

THE HOLINESS WE PURSUE

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The Need For Holiness

It would be hard to read the Bible without observing the importance of holiness. In its pages the writers constantly call God holy and God calls his people to be holy

Yet, both inside and outside the church **unholiness** abounds. Tragically, in both church and world the **same** unholiness abounds.

For example, in North America a majority of people have made a "personal commitment to God." They confess traditional Christian beliefs--the Bible is the word of God; Christ is the Savior of the world, prayer changes things, and the like. Yet, when it comes to basic honesty, faithfulness in marriage, the use of time and money, "believing" would seem to make little difference. The "easy-believe-ism" of popular religion, even if called Christian, cannot heal the brokenness of our world.

But God can! He himself is holy and he calls us to be holy. As we shall see, the root idea of the term "holy" is "different." God calls and empowers us to be "different." Different from what? Different from the brokenness so common in modern life. And, different from the causes of that brokenness. This is the good news we embrace and confidently share with our world.

A Biblical Vision Of Holiness

A proper focus on holiness places us in the mainstream of Biblical revelation. Indeed, at the very heart of the Bible's portrayal of God and his people we encounter the concept and reality of holiness. A consideration of the terminology alone

makes this clear. In the Old Testament the family of terms expressing the notion of "holy" or "holiness" appears well over 800 times. Similarly, in the New Testament comparable terms occur in excess of 300 times.

The Root Idea

The terms we translate as "holy," "holiness," "sanctify," and "sanctification," and related vocabulary, all convey the basic idea of being different, unique, or set apart for a special use or purpose. The precise reality to which these terms point can be determined only by the context in which they are used. For example, in the ancient world, pagan religions described temple prostitutes (male and female) as "holy" or "sanctified"--set apart for special sexual rites the pagans believed would bond worshipers to their deities. In other words, **the meaning of "holiness" can be understood only in relation to the character of the deity.**

The Character Of God

In the Bible the God of Abraham, Isaac, and Jacob, and the God and Father of our Lord Jesus Christ defines the nature of holiness. Clearly, God is unique, unlike all other persons and things. His holiness produces awe and fear, as with Moses at the burning bush (Ex. 3:1-6) and as with Isaiah in the Temple (Isa. 6:1-5). An encounter with God often frightened the people and always challenged them to be a different kind of people (see e.g.,

Ex. 19, followed by the giving of the law; cf. Heb. 12:14-29). God, in his holiness, is above and beyond us and our world.

Yet God's holiness also leads him to establish a loving, covenant relationship with his people. He calls a people into existence and claims them as his own (Ex. 19:6; Deut. 7:6-11). Beginning with Abram and culminating with the followers of Jesus, God draws people into loving partnership. He gives them his Word of promise that he may accomplish his plans through them for the good of the world. God, in his holiness, is present and acts graciously to embrace the world with redemptive love.

And the God who is holy calls his people to be holy. That is, to relate to him in ways that correspond to **his** unique, holy character. Accordingly, God wants his people to revere and honor him, and to live in dependence upon him. God also wants his people to delight in knowing and loving him intimately, and to reflect his love to others. Thus, holiness means living in deep trust and utter dependence upon God and with unrivaled, passionate love for God and others.

The Story Of God's Way With Us: Holiness Lost And Promised

From the very beginning God intended that we live in holy relationship with him. Genesis describes the original plan--the man and the woman trusted and depended on the God who made them and lovingly provided for all their needs (see esp. Gen. 2:4-25).

When the writer tells us they were naked and unashamed this signals not only the intimacy and transparency they enjoyed with each other but also with God (Gen. 2:25). Indeed, daily they and the Lord shared deep, unhindered fellowship.

But the man and the woman broke that fellowship, preferring their way to God's. Immediately the consequences of their rebellion appear in their relationships with God, one another, and the world. Estrangement and alienation make their debut. Disorder and chaos set in. Family and society suffer. History wanders off on its own disastrous course. Human rebellion and sin ravage God's good creation (see Gen. 3:1-24; 4--11).

The story of the Bible tells us what God has done to restore people to himself in a relationship of deep trust and loving intimacy. He chose the children of Israel as his special people (Gen. 12:1-3). He freed them from slavery in Egypt through awesome displays of power (Ex. 1--12). He called them to be a special or holy people, and gave them the Law to teach them how to live (see Ex. 19:1-6 with 19:7-20:21). God preserved them through wilderness wanderings and gave them a land of promise (Nu., Deut.). God would have used his people, Israel, to reflect **his** holy character before the world. He hoped to draw other nations to embrace him as the one true God, maker of heaven and earth. Ultimately, the choice or election of Israel was not to exclude

others but to include all. Through Israel God planned to call the nations to enjoy the same relationship of trust and love with him that Israel did.

Like Adam and Eve, however, Israel preferred its own way to God's (see the summary in Judg. 2:11-23; Pss. 78; 106; and the sad history of the Kingdom Period). Despite God's forbearance and patience, and the call of his prophets to repent, Israel's repeated rebellion led finally to judgment. The Northern Kingdom of Israel simply disappeared at the hands of Assyria (2 Kgs. 17:5-23), while Judah, the Southern Kingdom, suffered devastating defeat to Babylon (2 Kgs. 24:1-25:21). Only a small remnant survived in exile.

But God, in his holiness, didn't give up. Through his prophet Jeremiah he promised a new covenant relationship:

"The time is coming," declares the Lord, "when I will make a new covenant with the house of Israel and with the house of Judah. It will not be like the covenant I made with their forefathers when I took them by the hand to lead them out of Egypt, because they broke my covenant, though I was a husband to them," declares the Lord. "This is the covenant I will make with the house of Israel after that time," declares the Lord. "I will put my law in their minds and write it on their hearts. I will be their God, and they will be my people. No longer will a man teach his neighbor, or a man his brother, saying, 'know the Lord,' because they will all know me, from the least of them to the greatest," declares the Lord" (Jer. 31:31-34).

Through Ezekiel:

"I will show the holiness of my great name, which has been profaned among the nations, the name you have profaned among them.

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Then the nations will know that I am the Lord, declares the Sovereign Lord, when I show myself holy through you before their eyes.

For I will take you out of the nations; I will gather you from all the countries and bring you back into your own land. I will sprinkle clean water on you, and you will be clean; I will cleanse you from all your impurities and from all your idols. I will give you a new heart and put a new spirit in you; I will remove from you your heart of stone and give you a heart of flesh. And I will put my Spirit in you and move you to follow my decrees and be careful to keep my laws" (Ezek. 36:23-25).

Indeed, God promised to exercise nothing less than resurrection power to raise up a new people in whose life together the plan of God would be wonderfully manifest for all the world to see (see the vision in 37:1-14). Thus through Joel God promised a new age when all people would have opportunity to know his holy presence and share in his holy work in the world.

"And afterward, I will pour out my Spirit on all people. Your sons and daughters will prophesy, your old men will dream dreams, your young men will see visions. Even on my servants, both men and women, I will pour out my Spirit in those days. . . . And everyone who calls on the name of the Lord will be saved . . ." (Joel 2:28-32, selected).

Jesus: The Gift Of Holiness

At last, when the time was right (Gal. 4:4) God sent his Son, Jesus, to fulfill his holy plans. In fact, Jesus is "the gift of holiness." **He** shows us what holiness looks like, holiness in human flesh.

Thus, the Lord Jesus revered and honored his Father-God,

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living a life of humble submission and devotion to the Father's will (Phil. 2:6-8). His food and his delight, his passion, was to be his Father's Son and to do His Father's will. As he moved through the Galilean and Judean countryside he reflected the very character of God. He revealed God's heart for the lost--those broken by disease, adversity, and sin, calling them to a new life of love and trust in God. He also revealed God's condemnation on all human pride and arrogance, whether among the religious or profane. To one and all Jesus issued the call to repent--to turn away from self and sin and turn toward God. In this call to repent, he invited people to enter the Kingdom of God, to become members of a new society wholly devoted to the plans and purposes of God who is King.

Whatever the cost, Jesus' love for the Father led him to obey and trust God. And the cost was great--death on the cross! In **these** ways, and more, Jesus modeled the holiness to which God calls us.

But Jesus not only models the gift of holiness, he also offers this gift to us. By his death, resurrection, and promise of the Spirit, God keeps his word to make a new covenant with, and a new day for, his people. Through the cross and resurrection of Jesus the sin that enslaves us and separates us from God is conquered and cleansed. And through the gift of the Holy Spirit

God restores us to himself, repairs the damage caused by sin, equips us to be his people, and empowers us to do his will.

For this very purpose Jesus called people to follow him during his ministry. He invited them to be with him, to share his life, to reflect his likeness, and to do as he did in the world. In the same way, Jesus is calling to us: "love the Lord your God with all your heart and with all your soul and with all your mind.

This is the first and greatest commandment. And the second is like it: love your neighbor as yourself" (Matt. 22:37-38). He urges us to be people of blessing--poor in spirit, grieved at our sin and failure, gentle, hungry and thirsting for righteousness, merciful, pure in heart, peacemakers, suffering for what is right (Matt. 5:3-10). He calls us to "be perfect, therefore, as your heavenly Father is perfect" (Matt. 5:48) and to "seek first his kingdom and his righteousness" (Matt. 6:33).

Earnest Christians long to live according to Jesus' vision for life in the Kingdom of God and to realize the fulfillment of God's ancient covenant promises. Thus, they trust God to make them like Jesus. God's Spirit works in their lives producing fruits of love, joy, peace, patience, kindness, goodness, faithfulness, gentleness, and self-control (Gal. 5:22-23). They seek to be ordinary people who live in extraordinary ways, through whom God embraces the world in love.

The Way Of Holiness

The God who calls us to this holy life is faithful (1 Thes. 5:23-24). If we allow God to work, we may confidently expect that he will accomplish his will in and through us. But how does he make us a holy people? What landmarks can we identify on the way of holiness? A careful consideration of the Scriptures helps us identify them. Indeed, a study of how God's grace works in human life reveals a general pattern.

First, as Paul notes, "you were dead in your transgressions and sins, in which you used to live . . ." (Eph. 2:1-2). This is true for all of us. Yet, God graciously works in our circumstances, relationships, and in many other ways, to make us aware of our condition. This grace, called "prevenient" (which means "going before"), prepares us to hear and respond to the gospel. Often, when we become aware of our condition we experience a sense of dread and we desperately seek relief. Though earnest in our desires for relief, we may be misguided so that we attempt to win or earn the favor of God, or may be vulnerable to the many expressions of false spirituality available in our day.

But God is faithful and gracious. To those whom he prepares to hear the gospel, he comes through his Word and the witness of his people. The gospel offers us God's forgiveness through Christ's death on the cross and invites us to trust Christ. When

we accept this good news we become the children of God. We are forgiven past sins, drawn into a relationship with the living God, and actually experience a new life--just as a newborn infant.

Of course, new birth and its joys represent only the beginning. Babies must grow and develop into fully mature adults. So, the same grace of God sustains us in our new life and draws us into deeper understanding and experience of God. Yet, as we continue in fellowship with God we inevitably discover how profound our sin was and how we remain affected by its former domination of our lives. Alarmingly, we also discover that our former way of life entices us to abandon God's way, and often hinders us from being all God wants us to be. Ways of thinking, memories from the past, life-style habits--all conspire to sabotage new life in Christ.

But God is faithful and gracious. He draws us to a closer walk with him, a walk so near that the light of his presence banishes this darkness from our lives (as in 1 Jn. 1:7). Lovingly, he exposes our need for deeper trust, and a more complete offering of our selves to his gracious care. From the inside, his Spirit instills a hunger and a thirst for more of God, for all of God that a human being can experience. And God does not disappoint us! Whether through one grand, climactic moment of full and intelligent surrender or through a series of more subtle

offerings of self to God, grace prevails. Life with God deepens and life with others expands, and we continue to grow in Christ-like love.

While the general impact of God's grace in human life appears so clearly in the Scriptures, several matters of detail are not as clear. One of the most important of these is the nature of "sin" and the effects of sin on the human person. In the Bible, the vocabulary of sin covers a broad spectrum of meaning. "Sin" can denote willful violation of God's law, but also unintentional violations. "Sin" can describe blatant rebellion against God and lapses from divine perfection common to all humans. "Sin" can be any rupture or fracture in our relationship with others or God, whether owing to our actions or not. "Sin" can be a power that lords it over us, or a deep stain or flaw in the fabric of our human character. The language of "sin" may be used in still other ways in the Bible as well.

This broad range of meaning makes it difficult to give a detailed account of **how** grace deals with the reality of "sin." For example, exactly what is meant by "cleansing from all sin," which the Bible promises? Different contexts in which these promises occur give the promise different shades of meaning. Precise interpretations will vary among students of the Bible

Certainly we should encourage careful study and dialogue in

those areas where the Scriptures do not offer as much clarity as we would like. Even more, however, we must celebrate what the Scriptures affirm clearly: that God's grace frees us from sin's power and corrupting influence in every day life; that we need not and should not practice sin; that we may and we must be changed so that both our conduct and character please God; and that we may enjoy the Spirit's witness to these wonderful realities in our lives.

According to the Bible, our relationship with God from beginning to end envisions the life of holiness, of ever deepening love for God and others, and of growing conformity to the image of Jesus. We must never be content with simply "getting people saved." The Bible knows no salvation merely as a means of preservation for eternity. Salvation comes in **relationship** with a holy God who makes us like him and uses us for his purposes in the world.

The Scriptures reveal a general process in our relationship with God--from awakening to complete or entire devotion to God, and beyond. We must be careful, however, to keep our focus where the Bible does. God desires a deep, loving relationship with His people. This **relationship** should be our central focus. Thus, the holy life is not primarily a "state" or a "stage" or a "level" of grace that we attain. The primary images the Bible uses to

describe God's relationship with us help us keep a proper focus.

For example, one of the most prominent of these images is the marriage relationship (see Hosea 1:3-9; 2:14-23; 3:1-1; Ezek. 16; Eph. 5:25-27; Rev. 21:1-4). God has sought, wooed, loved, and brought us into a covenant relationship with Him. Then, within this relationship He lovingly sustains us and pursues our best interests.

In response to God's faithful love we look to God as the supreme love of our lives. Even more, we relate to God and to all other realities in our lives in the light of His love.

Our relationship with God is "holy matrimony," spiritually speaking. Our goal is not to reach some stage or state of the marriage where we'll be forever satisfied. Rather, our goal is to know and love and enjoy our Beloved as deeply and intimately as possible. To this end, as in any healthy, growing marriage, we cultivate our relationship with God. We take delight in giving time to our Partner, talking with Him and listening for His familiar voice, and sharing in His concerns and pursuits. We never reach a point where we're close enough or where we know Him and his ways enough. And we never stop learning how better to please Him and never content ourselves with yesterday's pleasure.

Therefore, we are always "in process." So long as we live in this life we must confess "God is not finished with me yet." We

rightly view the holy life as moving toward a full and entire surrender of our whole selves to God and then continuing and deepening our love relationship in faithful submission to His leading in our lives.

The Community and Witness of A Holy People

God's call to holiness of life addresses people both individually **and** corporately. The Spirit and Word of God seek to bring every person into holy and loving union with the living God.

But in God's good pleasure individual persons rarely accept the grace of God apart from the community of God's people. And they scarcely ever experience the fullness of grace without participating in the community.

As we've seen, from the beginning God's intention has been to call, shape, and use a people to reflect his holy character and to do his holy will. In fact, the Old Testament describes the people of God in communal terms almost exclusively. It is primarily to the community that God manifests his holy presence, dispenses his holy will, and carries out his plans in the world. To be sure, individuals compose the community, and each person must respond to the call of God. But in God's design the individual's response is stimulated and encouraged most effectively with support and accountability from others in the community.

Thus, Jesus formed a community of followers and made them the

nucleus of a movement in the first century world. Each disciple heard the call to follow Jesus and each accepted the call. But following Jesus always brought them into fellowship with other followers. And the most powerful and transforming encounters they had with Jesus occurred when they were together.

On the day of Pentecost, in obedience to Jesus the disciples were together and in their community they first received the promised Holy Spirit. Immediately, then, the Acts reports, these Spirit-filled believers devoted themselves to the apostles' teachings and to the fellowship, to the breaking of bread and to prayer . . ." (Acts 2:42). Throughout the Book of Acts and the entire New Testament, the community or the church plays a critical role in shaping men and women who turn the world upside down. In the community of brothers and sisters in Christ they learn what it means to be like Christ and God's grace forms Christ within them.

Classic Christianity has traditionally recognized the critical role of community in calling people to a holy life and then assisting them on the way of holiness. We must therefore recognize our need for one another and responsibility to encourage one another to love and good works (Heb. 10:24-25).

Indeed, the church not only provides the context, or the soil, in which holy living develops, it also provides the primary opportunity to demonstrate holiness. If the essence of holiness

is loving God with our all and our neighbors as ourselves, then in our worship life and in our loving care and support for one another the light of holiness should shine brightly in a dark and unholy world.

Earnest believers will seek to counter the radical individualism of Western culture. Such individualism caters to human self-centeredness, fosters self-reliance, and thus encourages independence from God and isolation from one another. In contrast, God calls us to be a people, a family, whose love for Him **unites** us in passionate pursuit of Christ-likeness. We celebrate the grace of God that makes us the Body of Christ in the world--mutually dependent on Christ our head and one another as gifted fellow-members. We reject individualism as contrary to the will of God. Together we delight in worshiping and serving God, and in assisting one another as we grow up until we all "become mature, attaining to the whole measure of the fullness of Christ" (Eph. 4:13). Holy living is best experienced not as an individual but as a group dynamic under the power of the Holy Spirit.

Finally, as the Family of God and the Body of Christ, called and empowered to be holy, we have a mission in the world. If the essence of holiness is pure love for God and others, then we must do something, for love always does something. And divine love always does what God does. Indeed, the way of holiness is none

other than the way of Jesus. To walk on that way leads us to do what Jesus did.

Thus, a holy people will live a Spirit anointed life and "preach good news to the poor . . . to proclaim freedom for the prisoners and recovery of sight for the blind, to release the oppressed, to proclaim the year of the Lord's favor" (Lk. 4:18-19). A holy people will be light in a dark world so that others will see their good deeds and praise the Father in heaven (see Matt. 5:16; 1 Pet. 2:12). A holy people will keep themselves undefiled from the corrupt world around them while embracing that world with redemptive love (see 1 Pet. 2:11-12; Ja. 1:27). A holy people will deny self, both in terms of individual ego and group or ethnic ego, and take up Jesus' cross of radical obedience and redemptive suffering for the sake of all people every where. A holy people will accomplish Jesus' great commission to make disciples of all nations because they obey Jesus' great command to love.

The Beauty of Holiness

In several Old Testament passages we read in the KJV of "the beauty of holiness" (see 1 Chron. 16:29; 2 Chron. 20:21; Ps. 29:2; 96:9). The NIV uniformly translates the phrase as "the splendor of holiness." These verses may refer to several important realities in the worship of God's people.

The beauty or splendor of holiness may refer to the awesome reality of God's holy presence--the loveliness of "seeing" God and appreciating his presence. There are linguistic parallels between the Hebrew terms and those of other Near Eastern texts that suggest the splendor and radiance of God coming near.

These terms may also refer to the garments worn by priests and worshipers, garments that are ceremonially clean. When the Holy One is near, the people must present themselves in appropriate ways.

Whatever the precise meaning of the phrase, one fact is clear: when a holy God makes his presence known people can no longer be the same. They can and they do change so that they reflect the presence and character of God. This merits the description "beautiful" or "splendid."

How desperately we and the world around us need the difference a holy God can make through a holy people. And how beautifully that difference plays itself out in mending the brokenness of persons, families, and societies. Indeed, among a holy people homes shattered by abuse and infidelity may be salvaged. Sinful desires that deeply stain the fabric of human character and pervert the most basic relationships of life may be cleansed. The energies and passions of young adults may be redirected to kingdom enterprises that will make an eternal

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difference. Through his holy people, the eternal God woos the lost and broken of this world to himself and does something beautiful in their lives.