

Three Radical Refusals

Holy Obsession – Part I

Romans 15:14

Introduction

One hundred seventy years ago in Scotland, there appeared briefly, a man considered by Christian's worldwide today, to be a shining light. His name was Robert Murray McCheyne.

McCheyne entered the pastorate in 1836, at the age of twenty-three. He would only serve for six years, however, as he died in a typhus epidemic when he was twenty-nine. By that time, his passion for Christ had already made its mark. His lifestyle and passion for holy living became almost legendary. His sermons and writings were heard and read throughout Scotland, and influenced untold thousands to give their lives in total surrender to Jesus Christ.

If you read of the life of Robert Murray McCheyne, you come away with the thought that this man was obsessed with the things of God. He was:

- obsessed with the glory of God;
- obsessed with the preaching of the gospel;
- obsessed with the grace of Christ.

McCheyne wrote these words in an address, challenging believers to live a similar life; that is, obsessed with godly priorities,

Remember, you are God's sword, His instrument – a chosen vessel unto Him to bear His name. In great measure, according to the purity of the instrument, will be the success. It is not great talent that God blesses so much as great likeness to Jesus Christ. A holy [Christian] is an awesome weapon in the hand of God.ⁱⁱⁱ

If any words best described the heart and life of the apostle Paul, I think it could be the phrase, “holy obsession”. Like Robert Murray McCheyne, Paul was obsessed with the glory of God and the gospel of God and the grace of God. And he was always challenging the believer with their potential and purpose as an instrument in the hand of God.

In Romans chapter 15, the apostle makes a shift in his writing to inform us that he is now in the process of wrapping up his letter; which does not mean he is finished. He actually has a lot more to say. He is like most preachers who say, “Now, finally . . .,” and you know they are nowhere near finality!

Do not think for a moment that Paul is finished teaching in this letter. In Romans 15:14, Paul does, in fact, begin his closing comments, which are personal and passionate and provocative. Look at that verse.

And concerning you, my brethren, I myself am convinced that you yourselves are full of goodness, filled with all knowledge, and able also to admonish one another.

Paul is commending them. It is a rare thing for Paul to write a letter without even one rebuke, yet the letter to the Romans arrives without a single reprimand.

This letter is so different from his letter to the Corinthians. He refers to them as immature babies, unable to receive even the most basic teaching of truth (I Corinthians 3:1-2).

It is also different than the letter by the writer of Hebrews. He refers to his scattered audience as

people who are poor listeners and slow learners (Hebrews 5:11-13).

Instead of these rebukes, Paul is able to entirely commend these believers who are living in Rome. He writes, "I am convinced you are people of . . ."

- character (full of goodness);
- conviction (filled with all knowledge);
- competency (able to admonish one another).

Today, I want to turn these three phrases around to give a different perspective on them. I want to present three refusals in the life of every believer who desires to be an awesome weapon in the hand of God. A person:

- of good character is choosing not to be evil or bad;
- of conviction is choosing not to float down the stream of relativism;
- who is competent to admonish is choosing not to ignore other people.

For those who are truly obsessed with holy living, their life will say "no," as much as it says "yes." A holy life is as much a life of refusing the wrong things as it is a life of accepting the right things.

If there was ever a need for radical refusals, to take place, it was in the days of Paul – and it is in our generation, as well.

The Romans believers were living in what Seneca, the first century playwright, called "the cesspool of iniquity". This was a reference to the capitol city of the Roman Empire, where Paul was mailing this letter.

The immorality of Rome was almost beyond description. Everything from bisexuality to bestiality were applauded.

The highest political leader of Rome was a known pedophile. Abortion was commonplace. Unwanted children were left on doorsteps to be taken and eaten by wild animals or worse, if there can be something worse, by human predators who would raise these children and then, turn them out as child prostitutes. A man and a woman who married and remained faithful were mocked by the Roman philosophers as prudes and simpletons.

The religions of Paul's day worshiped a pantheon of gods as wicked and petty as human beings. Their chief god was in reality, the human body.

Drug abuse was so widespread that when Paul preached in Ephesus, the people gave up their mind altering drugs.

If there was ever a day when people needed to learn how to refuse corruption and immorality and superstition and drug abuse and sexual promiscuity and drunkenness and so on – it was then, and it is now.

The radical refusals of the believers in Rome need to be the radical refusals of every Christian today, in order to pursue holy living. If a Christian is to have these holy obsessions; that is, to be passionate; gripped; preoccupied; fixated; fanatical; any other synonym you can uncover over holy things, there must be radical refusals in order to see it happen.

Radically Refuse Mediocrity

First, a believer must radically refuse mediocrity. To put this in a positive light – a Christian should be characterized by acts of goodness.

Notice again that first phrase Paul uses to describe these believers in Romans 15:14.

. . . I myself am convinced that you yourselves are full of goodness, . . .

The original word translated "full of" is the same word that is used of a sponge when it is full of liquid. Whatever is in the sponge will come out when the sponge gets, what? Squeezed.

Paul is saying, in effect. "When life squeezes you, what ought to come out is goodness."

This means the goodness that you have been building up on the inside.

It is interesting to me that the word for goodness in this verse, is also given to us as one of the fruits of the Spirit of God. When the believer surrenders to the internal reforming work of the Holy Spirit, fruit emerges,

. . . the fruit of the Spirit is love, joy, peace, patience, patience, kindness and goodness, . . . (Galatians 5:22)

Since God is entirely and essentially and absolutely good (Matthew 19:17), when we grow into the likeness of Christ, goodness squeezes out.

Goodness is the work of Christ in us, through the Spirit of God. This means, goodness is not something you drum up; it is not the result of self-effort. It is also not a New Year's resolution or a reward for attending church and never skipping

Sunday school. Goodness is the process of reformation – it is the making of a holy heart.

To borrow a popular expression, goodness is the result of an extreme makeover in which the Spirit of God bulldozes everything to the ground and starts from scratch as you surrender to Him.

People will say of a man or woman – under reconstruction by the Spirit of God – “That is a good man,” or “That is a good woman.”

It is becoming, more and more, a rare commendation of someone, is it not?

Many years ago, Mark Twain said, with a cynical grin on his face, “Always do the right thing. It will gratify some people and astonish everybody else.”

The *Daily Herald* of Chicago, a couple of years ago, ran an article about a newlywed couple who lost all their money. This couple had left a black zippered case – the size of a personal calendar – on the roof of their car as they sped away from their reception to begin their honeymoon. The case had all their wedding gift money and other cash gifts from their parents zipped up tight inside. When they reached their destination, it was gone.

Two days after the newspaper ran the story, the same newspaper carried the headline, “Finders Keepers? Not Everyone Believes It.” David Yi, an unemployed suburban resident, had found the black case with the 12,000 dollars inside. In spite of the fact that he was unemployed and had mounting bills, he tracked down the couple and gave it back to them. After this hit the newsstands, David was inundated with job offers! With employee theft in the billions every year, it is easy to understand why he received so many!

The truth is, goodness is so rare that we are surprised when it happens and are not quite sure how to respond.

A *USA Today* poll found 1 out of every 2 employees admitting to some form of unethical or illegal activity. This might be cutting corners on quality control or covering up incidents or lying about sick days or deceiving customers, etc.

I find it fascinating that Justin Martyr, who lived in Galilee in the second century, made an interesting observation about Jesus Christ’s work as a carpenter. You may remember that the Lord was a carpenter until the age of thirty, when he entered the ministry. Justin Martyr actually wrote about farmers still using plows and yokes for the oxen made by Jesus Christ – seventy-five years later!

Goodness is not necessarily discovered in church – it is demonstrated at work; in life. It is the refusal of mediocrity.

Track the word “goodness” or “good” through the New Testament sometime and feel the urgency of God to see his children demonstrate excellence in character, in occupation, in relationships, in all of life.

Earlier, in Romans 12:9, Paul said we should, . . . ***Abhor what is evil; cling to what is good.***

These are strong words. We are to despise sin and literally, glue ourselves to good.

Twice in Romans 13:3, Paul challenges the believer to do what is good as a citizen of earth and heaven.

Paul gave a pep talk to the Galatians as he wrote in Galatians 6:9a,

Let us not lose heart in doing good . . .

Why do you think Paul had to write, “Don’t lose heart in doing good”?

Because we can easily lose heart. Doing good does not automatically result in thank you cards, notes of appreciation, a promotion or a bonus at work.

Perhaps you have felt the discouragement, and even resentment, when the lazy, conniving employee received “Employee of the Month”. You are the one who has been sweating it out, faithfully taking on not only your tasks, but even helping that employee with his.

I learned firsthand the perils of working a little too hard while I was in college. Several of my friends and I worked on an assembly line, making microwave ovens. All I had to do on the assembly line was to attach two metal legs onto a small motor and then, press a plastic fan onto the motor – a small internal fan used to cool the microwave. When I finished making it, I had to hand it over to the worker on the assembly line just a few feet away, and then start on another one. The guy who had been assigned this post before me had only a couple of them assembled and ready for the assembly line.

I was afraid it might be a difficult spot. However, after working for only three hours, I had boxes of the part stacked around me – ready and waiting. I pulled a box of them over to the line so that the guy only had to reach in and he was ready to go.

I thought, “This is too easy!”

It was so easy, in fact, that it became downright boring. What I did not realize was that the guy before me wanted the job to appear to be difficult, so he would not have to do anything else. He wanted to be bored; he lived to be bored.

I naively jumped onto the line to help anywhere I could. I discovered after a few days, that I was upsetting the people I was trying to help – I was disturbing the culture of mediocrity. One guy muttered under his breath to me, “What are you doing – trying to make everybody look bad?”

The guy whose place I had taken was literally seething over what I had inadvertently done. A week later, the foreman settled the matter by assigning me to the task of making microwave oven doors. This was the most difficult spot on the line, where one could barely keep up.

Maybe Galatians 6:9 is the verse for you,

Let us not lose heart in doing good . . .

How do you not lose heart when you are penalized for doing good; when you lose clients because you cannot tell a lie; when you are made fun of for your honesty; when you lose a relationship because you will not loosen up?

The rest of Paul’s statement to the Galatians prophesies,

Let us not lose heart in doing good, for in due time we will reap if we do not grow weary. (Galatians 6:9)

Paul wrote to the Ephesians,

He who steals must steal no longer; but rather he must labor, performing with his own hands what is good . . . (Ephesians 4:28)

In other words, do your best – do not steal from your company. For those in the business of selling, this means, in simple terms, stop scamming people! Stop doing business like the world! I know as well as you do, people will believe anything; and if they believe the sales pitch, well, it is their own fault for not being more discerning!

For the believer who is passionate about holy living, being full of goodness is not a small commitment. This is no trite resolution. There is no scamming, no taking advantage of another person, no dishonesty, no shoddy work.

Jesus Christ set the standard, as Luke wrote that He,

. . . went about [everywhere] doing good . . . (Acts 10:38)

We know that when He made a plow or a yoke, He made it to last.

Jesus will one day, personally sit at the bema seat. There, for those who mirrored and modeled His character, our Lord will say this commendation,

. . . “Well done, good and faithful servant. . . .” (Matthew 25:23 KJV)

Becoming a person obsessed with holy living means to radically, entirely, and completely refuse mediocrity.

Radically Refuse Lethargy

The second phrase Paul delivers indicates that the Christian must also radically refuse lethargy.

Notice Romans 15:14 again.

. . . I myself am convinced that you yourselves are full of goodness, filled with all knowledge, . . .

If a refusal of mediocrity meant you were marked by character; this second phrase means you are marked by conviction.

Now do not misunderstand Paul in this. When he says that the Roman believers are filled with all knowledge, he does not mean that they have all knowledge or that they have nothing else to learn. He means they have all the knowledge they need in order to proceed in their walk with Christ.ⁱⁱⁱ

In fact, Paul will say in the next verse that they only needed to be reminded of the truths of this letter – indicating they had already received apostolic instruction. More than likely, this came through believers who had been taught by Paul, who now lived in Rome.

Paul is commending these Roman believers for their openness and teachability and passion to learn the things of God.

They were likewise obsessed with the truth of God’s word. Surrounded by paganism, relativism, idolatry, immorality, corruption on every hand, they had one primary question, “What do the scriptures say?”

It is no wonder that Paul would open his letter in the first chapter by writing this amazing compliment,

. . . I thank my God through Jesus Christ for you all, because your faith is being proclaimed throughout the whole world. (Romans 1:8)

Oh to be like the Romans! Has there ever been a need for the clarity of the gospel and the conviction of the truth of God more than today?

In *World Magazine*, an article covered a story that took place last year. Two researchers from The University of North Carolina at Chapel Hill conducted research in conjunction with the national Study of Youth and Religion. They surveyed 3,000 teenagers about their religious beliefs and wrote their findings in a new book. They summarized the teens' beliefs with these five statements:

1. There is a god who exists who created and ordered the world, but simply watches over human life on earth.
2. This god wants people to be nice and fair to each other, as taught by the Bible and most of the world religions.
3. This god does not need to be involved in anyone's life, except when he is needed to resolve a problem.
4. The central goal of life is to be happy and feel good about yourself.
5. Good people go to heaven when they die.

Gene Edward Veith, a believer and columnist, summarized the findings, by saying,

Even these secular researchers recognized that this creed is a far cry from true Christianity, with no place for sin, judgment, salvation, or even Jesus Christ. They have a religion of works and a god who does not really care.^{iv}

In a journal that arrived at my home this week, there was an article on another survey taken by the Harris organization. It was found that 96% of adults who identified themselves as Christians, believed that Jesus Christ rose from the dead.

Before you get too excited about this statistic, 50% of the same people believe in the existence of ghosts, 27% of the same people read the horoscope for daily direction, and 21% believe they were someone or something else in a previous life before being reincarnated.^v

It is no wonder that Paul wrote to the believer,

Be diligent to present yourself approved to God as a workman who does not need to be ashamed, accurately handling the word of truth. (II Timothy 2:15)

When we put the Bible aside, we throw away our rudder, oars, life jacket, and compass.

Paul wrote to Timothy, in II Timothy 3:16-17,

- ***All scripture is inspired by God*** – that is, it is the breath of God;
- ***and profitable for teaching*** – this is what you believe;
- ***for reproof*** – this tells you where you are wrong;
- ***for correction*** – this informs you when you are right;
- ***for training in righteousness*** – this helps you do what is right;
- ***so that the man of God*** – the believer;
- ***may be adequate, equipped for every good work.***

“Equipped” is the Greek word used for a ship that was loaded down with supplies before setting sail. It was also used of a wagon that was packed with all that was necessary before the journey began.

In other words, “Pack the Bible in your wagon, put it on your ship, carry it in your backpack as you head out into life, and you will have all that you need!”

Now I must quickly add that in Romans 15:14, Paul is not necessarily talking about intellectual knowledge; biblical facts. In this text, he uses the word for knowledge that means, “to apply what you know or to know by means of application and experience”.

Paul wrote,

that I may know Him and the power of His resurrection and the fellowship of his sufferings . . . (Philippians 3:10)

Wasn't Paul a believer? Didn't he know Christ as his own personal Savior?

Yes! But he used the same word “ginosko,” which implies, not merely intellectual activity, but obedient application.

Paul was saying, “I want to know the life of Christ, not just through propositional truth, but through personal testing.”

This is the believer who looks into the word and is among the,

. . . doers of the word, and not merely hearers who delude themselves. (James 1:22)

James goes on to say of the one who is an effectual doer,

... not having become a forgetful hearer but an effectual doer, this man will be blessed in what he does. (James 1:25)

I often think of the parable of the CEO who had to leave town on urgent business. He did not have time to meet with his key leadership or any of the employees in his company before leaving, so on his flight out of the country, he wrote a lengthy letter. He informed them that he would be gone for some time, and while he was gone, they were to accomplish a number of things. He was gone for six months.

Without notice, the CEO returned. He pulled into the company parking lot and immediately noticed the weeds growing next to the building. He had left instructions on the landscaping that he wanted done while he was away. As he entered the reception area, he immediately noticed the dust that had collected on the furniture. The receptionist quickly put away her nail file, sat up and said, "Good morning, sir."

He walked past the receptionist, into the warehouse where some of his staff had put up a ping-pong table. The equipment was silent and his staff was involved in what seemed to be a party. They stopped when they saw him and came over to him. He stammered out, "There were things I wanted accomplished, but the equipment is silent, the weeds are growing outside, and the staff is playing instead of working the phones. Didn't you get my letter?"

"Oh, that! You bet, we got it! We made photocopies for every employee and we all took an entire day off just to read it. Man, what a letter! It was great! In fact, we've created smaller groups of employees who meet weekly to discuss the letter. Some of our employees have even memorized parts of the letter. It is so good!"

Then, everyone fell quiet under the gaze of the CEO. He asked, "Did you do what I told you to do in the letter?"

"Oh, no sir. You see, sir, we're still studying the letter."

Paul is commending the Roman believers for refusing this kind of dichotomy; this kind of contradiction.

He commends them for refusing lethargy; for refusing the urge:

- to examine the truth, but never execute the truth;
- to analyze the Bible, but not apply the Bible;

- to read the word, without every reproducing the word in life.

Go deeply in your study of the word – just make sure you surface. What good is it unless people see your depth in the word become a demonstration of the truth of God's word!

Refuse mediocrity, refuse lethargy, and let me give one more.

Radically Refuse Apathy

Thirdly, the Christian who is obsessed with the pursuit of holy living will radically refuse apathy.

Notice Romans 15:14 once more.

. . . I myself am convinced that you yourselves are full of goodness, filled with all knowledge, and able also to admonish one another.

The word "admonish" is from "noutheteo," which gives us our word "nouthetic". Jay Adams popularized the concept of "nouthetic counseling" in his book entitled, *Competent to Counsel*. The meaning, taken directly from this title, is "able to counsel".

The word "noutheteo" is a compound Greek word made up of "nous," meaning, "mind or intellect," and "tithemi," meaning, "to put or place". When these are put together, it gives the idea of conveying something into someone's mind or someone's understanding which will correct them. This is like our common expression, "Let me lay something on your mind."

The words "teaching and admonishing" appear together in Paul's writings. In Colossians 3:16 he tells us that the believers are to be,

. . . teaching and admonishing one another...

The word "teach" seems to be used most often as a positive declaration, while "admonish" seems to be used with a more corrective meaning.

"Admonish one another," Paul wrote to the Romans. Literally, this meant, "correct one another". It has the idea of stirring one another up.

Why? Because we have the tendency to settle down into a rut. We are creatures of habit – we go home the same way; we eat the same things; we have our routine. We even sit in the same seats in class or in church.^{vi}

I can remember in elementary school thinking that my name was "Settle down". Every time Mrs.

Jolly or Mrs. Stickle saw me, they would invariably have to say, “Hey you, settle down. . . . You, settle down.” I figured that was my middle name, Stephen Settle-Down Davey!

The trouble is – when you get old enough, you start listening to that advice. You not only settle down, you wear down.

Yet the Christian life is called a race; a war; a match. It calls for discipline, drive, and determination.

We need one another to provoke each other. We need prodding, stirring up, admonishing because we tend to float in the current. Even worse, we tend to slide away.

D. A. Carson wrote,

We do not drift toward holiness. We do not gravitate toward godliness, prayer, obedience to Scripture, faith and delight in the Lord. We drift toward compromise and call it tolerance; we drift toward disobedience and call it freedom; we drift toward superstition and call it faith. We cherish the lack of discipline and call it relaxation; we slouch toward prayerlessness and think we have escaped legalism; we slide toward godlessness and convince ourselves we have been liberated.^{vii}

It is no wonder we need to admonish one another – to provoke each other and challenge one another to live for Christ.

I received a letter this week, from a young lady who listens to *Wisdom for the Heart* in another part of the state. She thanked us for the book she had received, which she finished in just a few days. Every time the program comes on the air, she gets out her Bible and her notebook and takes as many notes as she can. She asked several questions in her letter, which was addressed to me. She asked questions about how to discover the will of God for her life.

You can easily tell, by her letter, that she is passionate about living for Christ. She writes, “I’ll do anything God tells me to do. I often tell the Lord, ‘Lord, show me what to do. I am totally open to you.’”

What challenged me the most about this letter is that it was written by a young lady who happens to be in middle school! She is not even a teenager yet!

She signed the letter, “Your friend in the Lord”.

Conclusion

Paul would say of this young lady, as he said of the Roman believers, and I trust, would say of you and me,

We are people who make three radical refusals in our quest for holy living for the glory of God.

These three refusals are:

1. We will refuse mediocrity – we will not settle for second class workmanship.
2. We will refuse lethargy – we will not stop with learning the word without living the word.
3. We will refuse apathy – we will care enough to cheer one another on in this race we call the Christian life.

We will make these refusals whether it is through a phone conversation, a Bible lesson, an arm around the shoulder, or perhaps a card or a letter like the one from this young lady that ends with the words, “Your friend in the Lord”.

It is true, what Robert Murray McCheyne once wrote,

. . . It is not great talent that God blesses so much as great likeness to Jesus Christ. A holy [Christian] is an awesome weapon (an awesome tool; an awesome encouragement) in the hand of God.

This manuscript is from a sermon preached on 4/30/2006 by Stephen Davey.

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ⁱ J. Harrison Hudson, “The Impact of Robert Murray McCheyne,” *Life and Work*, (Jan., 1987).

ⁱⁱ *Holman New Testament Commentary* (Holman, 2000), p. 444.

ⁱⁱⁱ R. C. H. Lenski, *The Interpretation of St. Paul’s Epistle to the Romans* (Augsburg, 1945), p. 877.

^{iv} Gene Edward Veith, “A Nation of Deists,” *World Magazine* (June 25, 2005).

^v “Casper Friendly Theology,” *Leadership Magazine* (Spring 2006).

^{vi} John Phillips, *Exploring Romans* (Moody Press, 1969), p. 253.

^{vii} D. A. Carson, “Reflections,” *Christianity Today* (July 31, 2000).