
The Call to Holiness

Understanding Holiness

Various Passages

Then I saw in my dream, that the Interpreter took Christian by the hand and led him into a place where was a fire burning against a wall, and one standing by it, always casting much water upon it, to quench it; yet did the fire burn higher and hotter.

CHRIS. Then said Christian, "What means this?"

INTER. The Interpreter answered, "This fire is the work of God that is wrought in the heart: he that casts water upon it to extinguish and put it out, is the devil; but, in that thou seest the fire notwithstanding burn higher and hotter, thou shalt also see the reason of that." So then he led him about to the other side of the wall, where he saw a man with a vessel of oil in his hand, of the which he did also continually cast, but secretly, into the fire.

CHRIS. Then said Christian, "What means this?"

INTER. The Interpreter answered, "This is Christ, who continually, with the oil of His grace, helps the work already begun in the heart; by the means of which notwithstanding what the devil can do, the souls of His people prove gracious still. And in that thou sawest that the man stood behind the wall to keep up the fire; this is to teach thee, that it is hard for the tempted to see how this work of grace is kept alive in the soul." ¹

I Understanding Holiness

A. Introduction

B. Definitions of Holiness

C. What Holiness Isn't

D. What Holiness Is

E. Where is Holiness?

A. Introduction: Satan's goal for believers is to keep us defeated and ineffectual. I wonder how often we feel like there's more water on our fire than oil. But—I don't think we need Satan to do this to us. We can be very effectual at damping God's fire on our own. Certainly we want our fire to burn brightly. But sadly, part of the problem may be a lack of focus on holiness in contemporary Western Christianity.

But first—As Pastor Verne and I were talking prior to my vacation, I learned that shortly after we got back from Hawaii he and the family would be leaving for Hawaii. They were going to be able to spend a month back home. So I would be covering for him for four Sundays he'd be gone. This gave me an opportunity to do a series, but what should I do? But second—

A word from our sponsor, Sepher Ministries! Over the years the major part of my practice has dealt with clients with childhood abuse issues. And as they make progress, the dynamic often changes from intense counseling/discipleship into a more traditional form of the latter.

¹ Bunyan, John, *The Pilgrim's Progress*, Heritage Illustrated Publishing, Kindle Edition, 2014

And recently this was the case with a client who wanted to do a study in a book to help grow in their spiritual walk.

So we began to work through one of my favorite books, Jerry Bridges' *Pursuit of Holiness*. Meanwhile, I was still wondering: what topic should I preach on? Should I preach on four psalms, as I had done in the past? But, as I was reviewing Bridges' book, since it had been a while since I last read it, it seemed the Lord laid the subject of holiness on my heart. As a consequence, this series was inspired by Bridges' book.

Accordingly, this week I am going to give an overview on what holiness is and isn't. Week 2, we'll look at God's holiness; week 3, Christ's holiness; and week 4, God's requirement that we be holy. After all, don't we find this requirement throughout scripture?

“For I am the LORD your God. Consecrate yourselves therefore, and be holy, for I am holy.”...“... but as he who called you is holy, you also be holy in all your conduct, since it is written, “You shall be holy, for I am holy.”” (Leviticus 11:44; 1 Peter 1:15–16 ESV).

“Ascribe to the LORD the glory due his name; worship the LORD in the splendor of holiness” (Psalms 29:2 ESV).

“I appeal to you therefore, brothers, by the mercies of God, to present your bodies as a living sacrifice, holy and acceptable to God, which is your spiritual worship.” (Romans 12:1 ESV).

Finally, Jerry Bridges takes the Holman Christian Bible's translation of Hebrews 12:14 and paraphrases it as:

“Pursue holiness for without holiness no one will see the Lord”²

B. Definitions of Holiness: Let's begin then by defining holiness. While the general meaning is consistent, I nevertheless want to consider it first in light of the Old Testament and second in the New.

1. The Old Testament: In the Hebrew the word is translated:

“... to be holy, sacred, consecrated; to show oneself holy, be consecrated; to consecrate, make holy; to be dedicated, consecrated; to consecrate oneself; to set apart, consecrate, dedicate, regard as holy; to set apart as dedicated to God; by extension: pure, innocent, free from impurity.”³

Oh, oh. That last part is troubling. But more on that in a moment. Here are two examples.

“On the first day you shall hold a holy assembly, and on the seventh day a holy assembly” (Exodus 12:16 ESV).

² Bridges, Jerry, *The Pursuit of Holiness*, NavPress, Carol Stream, IL, 2014, p. 11.

³ Kohlenberger III, John R. and William D. Mounce, Editors, *Concise Hebrew-Aramaic Dictionary of the Old Testament*, Copyright © 2012 by William D. Mounce.

***“Sing praises to the LORD, O you his saints,
and give thanks to his holy name” (Psalms 30:4 ESV).***

2. The New Testament: In the Greek the word is translated:

“... separate from common condition and use; dedicated. Lk. 2:23; hallowed; used of things, ταῦτα ἁγία, the sanctuary; and of persons, saints, e.g., members of the first Christian communities; pure, righteous, ceremonially or morally; holy”⁴

“... even as he chose us in him before the foundation of the world, that we should be holy and blameless before him” (Ephesians 1:4 ESV).

Notice here? We were chosen to be “holy.” God expects us to live in that truth.

“For the unbelieving husband is made holy because of his wife, and the unbelieving wife is made holy because of her husband. Otherwise your children would be unclean, but as it is, they are holy” (1 Corinthians 7:14 ESV).

C. What Holiness Isn't: Jerry Bridges notes:

“The concept of holiness may seem a bit archaic to our current generation. To some minds the very word holiness brings images of bunned hair, long skirts, and black stockings. To others the idea is associated with a repugnant “holier than thou” attitude....”

The idea of exactly how to be holy has suffered from many false concepts. In some circles, holiness is equated with a series of specific prohibitions— usually in such areas as smoking, drinking, and dancing. The list of prohibitions varies depending on the group. When we follow this approach to holiness, we are in danger of becoming like the Pharisees with their endless lists of trivial do's and don'ts, and their self-righteous attitude. For others, holiness means a particular style of dress and mannerisms. And for still others, it means unattainable perfection, an idea that fosters either delusion or discouragement about one's sin.⁵

The fact is we all can be guilty of falling into the trap of believing that behavior makes us holy, i.e. being in church every time the doors are open. Tithing, having daily devotionals, saying “yes” to everything we are asked all should make us holy, right? I suspect that what, if anything, it makes us feel is either inadequate, which we are, or self righteous.

If these are the things required to be holy, it's no wonder we don't desire it all that much anyway. But of course that isn't what holiness is.

I believe part of our struggle is we are so immersed in our environment we simply can't see the problem. It's like the goldfish. It can't recognize the distinction between its environment and the world outside. The goldfish would need to be able to step outside the bowl and look back in to get a fresh look. Of course that's a bit tough for the goldfish.

On the other hand, we can step outside the bowl. We can see what is truth, or what is not. We don't have to buy into someone's definition of a works-oriented version of holiness. We

⁴ Mounce, William D., ed. with Rick D. Bennett, Jr., Mounce Concise Greek-English Dictionary of the New Testament, Copyright © 2011 by William D. Mounce.

⁵ Bridges, p. 19-20.

don't have to focus on avoiding anything that might appear worldly rather than focusing on what we are to be, that is holy. Our life is to be about who we are, not who we aren't. The answer is we have the Holy Spirit and Scripture to lead us and give us discernment.

“Now these Jews were more noble than those in Thessalonica; they received the word with all eagerness, examining the Scriptures daily to see if these things were so” (Acts 17:11 ESV).

D. What Holiness Is: First, if we are to talk of holiness, we need to take a step back and talk about sin.

1. Sin—An Offence against God: The starting place is taking sin seriously. One of Satan's greatest weapons is the lie, “Your sins aren't all that serious. Don't think about sin being an offensive against God. What you did isn't that big a deal.” It is easy to fall into the trap of saying, “I'm not really that much of a sinner compared to” Bridges makes this clear when he states ...

“ Our first problem is that our attitude toward sin is more self-centered than God-centered. We are more concerned about our own “victory” over sin than we are about the fact that our sins grieve the heart of God. We cannot tolerate failure in our struggle with sin chiefly because we are success-oriented, not because we know it is offensive to God.

W. S. Plumer said, “We never see sin aright until we see it as against God. ... All sin is against God in this sense: that it is His law that is broken, His authority that is despised, His government that is set at naught. ... Pharaoh and Balaam, Saul and Judas each said, ‘I have sinned’; but the returning prodigal said, ‘I have sinned against heaven and before thee’; and David said, ‘Against Thee, Thee only have I sinned.’”⁶

“ Against you, you only, have I sinned and done what is evil in your sight, so that you may be justified in your words and blameless in your judgment” (Psalms 51:4 ESV).

All sin, be it against ourselves, our family, our church, our society, all sins be they “small” or significant, are against God. Not recognizing this is a serious hindrance to holiness.

2. Holiness—A Call to Obedience:

If holiness is not generated by keeping a bunch of rules, it is demonstrated by a life that produces obedience.

“ Having purified your souls by your obedience to the truth for a sincere brotherly love, love one another earnestly from a pure heart” (1 Peter 1:22 ESV).

Keep in mind: we are holy! The question is, are we living accordingly?

“ But you are a chosen race, a royal priesthood, a holy nation, a people for his own possession, that you may proclaim the excellencies of him who called you out of darkness into his marvelous light” (1 Peter 2:9 ESV).

⁶ Ibid, p. 21-22.

The only way we can live holy lives is to live as God calls us, in dependency on Him, to be filled with the Spirit, to be in the word.

“ To be holy is to be morally blameless. It is to be separated from sin and, therefore, consecrated to God. The word signifies “separation to God, and the conduct befitting those so separated.”⁷

So, we are holy, but ...

E. Where is Holiness?: the church doesn't look all that different from the world around her. Where is the holiness? Why does it seem to be missing? An obvious answer is what we noted earlier, the very concept has become archaic for much of Christendom and legalistic for a small component. And within “healthy” churches, it isn't talked about much.

Since the seriousness of sin is downplayed, since after all they're forgiven, it should not surprise us that holiness and godliness are also generally ignored.

I remember back in the days in San Francisco when our pastor stated he didn't want to teach on prophecy, because he didn't understand the subject, the result of attending two radically different Bible schools. He told the body if they had questions they should ask me.

I think it maybe be the same problem for us: we don't study the subject because we don't understand it. Oh yeah, we don't understand it because we don't study it.

And the first thing we must understand is, while holiness is the product of our walk with God, it is also a call to action. It is something we have to work on, to act on. It is part of the call to live by faith.

“ I have been crucified with Christ. It is no longer I who live, but Christ who lives in me. And the life I now live in the flesh I live by faith in the Son of God, who loved me and gave himself for me” (Galatians 2:20 ESV).

Allowing the Holy Spirit to work through us is not the same as passivity. The call to holiness, the call to living by faith, is a call to action.

“ The words of J. C. Ryle, Bishop of Liverpool from 1880 to 1900, are instructive to us on this point: “Is it wise to proclaim in so bald, naked, and unqualified a way as many do, that the holiness of converted people is by faith only, and not at all by personal exertion? Is it according to the proportion of God's Word? I doubt it. That faith in Christ is the root of all holiness ... no well-instructed Christian will ever think of denying. But surely the Scriptures teach us that in following holiness the true Christian needs personal exertion and work as well as faith.”⁸

“ Do you not know that in a race all the runners run, but only one receives the prize? So run that you may obtain it. Every athlete exercises self-control in all things. They do it to receive a perishable wreath, but we an imperishable. So I do not run aimlessly; I do not box as one beating the air. But I discipline my body and keep it

⁷ Ibid., p. 20.

⁸ Ibid., p. 23.

under control, lest after preaching to others I myself should be disqualified” (1 Corinthians 9:24–27 ESV).

The holy life is a call to spiritual discipline. And when asked, Where is Holiness?, our goal, more importantly our desire, should be to be able to say “Within us!”

Conclusion: Let me summarize what we’ve learned this morning.

First, we are holy in that we, as believers, are separated and sanctified to God’s service. This is true for all of us.

Second, we can only live in the reality of our holiness as we depend on the Holy Spirit to empower us to walk the walk as well as talk the talk. Yes, He lives it through us and we can’t be who we are called to be out of our own strength.

Nevertheless, the walk involves discipline and work on our part. And that work is grounded in growing closer in our fellowship to God. As we walk closer with Him we will grow in our manifestation of holiness and godliness. And the practical aspect of that work is spending time in the word, not just reading, but studying and meditating, in prayer, not just cursory, but ongoing conversation with God, and in fellowship, not just showing up for services, but spending time with other believers encouraging one another in our moving towards God.

Yet we need a deeper understanding of what holiness is. And so over the next two weeks we’ll consider the holiness of God and Christ. Then, hopefully, we will take all this and see what this means for us on a practical basis.

Meanwhile, this week ask God to help you step out of the goldfish bowl, to allow to see Him, and to show you what He wants you to discover about who He calls you to be.

“ And I said: “Woe is me! For I am lost; for I am a man of unclean lips, and I dwell in the midst of a people of unclean lips; for my eyes have seen the King, the LORD of hosts!”

Then one of the seraphim flew to me, having in his hand a burning coal that he had taken with tongs from the altar. And he touched my mouth and said: “Behold, this has touched your lips; your guilt is taken away, and your sin atoned for.”

And I heard the voice of the Lord saying, “Whom shall I send, and who will go for us?” Then I said, “Here I am! Send me.”” (Isaiah 6:5–8 ESV).

*Take me past the outer courts
Into the holy place
Past the brazen altar Lord,
I want to see your face*

*Pass me by the crowds of people
The priests who sing your praise
I hunger and thirst for your righteousness
And it's only found one place*

*Take me in to the holy of holies
Take me in by the blood of the lamb
Take me in to the holy of holies
Take the coal, cleanse my lips, here I am
Take the coal, cleanse my lips, here I am*⁹

⁹ Browning, Dave, “*Take Me In*”

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A. Introduction:

(Leviticus 11:44; 1 Peter 1:15–16; Psalms 29:2; Romans 12:1; Hebrews 12:14)

B. Definitions of Holiness: 1. The Old Testament:

(Psalms 30:4)

2. The New Testament:

(Ephesians 1:4; 1 Corinthians 7:14)

C. What Holiness Isn't:

(Acts 17:11)

D. What Holiness Is: 1. Sin—An Offence against God:
(Psalms 51:4)

2. Holiness—A Call to Obedience:
(1 Peter 1:22, 2:9)

E. Where is Holiness?:
(Galatians 2:20; 1 Corinthians 9:24–27)

Conclusion:
(Isaiah 6:5–8)