

JESUS AND A GOSPEL OF HOLINESS

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As one who grew up in the holiness tradition, it strikes me as odd that most holiness teaching and preaching seldom visits the gospels. This is odd for several reasons. First, we would claim to be earnest Christians, intense and deep in our discipleship. And yet, we have seldom elaborated the deeper life in terms of the story of Jesus our Master. Second, we claim to be Bible-Christians, an expression Wesley used. That is, we hold a high view of Scripture, its inspiration and authority. And yet, nearly half of the New Testament that tells the story of Jesus does not directly inform our understanding of living a holy life. And third, our preferred mode of discourse on holiness has been oriented around Pentecost and Spirit-baptism/filling. Jesus celebrated the Spirit's ministry within his followers as a gracious expression of divine self-giving that would make **Jesus**—his life, teachings and way—gloriously clear to them. And yet, ironically, **our** focus on the Spirit's fullness has not consistently brought us to a place of holy preoccupation with the person of Jesus.

When you read the Gospels, it appears that Jesus has very little to say on the subject of holiness. The standard terms are seldom found. To begin, then, why does Jesus seldom address a theme so central for much of Judaism in the first century? And what does this fact imply for a

holiness tradition that seeks “to spread scriptural holiness across these lands?” In general terms, these pages aim at offering an answer.

Jesus had little to say about holiness for the same reason he had little to say about the Messiah. That is, the concept of “holiness” within first century could not be embraced or engaged without major critique and redefinition. Especially the redefinition, but also the critique, was closely tied to his own identity and mission in the world.

More particularly, then, I want to suggest some features of the notion of holiness that shaped the context for Jesus’ ministry and outline Jesus’ critique of them. Then, I will explore briefly how Jesus redefined the concept of holiness around his own kingdom mission and suggest how he offered the gift of a new and holy life to his followers. Finally, I will begin to draw out some of the ways the story of Jesus in the gospels suggest a gospel of holiness that is truly “gospel,” good news.

HOLINESS IN THE FIRST CENTURY JEWISH CONTEXT

How is it that Jews distinguished themselves from their unbelieving world? By what means did they live that clearly marked them as different—holy—precisely because they claimed to be people of the one true God? What markers or boundaries separated “holy” from “unholy?”

Land

The people of God lived in a land that was God's gift to them and their descendants. That land was "promised" to them and therefore special, unlike any other. The people of that special, holy land were themselves the holy People of God. Exile from the land called into question their identity as holy people. The long years of struggle to enter, subdue, and inhabit the land, the yearning to return and reconstitute the nation as independent and free, and the need to expel foreign, godless occupiers would necessarily set the stage for the final establishing of God's kingdom in God's land and for God's people. Such life as subjects of God the King in the holy land, with all attendant blessing, would be holy indeed.

Temple

The land became holy because it had been promised, set-apart as a unique place. In particular, this land was the place of God's glorious dwelling on earth. And the Tabernacle/Temple was the locus of that dwelling. As such, the Temple became the symbolic center of holiness. The Holy One of Israel had chosen the Tabernacle/Temple as the premiere place for disclosing his magnificent presence. Within the innermost sanctuary—the Holy of Holies—Israel's God was enthroned. From that throne the Holy One governed the universe.

From that same throne, the Holy One provided a way for the unholy to draw near and to stay near. The priesthood and its administration of the sacrificial system of Israel offered atonement for sin and cleansing for defiling impurities. Atonement and cleansing became foundational for the people's life before God, for living in fellowship with God, and for enjoying the covenant blessings of God. The Temple and those who carried out its ministries on the people's behalf established, maintained, and guaranteed that God's people would be a holy people.

For this reason, the Temple carried profound social and political meaning, as the unique dwelling place of the Holy One and as the means for making God's people holy. Whoever built, maintained, and controlled the Temple achieved enormous status and power among the people. Likewise, whoever or whatever threatened the well-being or operation of the Temple was by that fact an enemy of God, God's people, and all that was holy.

Fidelity to Torah or the Law

God's people in God's land under God's rule would live in ways unlike the peoples around them. The provisions of the covenant, with the interpretive body of tradition they generated, would certify the faithful as truly holy. Although first century Judaism (even in Palestine) seldom spoke with one voice on matters of tradition, there was agreement that

circumcision, adherence to a clean diet, and observance of Sabbath constituted the most prominent markers of a holy people. At the birth of a male child the community acknowledged and affirmed they were a covenant people—the difference cut in their very flesh. Every day their diet reminded them they were nourishing a life unlike that of other groups. And on the seventh day, while others carried on as always they rested from their labor as their God had done in the beginning. Hallowing that day marked them as holy people. Once the people of God began their exile these markers became critical to the people’s self-understanding as people of Yahweh, the Holy One of Israel.

We could summarize these three markers of holiness in Jesus’ day in following three principles of holy living: (1) Holiness requires kingdom life, (2) in the presence of the Holy One, (3) that is radically distinct from others outside God’s kingdom. When we express holiness in this summary way, however, we must not forget the very precise ways these expressions were understood by Jesus’ contemporaries. In Jesus’ day, God’s kingdom meant re-establishment of Israel as a geo-political nation in the world. Moreover, to welcome and celebrate the presence of God dwelling among his people required the Temple and all that went with it. And the distinctives of God’s people were conceptually joined with circumcision, clean foods, and Sabbath observance. To speak of holiness in Jesus’ day necessarily implied these features of common Jewish life.

While there was room for some variation in understanding them, to call any of them into question would constitute a rejection of holiness itself and incur violent hostility.

That, of course, is what Jesus did. He embodied and offered the world a different understanding of holiness. That different understanding led to his loving sacrifice, his mighty triumph over death, and a radically new life for his followers.

JESUS' CRITIQUE AND REORIENTATION OF HOLINESS

Israel's God, the Holy One, was king of the universe. Jesus' message announced that reality and invited people to enter a kingdom life. Yet, the kingdom was not Israel re-established; it was larger. It was not only the "Holy Land," but all land, indeed the whole earth. And the way of the kingdom was not that of Israel or any other nation of the world. Not by armed resistance, or military struggle would the kingdom come. Rather, the kingdom comes by entrusting self and all to the care of the king, by seeking and surrendering to **his** way. It comes by repenting, by becoming like a child, and by rebirth.

The kingdom came not by violent striving but by grace and gift to all who would receive it. According to Jesus, the kingdom belonged especially to the poor—materially or other wise—who relied not on human, this-worldly resources but on the riches of another world to which they

became heirs. Not that the kingdom was other-worldly. For Jesus kingdom reality embraced the here and now, the very concrete life of people in relationship with God, others, and self. Indeed, this kingdom was among them, already a given, providing foundation and empowerment for another way of life. That **other** way was **holy**. To be sure, at some point God's kingdom would prevail over all of reality, but until then the world of Jesus' first followers had been visited and occupied by a very different kind of realm and as its subjects they began to live a very different kind of life.

Jesus called people to enter and to live such a kingdom life. He invited people to come into the Presence and dwell, to taste the fellowship of the kingdom table, to leave behind former ways and begin anew in the company of his own. Precisely in the context of this radical invitation to all, Jesus could pronounce forgiveness of sins, the arrival of salvation, and the presence of shalom. Similarly, he dared to utter words of woe on those who refused to see what he was doing and hear his words of life.

The opponents of Jesus rightly interpreted his invitation into the Presence as at best a rebuke of Temple, Priesthood, and their efficacy to atone for, and cleanse the people from, sin. At its worst, Jesus' welcome was simply a rejection of Temple, Priesthood, and sacrifice. All the gospels tell of Jesus' rampage in the Temple and cite prophetic judgment

to explain it. The House of Prayer for all nations had become a hideout for bandits, who ripped off worshipers as they came to the Temple, but even more they ripped off God by denying him the fruit of the nations streaming to the Holy Place to offer him worship. As the alternative, **Jesus** would be lifted up and draw all people to himself. Jesus had said, destroy this temple and in three days I will raise it up, referring to his crucifixion and resurrection. Although his opponents could never have made this connection, they correctly saw that Jesus' ministry posed a grave threat to the *status quo*.

Finally, Jesus' welcome into divine presence and call to a kingdom life founded a community that lives in ways profoundly different from other communities. But it was not the case that Jesus simply rejected circumcision, food laws, and Sabbath observance, and other features of common Jewish life. Jesus rejected the connection assumed between these external forms and a heart set on God. His quarrel with the Pharisees was not that they marked holiness by observable behaviors or customs. In fact, by definition a holy life will always be distinguishable from other ways. Jesus' quarrel was with the Pharisees lack of integrity. Their outer forms of life, which could be well and good, did not flow from hearts soft toward God, surrendered and submissive to his ways. And often the outer forms provided cover for inner defiance of God. Jesus had no patience for such pretence.

Jesus claimed that Israel's story came to its full God-intended meaning in his own identity and mission. He came as the anointed of God, uniquely called to bring God's redemption to Israel and through Israel to the world.

JESUS ON HOLINESS

The retelling of Israel's story in the life and ministry of Jesus identifies the problem with the people of God as a heart-problem. Isaiah had said, "This people honors me with their lips but their hearts are far from me." Matthew's Jesus cites that very diagnosis in describing his opponents, the leaders of God's people. Similarly, Jesus argued that people contract the worst forms of defilement not from contaminated externals but from inner corruption. Not from food that goes in, but from the well-spring of the heart comes He pronounced woe upon those who cared most about purity; they had become white-washed tombstones outwardly, but rotting corpses inwardly. They were, in fact, intensely concerned with image and profoundly lacking in substance. Their righteousness, Jesus insisted, was cosmetic. The beauty of their holiness was indeed only skin deep.

Such inner corruption produced a hardness of heart. They could not fulfill God's original intent for their lives because of such hardness. Even the Torah made concessions to this heart-condition so that the covenant

of marriage could be easily broken. And that broken covenant signaled the shattering of the more basic covenant God had made with his people. Through rebellion and defiance, Israel, God's choice vineyard failed to produce at all, or suffered the plundering of its fruit under the judgment of God.

The mission of Jesus to Israel as Messiah exposed this heart problem and offered God's answer. In Jesus, God fulfilled his promise of a new covenant inscribed on human hearts. If the law could be summed up in two great love commands, Jesus exposes the problem: 'You do not have the love of God in your hearts,' and then offers the solution in his own loving sacrifice. In response to that love, he calls his own to love as he himself loves. Such love, filling up and then flowing from the human heart, expresses new covenant holiness.

THE GOOD NEWS OF HOLINESS

Here is the gospel of holiness, according to Jesus. To address the human predicament of sinful bondage to the ways of death and the hardness of heart those ways develop, even among God's people: Jesus, King of love came and inaugurated a kingdom of love that counters and will conquer every other kingdom.

Truly, his **is** a kingdom of love. Thus, he extends loving welcome not just to some, but to all. Decent God-fearing fishermen, despised tax-collectors, disgraced women of the village, and disturbed bedeviled lunatics lurking among the tombs—all no less than the distinguished guardians of the sacred traditions. All who waited for God's kingdom had braced themselves for its bold, shocking invasion into their midst. But no one expected the shocking assault of a loving invitation to whomever.

Response to his loving invitation drew people into gracious forgiveness. But this forgiveness was more than removal of guilt; it came as assurance that they were now somehow keeping divine company, somehow included in divine hospitality—at the table no less—somehow belonging to others and to God. And that belonging began a new life.

Strangely, they belonged to these others who had also been surprised by Jesus' invitation. They seemed to be a community held together by growing commitment to the One who spoke as from God. In time, he would call them family—brothers, sisters, aunts and uncles—who hear and obey the word of God, Family that could include, but was not limited to or by, the other families that claimed them.

Their new life was learned “on the go.” They walked, literally and otherwise—with Jesus. He said, “Follow me!” and they did. In time, he sharpened the summons, “Deny self, take up cross, and follow.” And to the degree they understood, they did. They listened as he pronounced blessing on those they and most everyone else had considered cursed before—the poor, the powerless, and the persecuted. They learned that the same love they had received could actually rule their lives. In fact, love must rule, even when responding to enemies, even when realizing God’s plan for the ages and the nations. They began to understand that piety is for God and others, never for self. That as soon as piety serves self it degenerates into one more pathetic attempt to take glory that belongs only to God. They learned to trust the love that drew them into the new family. The One who loves them truly **loves** them. That is, he knows what they need and will respond to their needs. Because they are so cared for, they can live care-free. And they heard and learned many other facets of life in God’s kingdom of love.

Somewhere along the way, it must have dawned on them that, “This is not what we expected, but it is good.” In fact, it wasn’t what anyone expected. This life was completely different, in a word, holy.

It was an active, engaged holiness. Following a king like no other meant doing things they had never done before in ways they would never have

thought to do them. They did the things Jesus did—preached, healed, cast out demons, invited people to a kingdom life. If they were becoming like Jesus, that likeness could be seen most clearly as they interacted with others. As they saw people in the way Jesus did, and as their hearts went out to them as Jesus' did, they did what they could in Jesus' name. They were becoming like Jesus in the most comprehensive sense.

That they were also **unlike** Jesus became clear as well. Not as the result of inner reflection, but as they sometimes found themselves jealous of one another's relative standing with Jesus, as they took offense at the rejection of people who had no interest in the good news, and as their heroic professions collapsed under the weight of trial and temptation. Yet, love conquered on their behalf. Love did not let them go. Love found them and reclaimed them, just as he had told them. And, in community, in the new family he had founded, they received the Spirit he promised them—the Spirit as Jesus' own indwelling, empowering presence to go as he went, to love as he loved, to replicate and reproduce the Family here, there, and everywhere.

The good news of holiness from the story of Jesus is that Jesus continues this same journey and extends this same call with and to us. The story engages us. **We** are now called to follow, to find ourselves in

the company of others who wish to follow, to find ourselves listening and learning and living in ways we never imagined for ourselves. We are called to discover in the following how it is we are like and unlike this One, how it is that he meets us on the other side of a cross to breathe new life into us and our branch of the Family so that we actually do go, love and act as he himself did.

This seems to me so important and truly good news, because it has become common among us to lament the decline of holiness teaching and preaching. And to address our perceived need we clamor and work to make up for what is lacking. Surely the attempt to reformulate our article on sanctification is itself a case in point. Those of us who may help fill what is lacking feel this as privilege, I think, but also as responsibility. We may even feel it as burden, heavy burden. And yet, the burden can be lightened and heaviness eased by the Jesus of the story who calls us to come, to see for ourselves, to walk trustingly with him and some others to a new—holy—way of life. This strikes me as good news indeed.

Finally, how might this account of the story of Jesus with particular reference to a holy life challenge and inform us as seek to “spread scriptural holiness across these lands?” Here are just a few possibilities.

First, Jesus' hesitancy to use the language and terminology that most commonly conceptualized holiness in his day, but had been corrupted by its religious handlers, should perhaps give us pause. To what have we wed the categories of a holy life that may, in fact, compromise that very life? One part of the answer: when our formulations of a doctrine become so important to us that we can no longer think about the doctrine or recognize its reality without using those formulations. I believe that our current article on Entire Sanctification has become dangerously formula-like for some among us.

Second, in Jesus' way the primacy of love is clear, which has been a hallmark of classic Wesleyan teaching. In the story, however, **that** love extends to others in radically inclusive ways that profoundly threaten the neat moral/spiritual arrangements of the *status quo*. In what ways might we understand, embody, and share Jesus' love that would distinguish us with similarly radical and threatening consequence? **Is** love, Christ-like love, our bottom line, the most important aspect of holiness? It was for John Wesley and B.T. Roberts. The proposed redraft offers a much stronger focus on the primacy of love.

Third, Jesus offers us little detail on the process and the steps that would lead a people to be truly holy. It would seem odd indeed if there were no steps and helps toward holiness. Likewise, how strange if there

were no common patterns of life-experience observable among followers of Jesus to a holy life. As legitimate and helpful as identifying these may be, still Jesus offers little explicit help for doing so. Contrast that with a common tendency in our tradition to pin down the steps, as though getting it right and proclaiming it passionately somehow guarantees results. Jesus' way with people may suggest that this tendency is misguided.

Jesus' preferred model would include these basic components. He begins with a call to follow (or keep following); then, he summons to bear the cross, which means carrying it all the way to Jerusalem, a full identification with his death (as Paul would later express it: dying with Christ); and finally, he gives his Spirit to each within the community, empowering new life and impact on the world.

Fourth, Jesus' way with people is tailor-made to each disciple's need. It also seems patient, even in the press of an urgent mission. He seemed satisfied to have his followers on the way, moving in the same direction with him, participating in the common life and ministry of their community. Does this suggest a shift of perspective from a primary focus on the progress already made in one's walk with God (marking the milestones passed) to a primary focus on the continuing walk in the same direction in close proximity to Jesus (keeping the eye on where he is going)? I note that our current article on Sanctification tends to lead

us to reflect on our condition more than aspire to the vision of a holy life. The proposed article focuses more on the way and the goal, while affirming what we expect God will do. This focus keeps us open to tailor-made approach of Jesus, and less likely to assume that God's way with one is God's way with all.

Fifth, Jesus' way of love is grasped and lived only in community. When the Lord deals with individuals—their lack of love, their misguided or sinful responses, and his call to love—his interaction with them typically plays out in the company of others. That is, actually becoming a loving person and actually expressing love occurs in the course of relating to others in the community. Especially in North America, but increasingly elsewhere, how do we embrace Jesus' love, and invite others to his way of love, in the cultures of our society and our churches when they are so enthralled with the private and the individual?

Sixth, the new way of life Jesus offers engaged the world and the powers, and those held in their grip. In reading the gospel stories it is not possible to distinguish the inner God-awareness and God-likeness of individuals from service and ministry toward others. Especially in John's story, Jesus stressed that his word came from the Father and his deeds were what the Father was doing. He entered into and completed a word and ministry already in progress on behalf of people caught in the

historical, social, cultural and religious realities that conditioned their lives. And as Jesus was sent, so he sends his own. How is it, then, that a holy people, Christ-like in character, could ever disengage their piety from the on-going mission of Jesus? In my judgment the proposed article makes this connection between a holy life and the community much stronger than the current article, especially as that article is most commonly perceived.

Seventh, indeed, to use terminology now in vogue, Jesus' way was missional to the core—to confront, call, challenge, change people as well as social, religious and political structures by the power of love. More specifically, it was by the power of *self-sacrificing* love. Jesus really believed, and then lived, died, and rose again, in this way of love. **That** is how he brought victory to the world. Is it not at the core of the Jesus story and the ongoing Jesus movement that the followers of Jesus take this same unique—holy—way? That they distinguish themselves most clearly and powerfully by living and dying, at least to ego- and ethno-centric living if not otherwise? And, that they trust this way of Jesus' costly love, as opposed to other political, social, military ways, and thus continue to conquer? The proposed article places much stronger emphasis on specifically dying to a self-centered life and filling with divine love as the primary meaning of purifying from sin.