

2 Corinthians 7 (Part 1): 1 - Bringing Holiness to Completion

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2 Corinthians, chapter 7, verse 1: *“Since we have these promises, beloved, let us cleanse ourselves from every defilement of body and spirit, bringing holiness to completion in the fear of God.”* (ESV)

I know that's not much, but it's actually a lot. I'm going to have you stop right there, and we're going to pray.

Lord, open our hearts to the ministry of Your Word this morning. And let this Word really speak to us and challenge us. For we ask it in the name of Jesus Christ, amen.

I was sharing with my lovely wife as we were getting ready this morning how there are times when I approach a passage of scripture in the study of the Word of God and whether it's a whole passage or whether it's like we're doing today a single verse, I become very aware of the fact that there's really no way that I can do it justice.

And I feel like that's the case here with verse 1 of 2 Corinthians chapter 7. And the reason is because it's just too big. There's too much here. I've taken a single verse to look at with you here this morning because as I read through it, I was struck by the fact that I was dealing with a whole ocean of truth confined within the context of just a drop of speech.

And so, as we read through this verse, as we look at this verse, you'll notice that the topic or the context is holiness. As Paul writes here about: *“...bringing holiness to completion.”* And some of you might be, like, inside, you're groaning a little bit when you think about a message on holiness.

Some of you might think, whoa, cool, okay. But some have a negative reaction to holiness because holiness has had a negative reaction in the body of Christ over the years. And I'm talking about the history of the church. We've had several movements in the body of Christ that are geared toward what we call holiness, and we actually refer to them as holiness movements.

Several denominations actually grew out of movements toward holiness. Just in case you're curious, a church like the Nazarene Church grew out of a holiness movement. And essentially, a holiness movement is, I guess, an emphasis among believers to focus on the idea of being holy before God.

The reason that sometimes there are negative connotations that go along with holiness movements is because some of them, not all of them, but some have tended to evolve into legalism. The heart, the desire to be holy before God, merges with the sinful nature of man, the flesh of man, and man begins to come up with rules that he believes, the keeping of which will foster a greater holiness, and pretty soon there isn't a true holiness going on at all. It's just rules and regulations made by man. And those things have tended to detract, I suppose, and in some cases even cause people to pull back a little bit when they hear about holiness.

But I believe that there is a balance with everything, like everything, in our walk with God, there's a balance, and there's a balance for holiness, too. And I believe that this verse is powerful in its expression of what God wants us to understand about holiness and the call to holiness.

In order to better understand this verse, or frankly, any verse of the Bible, I like to sometimes take it apart and put it into phrases, break it up into phrases and look at them each on their own, and I'll show you how I usually do that. I made 5 points from this verse here, and you'll see it on the screen.

1. Since we have these promises
2. let us cleanse ourselves
3. from every defilement of body and spirit,
4. bringing holiness to completion
5. in the fear of God

And the first one is, **Since we have these promises**, and we'll look at that and what those promises are. And then comes the exhortation; **let us cleanse ourselves**; we'll talk about what that means. And then he tells us what we are to cleanse ourselves, *from* (he lists) *every defilement of body and spirit*, we'll discuss that. And then he talks about what would come out of it, which is to **bring holiness to completion**, at least as the ESV renders it. And then finally, Paul lays out part of the motivation for this move toward holiness, and that is, **in the fear of God**.

Let's begin to look at these 5 things and we'll move through them fairly rapidly but I think you'll see that these are very important as we unpack what this verse

has to say to us. It begins with : “*Since we have these promises...*” and the first question that we have to ask is what promises because we feel like we're picking up this verse all on its own. Well, it goes with chapter 6. In fact, I believe verse 1 of chapter 7 really should have been at the very end of chapter 6 because it's there that Paul talks about the promises that are connected to holiness. We'll talk about those in a moment.

But let me just remind you of something that we saw as we got toward the end of chapter 6, the previous chapter. Do you remember that Paul made the statement that we are not to be unequally yoked with unbelievers? That formed the context of the latter part of chapter 6, and that context is separation. The act of being separate from the world. A world that you and I live in that happens to run counter to everything that is really part of the will in the heart of God. And the act of separation, or separating ourselves from the world, and all that it wants to influence us with, is what is fundamentally behind the definition of holiness, okay?

So, holiness is not about rules and regulations. Holiness is about being separate, being separated, the act of being separated from the world, from the things of the world, the emphases, the things that lure our hearts into sinful activity that ends up hurting us and causing issues in our walk with the Lord.

And as Paul speaks here in this verse of holiness and talks about it in the previous chapter, he begins to bring up some of the wonderful promises that go along with an individual who takes seriously the issue of separation from the world. And I want to review those promises with you because they were in the previous chapter, but I'll put them up on the screen so we can all read them together off the same translation. It's the 17th and 18th verses which are the last ones of the chapter, the previous chapter, Paul says,

2 Corinthians 6:17-18 (ESV)

“Therefore go out from their midst, and be separate from them, says the Lord, and touch no unclean thing; then I will welcome you, and I will be a father to you, and you shall be sons and daughters to me, says the Lord Almighty.”

“Therefore go out from their midst, and be separate from them, says the Lord, and touch no unclean thing; then I will welcome you, and I will be a father to you, and you shall be sons and daughters to me, says the Lord Almighty.”

And of course he's quoting from the Old Testament, but he's bringing this into our relationship as God's people in the New Testament. But let me take these

promises and put them in as bullet points for you so you can see what we're going to center our discussion on:

- I will welcome you...
- I will be a father to you...
- You shall be my sons and daughters...

First, there's the promise that when you take seriously the issue of separation, separating your heart and your desires from the things of the world, He says, first of all, "*I will welcome you...*" "*I will be a father to you...*" "(And) *you shall be sons and daughters.*" To me

Let's take a look at this first one. He says, "*I will welcome you...*" Now some of you who have a different translation, your Bible may actually use the word, receive, instead of, welcome. "*I will receive you...*" So I looked up the Greek word and I found that it literally means to take into one's favor, to take someone into your favor, right? And so, what God is saying here, to those who take seriously, once again, the idea of separation from the world, that God says, I will take you into my favor with a grace, or I should say a favor, that goes beyond grace.

You guys understand what grace is, right? That is a favor from God that comes not by merit or works but by God's free gift. He just simply gives you favor. And you know what it is to have a favor with someone. It means you're in good standing with them. So, in Christ, by faith, we are in good standing with God. That's called grace, right? But did you see here, God is talking about something beyond grace, which is unmerited. He's going on now and talking about favor that is merited.

How do we merit it? Through separation, through holiness, He says, I will receive you with favor. There will be an extra favor from the Lord. Just because grace is unmerited favor doesn't mean that's all the favor God has to give. He's talking now about this additional step, this additional expression of His favor in our lives, literally a blessing in our lives, that comes as the result of you and I taking seriously this issue of separation and separating ourselves.

Now, I want you to notice the second and third promise that we had put up on the screen there and that was the thing about where God said I will be a father to you and you will be a children to me. Now what is he saying here? Remember, He's talking about, this is all these blessings, these promises are predicated upon separation, holiness. And He says, I will be as a father to you, you will be as children to me. Is he telling you and I? That our sonship, literally, we become

children of God by being holy? No, he's not saying that. That is sonship that comes by faith, right? We know in the scripture that it says, yet to those who received him, to those who believed on His name, He gave the right to what? Become children of God, right? (John 1:12) So that comes by faith. That's called adoption. We are adopted into the family of God.

So, obviously He's saying something different here because this promise is predicated upon separation or holiness: I will be as a father to you; you will be as children to me. And what he's talking about here is He's talking about the connection of likeness to the family image: You will be as children to me; I will be as a father to you. And in other words, He's talking about how there will be a connectedness of likeness between us and the Father, meaning that we will reflect His holiness.

Let me put this in another way if I'm not doing a very good job of explaining it. You know how you sometimes you watch movies, and many times the subject of the movie is about some family that has a strong reputation in their area for being a certain way or doing things a certain way, and maybe in the movie there's a son of this family who acts just like his father and he does things that are in keeping with the reputation of the father, and someone might say about that son, well, he's his father's son.

And what they mean is he is reflecting the reputation of his father, right? He's following in the family likeness, that's what Paul is talking about here, when he's talking about this promise, these ideas here about God being a father to us, us being as children to Him. It's speaking about that family likeness. How we're going to exhibit that family likeness in the world. That's a promise, and it's a wonderful idea that is being conveyed here.

So what we see in these statements is that God has promised to bestow a special blessing of closeness, intimacy, favor to those who choose to walk in an attitude of separation from the world, and all the things that contaminate and pollute our lives in the world.

So, in light of these promises, Paul then goes on to say, “...*let us cleanse ourselves...*” And that's an interesting statement. What it means is, let us avoid everything that would only hinder your walk with God from being close and personal. Let us avoid everything in life that's going to become a hindrance by adding something in your life, in your body, in your spirit, that is going to contaminate you and contaminate your spirit in relationship with God. It refers to throwing off or, if you will, pitching overboard the things that we know are going to be a problem or a hindrance. And he's talking about, obviously, sins.

I want to take a moment and I want to just ask you, has the Holy Spirit been speaking to you lately about pitching something overboard that's just hindering you? It's hindering your walk. And maybe you've tried to justify it. It's not that bad. And that's something the enemy likes to come and say, it's really not that bad. I mean, you're not as bad as that guy over there. But you know that you know, God has been speaking to you about it, and you've been ignoring him. But He's telling you to get rid of it because it's causing pollution. It's causing a contamination between you and the Lord.

So what exactly is he talking about getting rid of? That's the next statement he makes in this verse. He says, “...*from every defilement of body and spirit....*” And obviously he's talking again about those things that negatively impact our physical bodies and our spirit as well. But what does he mean by defilement? Because I'm guessing that's not a word you use every day. And I certainly don't either. So what exactly is it?

Well, if you have a New King James (NKJV) Bible, you have a different word there than defilement. And I think that word actually is helpful. The word that's used in the New King James is, filthiness. He talks about filthiness of the flesh and spirit. Now see, I can relate to filthiness. My mom liked to say filthy, especially when she was talking about my bedroom and my need to get in there and clean it. And that was just her favorite word. She was a nurse and so she was a little bit of a germaphobe and good thing you didn't pass that along to me. Anyway, so, but she would always talk about how filthy my room was, so I get that.

Actually, I looked up the Greek word that the New King James says, is filthiness. The ESV says, its defilement. And I found out that it comes from a Greek root word that means to stain or to soil, to stain or to soil. And so Paul is talking about those things that are going to stain or soil or pollute or contaminate flesh and spirit, and hinder our walk with God. Have you noticed I've used that word contaminate a lot? I like it. I mean, I was raised on the NIV and that's actually the word that's used in this verse. Let me show it to you on the screen here.

2 Corinthians 7:1 (NIV)

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.

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.

I like that word because it just really, I don't know, it resonates with me. I understand the idea or the concept of something being contaminated. But just in case that word is a little bit fuzzy to you, let me put the definition up on the screen for you as well.

con·tam·i·nate

verb

making (something) impure by exposure to or addition of a poisonous or polluting substance.

It means making something impure by exposure to or addition of a poisonous or polluting substance.

Can you think of a better description for sin than that? I can't. I mean, what does sin do to us? Well, it basically exposes us to the addition of poisonous or polluting substance, whether in body or in spirit. And that's what happens when we sin, and we can't get away from it. It's poisonous. It's toxic to you and I. It's toxic to our relationship with God, and it's toxic to our relationship with one another. It hinders us in every way.

And then we come to the last two elements of this verse, and that is: “..*bringing holiness to completion...*” which we'll talk about in a moment. And then the last element, which is: “..*in the fear of God.*”

All right: “..*bringing holiness to completion...*” That's how the ESV puts it. The New King James says, perfecting holiness in the fear of God. And I'll be honest with you, I kind of like the ESV better because whenever the Bible uses the word, perfected. Christians have this natural sort of a tendency to gravitate toward thinking that it means being perfect. In other words, they see perfect, which is a variant of perfect, obviously, and they think, oh, we're talking about sinless perfection.

Well, we're not talking about sinless perfection. I don't believe we're going to be perfect, perfectly sinless, if you will, this side of glory. I just don't think we are. I do believe we're told to strive for it. I don't think we're going to get there. And I don't say that as a justification for sin in your life. In other words, hey, Pastor Paul says we're not going to be sinlessly perfect. So, hey, let's go out and do a little sinning. Cause that's —it's not what —I'm not giving you an excuse. We

don't—if you're like me, you don't need any excuses to sin. I'm simply stating a truth about reality.

John the apostle said in his first epistle, any man who claims to be without sin. Is what? He's a liar and the truth isn't in him. (1 John 1:8) John wasn't trying to give you excuses either. He was stating a fact. While we live in these sinful human bodies, while we retain this sinful nature, there will be times that we will fall to it. And that's the sad reality. But we are still to set our sights on holiness, which comes through separation and move toward it. Let me show you this passage from Hebrews chapter 12 verse 14.

Hebrews 12:14 (ESV)

Strive for peace with everyone, and for the holiness without which no one will see the Lord.

Strive for peace with everyone, and for the holiness without which no one will see the Lord.

Notice that there's two things that we're to strive for in that passage: peace with all men and holiness. We probably aren't going to have peace with all men either, but we're supposed to strive for that as well. In other words, as best to your ability, alright, live at peace with all men and strive toward holiness. And so, that's what Paul means by bringing holiness to completion; he means, let it come to maturity. Let it mature. Let it grow in your life.

People, do you understand that we're supposed to be growing in holiness? We're supposed to be, and again, holiness is seen through separation. So are we growing in holiness? We have to look at our lives. I have to ask myself, and as I was studying out this passage, I was greatly convicted about areas in my life where the Holy Spirit has been knocking on my door about things in my life that I need to separate from, whether they're in my heart or whatever.

And, I'm just like you, I'm no different from you, and I can try to take the Holy Spirit's voice and set it aside with some personal justification. But in the end, I'm miserable because I know that He's speaking to me. I know that He's trying to get my attention, and I know that as a believer, I'm supposed to be growing in holiness. That act of separation from the world. So bring holiness to completion, Paul says, bring it to maturity, let it grow, let it flower in your life, let it take greater root in your life so that it is stable and growing, and bearing fruit like a strong tree.

The word holiness is full of meaning, and that's one of the reasons why I knew that I wasn't going to be able to convey everything I wanted to convey or should even convey to you in one single message about this single verse in 2

Corinthians related to holiness. But part of what holiness means is to be whole and to be healthy in your relationship with God. And again, these come from the act of separating ourselves from things that contaminate. I can't say that enough.

There's a huge, well, I don't know how huge it is, but there's a lot of people today talking about, well, I guess expressing concern, I should say, for the food that we eat. There's a lot of people who are very concerned about contaminants in food, whether it's antibiotics that are injected into animals or pesticides that are sprayed on fruit or whatever, and how we need to be concerned about that. So, in an effort to attain wholeness and healthy living, what do they do? What do these people do? They separate themselves from the foods that they think are contaminating them physically. We can get that, we understand that. That's what Paul's talking about, except instead of food, he's talking about sin, right? He's talking about keeping away from those things that contaminate, that there might be health and wholeness in our relationship with God.

And then this last statement of the verse, which is “...*in the fear of God.*” Paul talks about “*bringing holiness to completion in the fear of God.*” In the fear of God, what does that mean? Well, it means something different, frankly, if you're an unbeliever than if you're a believer.

Now, as a believer, the fear of God is an expression of awe and reverence that affects the way we live. Hopefully, with an unbeliever, it's a true fear of God that will affect them as well and cause them to repent of their sin and come to Jesus. But once we've done that, we don't get rid of the fear of God. We continue to have awe and reverence. Let me show you this passage from Hebrews chapter 12, beginning at verse 28.

Hebrews 12:28-29 (ESV)

Therefore let us be grateful for receiving a kingdom that cannot be shaken, and thus let us offer to God acceptable worship, with reverence and awe, for our God is a consuming fire.

Therefore let us be grateful for receiving a kingdom that cannot be shaken (Paul writes), and thus let us offer to God acceptable worship, with reverence and awe (That means with the fear of God. Why?), for our God is a consuming fire.”

We recognize that whether unbeliever or believer, our God is a consuming fire. And there is a fear of God in our lives and it affects the way we live. This is one of the motivations for walking in separation, which is holiness, which is how we achieve holiness, through separation. Why? Because of the fear of God. We understand that God has created a kingdom whereby sin is toxic to us, right? We learn that scientifically relate with relation in related to food in our bodies. We learn that pesticides and other things in our food sources can be toxic to our bodies. Well, listen, that's our own doing.

The fact is God has fashioned in creation, as part of creation, that sin is toxic and poisonous to you and I. That means that attitude of unforgiveness that you have toward a brother or a sister. You're actually hurting yourself, and you're hurting your relationship with God. It's toxic to your relationship with God. It's poisonous. Those lustful thoughts; the dalliance with pornography; the attitude of just giving into fear, giving into anger; the things that we do, even how they affect our body—gluttony can even be an element of sin related to the flesh. And then a myriad of other issues related to the contaminating of the spirit. It's toxic to us, and we need to get that through our hearts.

Have you ever watched a documentary on food? Usually people that watch those documentaries, they become vegan. I'm serious. They just like, that's, I'm done. I've eaten my last hunk of meat, and the only fruit and vegetables I eat from now on are the ones I grow in my own garden, because I can't trust anybody. Because they're putting all kinds of dopey stuff on there that's toxic to my body. And they become alarmed; they're like, whoa! I got to do something about this.

Christians, God has said in His Word that sin is toxic. Are we alarmed? Or is it just eh? I sin, He forgives. We have this relationship. And we seem to pass it off like it's really no big deal. It is a big deal, and we ought to be just, we ought to be more alarmed than watching a documentary on what's in your food. Because what is in sin is causing death. The wages of sin is death. (Romans 6:23)

And although those wages on a spiritual, eternal level have been dealt with for you as a believer, and they can no longer cause an ultimate separation with God, and in fact God has given you eternal life, that doesn't mean sin is done doing what it does so well, which is killing.

Sin still kills, even for believers. I've seen it kill job opportunities; I've seen it kill marriages, homes, relationships. I've seen it kill all kinds of things, even in my own life. I've watched it. I've watched the toxicity of sin work its way through a relationship, destroying every fabric of intimacy and meaning.

Are we alarmed? We ought to be. We ought to be alarmed. This is what God is telling us. We see that when we look at this whole idea of holiness, we see there's a positive and a negative side of this thing. On the negative side, we're told to throw off, put off the things that are increasing this toxicity in our lives and so forth, this contamination. But by the same token, there's a positive side of this. And that is that we are to bring to completion, bring to maturity, this work of holiness through separation that God has called us to.

Now, as I get ready to close you out here, I'll tell you that there are usually, traditionally, two responses when we talk to people about holiness. And one response is to embrace holiness, but then to make it weird over time. And this is what has happened in some of the holiness movements. We get all excited about the fact that I need to—God calls me to a life of holiness, and that comes through separation and so forth from the things of this world and so forth.

But like I said, it begins to get corrupted by our sinful nature, and we start feeling holy because I don't do this and you do. And we start looking down on people, and it just evolves into just this catastrophe of thought that really turns people off and frankly doesn't help your relationship with God—but that's kind of this side over here.

Then the other side is people who look at holiness, and they just go, I can't do that. And the reason they say that is because they're very aware of their sin. They recognize, I mess up, and here you are talking about holiness and separating ourselves from these things, and I just keep going back, and I just keep walking through the slough, through the sewer of my—the things that draw me into sin. And they, and you can see these two polar opposite responses to this idea of holiness.

Well, I believe you can walk in holiness without, first of all, being weird. And I believe that you can also look at the impossibility of holiness, and you can begin to embrace it through a proper attitude. About, first of all, how God sees me as his child. God sees me, regardless of how I see myself. He sees me as His son, pure and righteous, and without stain of guilt.

See, that keeps me from berating myself and giving up. Because I recognize he sees me through the blood of his son, Jesus Christ. And what a wonderful and glorious thing that is for God to see all of us that way. I know that you see yourself up close and personal and it's not that impressive, but I want you to know God sees you and He delights in you. Not because he's old and has bad eyesight, but because he has chosen to view you through the blood of Christ. And when He sees you through that blood, you are cleansed. You are washed.

That gives us hope to move on, because I know that I'm not under condemnation, you see. And I, if I'm not under condemnation from God, I shouldn't be condemning myself, right? I shouldn't be under condemnation of self. If the judge of the universe has acquitted me and called me His child, why in the world am I doing the opposite to myself? That's for starters, and I think that's really important.

But when we recognize those times that we do sin, we need to be quick to just cry out to God and know that there is forgiveness. And we can move on in the act of holiness because that tendency to want to give up when we do sin is very prevalent in our lives. And I've seen it in my own life, and I've seen it in some of you guys. We'll be going along, walking along with God, and then we mess up, and it's like a big-time mess up, a really dirty, ugly, embarrassing mess up, and we just go, well, whatever. And we're like, and we just throw ourselves into sin for a period of time. And it's pretty ugly.

I don't think we have to take the road of self-righteousness or the road of self-abasement. I think when we understand and follow the model of God's Word about how to deal with my sin, when I know that I'm on this calling to live this holy life, but I know that I mess up, how do I reconcile those two? Well, I do it through some of the beautiful models of prayer that I see in the Word of God, and I love the life of David because here was a man who was a lover of God, but he went through times in his life where he loved his flesh more. Let's just call it what it is.

And David would readily admit it. But you know what? It didn't stop him. He would go to God; he would get the forgiveness that was needed, and he would begin to move on. And one of the prayers that he offers and records actually for you and I, which came at a time in his life when, which was one of the most heinous and public sins that David ever committed, is so powerful for you and I to read, and adopt, I believe, into our lives when we mess up. Let me show it to you on the screen. It's from Psalm 51, and it goes like this:

Psalm 51:1-2,10 (ESV)

Have mercy on me, O God, according to your steadfast love; according to your abundant mercy blot out my transgressions. Wash me thoroughly from my iniquity, and cleanse me from my sin! Create in me a clean heart, O God, and renew a right spirit within me.

Have mercy on me, O God, according to your steadfast love...” David was convinced that God's love was steadfast, and so he asked for mercy predicated upon that love. And then he said, “...according to your abundant mercy, blot

out my transgressions (blot them out). Wash me (he says) thoroughly from my iniquity, and cleanse me from my sin!"

Did you notice there's different words that David uses related to the sin? He says, have mercy on me, da, da, da. But then he starts off by saying—he says, *"...according to your steadfast love; according to your abundant mercy, blot out my (notice the first word for sin) transgressions."* You know what that word transgression means, right? It means I knew it was wrong and I did it anyway. I knew God said, no, don't do that, but I chose. God drew the line right there, and I stepped over it willfully, and said, I'm doing it anyway.

That's what David's crying out about concerning his sin, his transgressions. He says, *"Wash me (thoroughly) from my iniquity, (and) cleanse me from my sin!"* And then I love this last statement, he prays and says, *"Create in me a clean heart, O God, and renew a right spirit within me."* This is a man who is very aware of the fact that he has contaminated; he has polluted his body and spirit, and he knows it. And he needs a washing and a cleansing, and he cries out to God for it, and he gets it. And you and I will too.

And then, once you do, it's now time to start walking again on that calling to holiness through separation. Now David messed up here. He didn't separate here when he should have. There was Bathsheba, on the rooftop, and he wanted her. Whereas he should have brought separation physically from his eyes or his desires, or whatever. Instead, he embraced it all. What did he do?

He invited death. He invited death. The toxicity of sin took lives in that sin. You know the story. People lost their lives because of his sin. But more than that, David's relationship with God was affected as well. And so David had to come back and cry out for God, to cleanse that contamination away.

You guys, we can do that too, and God will respond. And He will restore fellowship with us. And it's such a beautiful thing. We're called to holiness. Let's not push it away. Let's not become self-righteous in it. Let's just keep striving toward it, like the writer of Hebrews says, because we're called to reflect the family image.