that we are called on to purify, this can seem like a daunting task. It was for me at first. I was overwhelmed as I contemplated all the ways I needed to purify myself. But I kept going and soon discovered something very powerful about purity: I was becoming a stronger person.

Before I began my study of purity, I did not understand the power of a pure life. If I needed more strength, I thought I should read the Bible more often or pray more (and I should). But we can pray, read the Bible, go to church and still be very weak Christians. Hopefully, doing these things will lead us to a closer walk with God, but the power of the scriptures comes as a result of faithfully putting them into practice (James 1:22-25).

After months of studying purity and seeing the connection between purity and strength, I awoke one morning feeling very discouraged. I was facing some rather big challenges, and was feeling that I could not get through the day. In my prayers that morning, I found myself asking God for strength. As those words crossed my lips, I realized I could do something about this – I could purify myself. So I began to consider what I might need to purify. In a quick moment, I realized I had some unrighteous attitudes toward another person, and impure and faithless thoughts going through my mind. These thoughts were taking a toll on me physically, emotionally and spiritually. So my prayers became much more specific, and with God's help, I began to purify my attitudes and thoughts. (We will look at this in detail in a later chapter.)

I was encouraged by the turnaround in my countenance. Rather than spending my day feeling discouraged and faithless, I experienced a wonderful day. I dealt with my impurity, and it had an immediate

impact on my spirit. However, if I had gone through the day with a contaminated spirit, the outcome would have been very different. But that day I enjoyed the blessing of purifying my spirit.

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As you begin this study on purity, I want to remind you that we should not pursue purity with legalism or self-righteousness. Both of these things can become big stumbling blocks. Legalism means that we follow a list of do's and don'ts. We can find ourselves doing things without getting our hearts involved. The Pharisees followed many rules and regulations, but Jesus said they were full of wickedness:

“Woe to you, teachers of the law and Pharisees, you hypocrites! You are like whitewashed tombs, which look beautiful on the outside but on the inside are full of dead men’s bones and everything unclean. In the same way, on the outside you appear to people as righteous but on the inside you are full of hypocrisy and wickedness. [Emphasis added.]

Matthew 23:27-28

Even though they were very religious, they were living impure lives. On the outside, they appeared to be righteous, but God was just as concerned with what was going on in their hearts and minds as in their actions.

In addition to being legalistic, the Pharisees were also self-righteous. This too can become a stumbling block for us. Once we begin to purify our lives, it is tempting to start relying on ourselves more or to look down on other people who are not as *righteous* as we are. But we should never think we are righteous because of our own efforts. It is the blood of Jesus that purifies us:

But if we walk in the light, as he is in the light, we have fellowship with one another, and the blood of Jesus, his Son, purifies us from all sin. [Emphasis added.]

1 John 1:7

We need to be humble as we purify ourselves, and remember that without Jesus’ sacrifice, we would be unable to purify our lives and enjoy his blessings. This does not mean, however, that our purity is out of our control. Notice there is an “if” in this scripture – *if we walk in*

the light. We still must do our part. In fact, the right response to God's forgiveness is to put our whole heart into purifying ourselves:

So then, dear friends, since you are looking forward to this, make every effort to be found spotless, blameless and at peace with him. [Emphasis added.]

2 Peter 3:14

For you were once darkness, but now you are light in the Lord. Live as children of light (for the fruit of the light consists in all goodness, righteousness and truth) and find out what pleases the Lord. Have nothing to do with the fruitless deeds of darkness, but rather expose them.

Ephesians 5:8-11

Since we have these promises, dear friends, let us purify ourselves from everything that contaminates body and spirit, perfecting holiness out of reverence for God.

2 Corinthians 7:1

These scriptures encourage us to respond aggressively by:

- making every effort,
- finding out what pleases the Lord,
- having nothing to do with deeds of darkness, and
- purifying ourselves from everything.

Note that the above scriptures were written to people who were already Christians. They were already forgiven of their sins, but were still being told to purify themselves from everything that contaminated them. As Christians we are called to make every effort as we purify ourselves. When we understand the blessings and benefits of purity, we see purity as a “get to,” rather than a “have to.” Just like enjoying pure water, spiritual purity is a great privilege.

