SOFTWARE & TECH

The Pursuit Of Holiness Jerry Bridges

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Understanding the Core Message of The Pursuit of Holiness by Jerry Bridges

For decades, Christians seeking a deeper, more authentic walk with God have turned to a classic work of spiritual formation: **The Pursuit of Holiness** by Jerry Bridges. First published in 1978, this book remains a cornerstone for those who desire to understand what holiness truly means and how it applies to daily life. Unlike many modern self-help guides that focus on external behavior modification, Bridges offers a theologically rich, deeply practical, and highly accessible exploration of what it means to be holy as God is holy. His central thesis is both challenging and liberating: holiness is not optional for the believer, but it is also not achievable through human effort alone. It requires a delicate, daily balance of personal responsibility and complete dependence on the Holy Spirit.

In a world that often minimizes the gravity of sin and reduces Christianity to a list of moral rules, Jerry Bridges calls readers back to a robust, biblical vision of sanctification. He argues that the pursuit of holiness is not a dreary, joyless task but rather the pathway to genuine freedom and intimacy with Christ. This article will explore the foundational principles of Bridges' teaching, unpacking the relationship between grace and effort, the role of the Holy Spirit, and the practical habits that help believers grow in Christlikeness. Whether you are new to the Christian faith or have walked with Christ for decades, the timeless wisdom in **The Pursuit of Holiness** offers a clear, compelling roadmap for the journey.

Who Was Jerry Bridges? A Brief Background

Jerry Bridges (1929–2016) was an American author, speaker, and staff member of The Navigators, a global Christian parachurch organization. For over fifty years, he devoted his life to teaching Scripture and discipling believers. His writing is characterized by a rare combination of theological precision and pastoral warmth. He did not write as a distant academic but as a fellow traveler on the path of sanctification, openly acknowledging his own struggles with sin and his ongoing need for God's grace.

Bridges is perhaps best known for his trilogy on the Christian life: **The Pursuit of Holiness**, **The Practice of Godliness**, and **The Discipline of Grace**. Each book builds upon the others, but **The Pursuit of Holiness** remains his most widely read and influential work. His writing style is straightforward, biblical, and remarkably free of theological jargon, making deep truths accessible to everyday readers. He masterfully holds together two truths that are often pitted against each other: the absolute sovereignty of God in sanctification and the clear biblical call for believers to actively strive for holiness.

The Biblical Foundation: Why Holiness Matters

The starting point for Bridges is not a human philosophy but the explicit command of Scripture. He anchors his entire discussion in 1 Peter 1:15-16: *"But just as he who called you is holy, so be holy in all you do; for it is*

This is not a suggestion or a recommendation for the especially devout. It is a command issued by God Himself to every person who bears the name of Christ.

Bridges argues that the pursuit of holiness is fundamentally about the character of God. We are called to be holy because He is holy. Our holiness is not meant to earn His favor—that has already been secured by Christ—but to reflect His nature to a watching world. When we live holy lives, we display the reality of the gospel. When we tolerate sin, we obscure the beauty of the One we claim to serve. This understanding elevates the pursuit of holiness from a mere personal improvement project to a matter of divine testimony.

The Distinction Between Positional and Practical Holiness

One of the most crucial distinctions Bridges makes is between **positional holiness** and **practical holiness**. Positional holiness, also known as justification, is the instantaneous, complete, and unchanging status every believer receives the moment they place their faith in Christ. Through the blood of Jesus, we are declared holy, righteous, and acceptable before God. This is a gift of grace, not a reward for effort.

Practical holiness, or sanctification, is the ongoing, lifelong process by which the Holy Spirit transforms us into the likeness of Christ. This involves our active cooperation: putting sin to death, cultivating righteous habits, and growing in love for God and neighbor. Bridges insists that confusing these two categories leads to serious problems. If we focus only on positional holiness, we may become complacent about sin. If we focus only on practical holiness, we may fall into legalism and despair, trying to earn what has already been given.

The genius of Bridges' approach is that he keeps both truths in constant tension. Because we are positionally holy, we are free to pursue practical holiness without fear of condemnation. Because we are called to practical holiness, we must not use grace as an excuse for sin.

The Role of Personal Responsibility in Sanctification

A major theme throughout **The Pursuit of Holiness** is the believer's active responsibility. Bridges firmly rejects any form of quietism—the idea that we should simply "let go and let God" transform us without any effort on our part. He points to passages like Philippians 2:12-13, which commands believers to "work out your salvation with fear and trembling," while affirming that it is God who works in us. There is no contradiction here for Bridges; it is a divine partnership.

This partnership requires several concrete actions on our part:

- Study the Scriptures daily to understand what God requires and to renew the mind.
- Identify specific areas of sin rather than dealing with vague feelings of guilt.
- Develop a strategy for putting those sins to death, including accountability and avoidance of tempting situations.
- Pray persistently for the Holy Spirit's power to obey.
- Rely on the means of grace: prayer, Scripture, fellowship, and the Lord's Supper.

Bridges is careful to point out that this effort is not "works righteousness." We do not become holy by our own power. But God, in His sovereignty, has ordained that we grow through diligent, Spirit-dependent effort. To expect growth without effort is to misunderstand how God normally works in the lives of His children.

Dealing with Sin at the Root Level

Another hallmark of Bridges' teaching is his insistence on dealing with sin, not just its external symptoms, but its internal roots. He warns against a superficial approach to holiness that merely modifies outward behavior while the heart remains unchanged. True holiness begins in the mind and affections. We must learn to hate what God hates and love what God loves.

To this end, Bridges provides a diagnostic approach. He encourages readers to ask probing questions: What do

I think about when my mind is idle? What do I secretly crave? Where do I tend to cut corners ethically? What sins do I excuse in myself while condemning in others? By bringing these hidden areas into the light of Scripture and confession, we allow the Holy Spirit to do deep, lasting work.

The Indispensable Role of the Holy Spirit

While Bridges emphasizes personal effort, he is equally adamant that holiness is ultimately the work of the Holy Spirit. He frequently reminds readers of Galatians 5:16: *"Walk by the Spirit, and you will not gratify the desires of the flesh."*The Spirit is the divine Agent of sanctification. He convicts us of sin, illuminates the Scriptures, empowers our obedience, and produces His fruit in our lives.

For Bridges, the secret to consistent victory over sin is not trying harder in our own strength but learning to depend more fully on the Spirit's power. He describes this as a moment-by-moment reliance, a conscious turning from self-sufficiency to Spirit-dependency. This is not a passive state but an active trust. We pray, we obey, and we trust the Spirit to work through our efforts. The goal is not to become self-reliant holy people but Spirit-reliant holy people who are increasingly free from the dominion of sin.

Grace as the Motivation, Not the Excuse

One of the most frequently misunderstood aspects of the Christian life is the relationship between grace and holiness. Bridges addresses this head-on, arguing that grace is not a license to sin but the very power that enables us to say no to sin. He distinguishes between two kinds of grace: **saving grace**, which brings us into right relationship with God, and **sanctifying grace**, which empowers us to grow in holiness.

Unfortunately, many believers fall into the trap of "cheap grace," assuming that because God will forgive them, they do not need to take sin seriously. Bridges counters this by pointing to Romans 6:1-2: *"What shall we say then? Are we to continue in sin that grace may abound? By no means!"*True grace, he argues, always leads to a hatred of sin and a desire for holiness. If our understanding of grace does not produce a growing distaste for sin, we may not have understood grace at all.

On the other hand, Bridges also warns against the opposite error: trying to earn God's favor through our performance. He calls this "legalism" and insists it is equally destructive. The proper motivation for holiness is not fear of punishment or a desire to be accepted, but love for the God who has already accepted us in Christ. We pursue holiness not to be loved but because we are loved.

Practical Steps for the Pursuit of Holiness

Throughout his book, Bridges offers a wealth of practical, actionable advice. He does not leave readers with lofty theology alone; he shows them how to apply it. Here are some of the key practical steps he outlines:

1. Take sin seriously. Do not make peace with any sin, no matter how small it seems. Every act of disobedience is an offense against a holy God.
2. Know your weaknesses. Every believer has particular areas of vulnerability—pride, lust, anger, gossip, laziness, or worry. Identify yours and develop a specific plan to guard against them.
3. Use the means of grace diligently. Regular time in Scripture, prayer, and fellowship with other believers are not optional extras; they are the ordinary channels through which God strengthens His people.
4. Practice accountability. Find at least one trusted brother or sister in Christ who can ask you hard questions and pray with you regularly. Isolation is a breeding ground for sin.
5. Memorize and meditate on Scripture. Hiding God's Word in your heart is one of the most powerful weapons against temptation. Bridges often cited Psalm 119:11: "I have hidden your word in my heart that I might not sin against you."
6. Confess sin promptly. Do not allow unconfessed sin to accumulate. Agree with God about your sin as soon as you become aware of it, and receive His cleansing grace.

7. Cultivate a thankful heart. Gratitude for the gospel is a powerful antidote to the selfishness that fuels so much sin.

Common Obstacles to Holiness

Bridges also identifies several obstacles that commonly derail believers in their pursuit of holiness. Among them are:

- Ignorance of Scripture. We cannot obey commands we do not know.
- Unbelief. Doubting God's promises or His power to change us.
- Love of the world. Allowing the values and pleasures of this age to capture our hearts.
- Peer pressure. The fear of man is a snare that leads to compromise.
- Spiritual laziness. Simply not putting forth the effort required to grow.
- A casual attitude toward sin. Viewing sin as a minor flaw rather than a serious offense.

By naming these obstacles, Bridges helps readers diagnose why they may be stuck in their spiritual growth. Often, the problem is not a lack of desire but a failure to identify and address the specific roadblocks that stand in the way.

The Rewards of a Holy Life

Finally, Bridges does not present the pursuit of holiness as a grim duty but as a path to profound blessing. He points to the Beatitudes in Matthew 5, where Jesus pronounces blessings on the pure in heart, the merciful, and those who hunger and thirst for righteousness. Holiness, properly understood, leads to joy, peace, and a deeper experience of God's presence.

There are also practical rewards. A holy life builds credibility for our witness, protects us from the destructive consequences of sin, and brings glory to God. Bridges quotes Hebrews 12:14: "Strive

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