

Holiness

M. W. Bassford, 1-12-14

Now that the year has turned again, we find ourselves in 2014. When I typed that date at the top of my sermon, I said to myself, “Yikes!” As always, this time of year is a time for reflection and self-contemplation, of considering what we’ve done in the past year that seemed to go by in a blur, and how we’re going to spend this coming year.

Probably every one of us has different answers to those two questions, but there should be one constant. Each one of us should resolve to spend the next year, and indeed all the years that follow it, being dedicated to God. It makes sense, then, for us to turn our attention at the beginning of this new year to holiness.

Its Nature

If we’re going to discuss the topic, the first thing we need to do is to define what we’re discussing. We need to ask what the nature of holiness is. It first appears and is defined **IN GOD**. I’m pretty sure that this is not the first time I’ve tried to explain the holiness of God from the pulpit, but I still find it a challenge. As far as I can tell, there isn’t a verse that just up and says, “This is what it means for God to be holy.”

However, we do gain some important insight into what makes God holy in Habakkuk 1:12-13a. This passage describes God in several different ways, but they all combine to paint an interesting portrait of Him. Let’s start with the last things that Habakkuk says and work our way backward. Here, Habakkuk highlights two characteristics: God’s inability to approve evil and His hatred of wickedness. This sounds similar to justice, but it isn’t quite the same thing. Justice is dispassionate. Justice rewards those who keep the law and punishes those who break it. It’s nothing personal. Holiness, on the other hand, is emotionally involved, is passionately committed to favoring right and opposing wrong.

However, holiness in God isn’t merely an attitude. It inevitably leads Him to action. Because He is holy, God protects the righteous, judges the wicked who will not repent, and corrects the wicked who will repent. In the same way that Christians are drawn to associate with other Christians, the holiness of God drives Him to seek association with the holy. On the other side of the coin, God’s wrath is also an outgrowth of His holiness. He holds in contempt those who hold Him in contempt. In His fury, He casts the wicked from His presence because He can’t stand to be near them.

Because holiness means these things to God, it leads Him to seek holiness **IN HIS PEOPLE** too. This is a longer reading, so we’ll have to turn to it in our Bibles together, but look at Leviticus 20:22-26. Obviously, this is written to the nation of Israel, so many of the specifics no longer apply to us, but there are several principles here that will help us understand what it means for any people to be holy to the Lord.

First, holiness requires obedience. This isn’t a partial obedience. Instead, God clearly says that the Israelites are to keep all of His statutes and ordinances. If they don’t, they will meet with a fate that Moses graphically describes. The land will spew them out. Of course, it isn’t literally the land that is nauseated by sin here. Instead, it is the God who brought them to the land in the first place. Just like when we get food poisoning, we’re miserable until we get that bad food out of our stomachs somehow, the presence of disobedience among His people makes God sick to His stomach. If we want to be holy to Him, that must begin with our complete submission to His authority and will.

Second, holiness requires separation. The nations around Israel in Canaan were unholy nations. They did not know God. They did not belong to God. They did not obey God. Indeed, the only time when God concerned them was when He annihilated one of their armies. In consequence, the text says that God abhorred them.

“Abhor” is a strong word. The dictionary tells us that it means “to regard with extreme disgust or aversion, detest utterly, loathe, abominate”. Let me give you an example. In my neighborhood, it’s fairly common to see road-killed skunks. We’re like the skunk capital of the world or something. Let’s say that I invited you to dinner one Sunday, and for the entrée, I got my shovel, went out, found a road-killed skunk that had been marinating in the sun for a few days, scraped that skunk off the pavement, brought it in the house, and dumped it on your plate. Your reaction to the meal I was offering would be abhorrence, and that’s precisely the way that God felt about the sin of the nations.

The thing about abhorrence is that when we abhor something, we also abhor the things with which it comes in contact. Let’s say that I don’t try to feed you the skunk. Instead, let’s say that I only take the skunk carcass, smear it around on my body some, then put it back down and come to services. Are you going to want to sit next to me? Have a conversation with me? Why not? It’s not like I brought the skunk to church. Of course we understand that even though I was no longer in contact with the skunk carcass, certain reminders of its association with me would linger on. My contact with something that you abhorred would lead you to abhor me too.

So too it is when God’s people associate with and come into contact with those whom He abhors. The spiritual skunk stink transfers to God’s people and makes them unholy too. This was the biggest problem the Israelites had. They couldn’t leave the nations around them alone. They intermarried with those nations. They adopted their customs, and in so doing, lost the holiness that made them dedicated to God. In consequence, God rejected them.

Finally, holiness requires discernment. In this particular case, the Israelites were required to distinguish between clean and unclean animals, between the creatures they were allowed to eat and the creatures they weren't. If they didn't, by eating the unclean, they would make themselves detestable to God, and here too, "detest" is a strong word.

However, the Israelites weren't to apply this discernment only to their meal choices. Instead, they were supposed to be discerning generally. It wouldn't have profited them if they had correctly distinguished the clean from the unclean, but had failed to discern the dangers of working on the Sabbath or worshiping idols or breaking any of the other commandments of God. Instead, they had to figure out what holiness meant and how to apply its precepts to themselves.

Of course, none of us have the righteous conduct necessary to establish our own holiness. Instead, mankind must seek it **THROUGH FORGIVENESS**. Look at 1 Corinthians 6:9-11. In real life, I've never been sprayed by a skunk, but I understand that you need lots and lots of tomato juice to get the stench out, so that you are no longer physically abhorrent. When our sin has made us detestable before the holiness of God, there is nothing we can do for ourselves that will cleanse us. Instead, we must seek cleansing through the blood of Jesus. That's the punch line of this text, and when we read it, we must be careful not to forget it. Yes, it is true that the practice of sin will keep us from inheriting the kingdom of God, but despite our sin, we can be washed, sanctified, and justified in the name of Jesus. All of the sins that made us abhorrent to God have been erased, never to trouble us or Him again.

In Jesus

Next, before the Lord's Supper, let's consider what holiness in Jesus looked like. First, in Him, it was evident **IN SINLESSNESS**. Look at the Hebrews writer's description of Jesus' behavior in Hebrews 7:26-27. The larger context of this verse, Hebrews 7, is an explanation of what makes Christ fit to be our High Priest and intercede for us. In order for Him to approach God to seek forgiveness of our sins, He must be sinless Himself. Otherwise, the holiness of Jehovah would strike Him down the way it would strike us down. The Mosaic high priests dealt with this by offering sacrifices for their own sin before they entered the Holy of Holies on behalf of the people. Jesus, however, chose a more direct route. He simply didn't sin. He faced temptation as we do. However, His love for God and man led Him to resist every one of them, so that His entire life remained awesomely free from the things that would make Him guilty. This is one of the reasons why we worship Jesus. I know in myself, as each one of us does, how far my conduct is from God's perfect standard. If we aren't aware of that, we need to study the standard more. However, Jesus didn't stray from the precepts of the Law, which were even more burdensome than the law He handed down to us. Instead, He fulfilled every one perfectly. It's hard to imagine how that's even possible, but Jesus did it. All His life, He was perfectly holy.

Second, Jesus revealed His holiness **IN SERVICE**. Consider how Peter describes Him in Acts 4:27. God anointed Jesus for service, and Jesus carried out that service the same way He did everything else—perfectly. That too made Him holy. This is important for us to recognize today because it demonstrates that the holiness of Christ, and indeed holiness generally, have a positive as well as a negative aspect. Jesus was holy not merely because of the things He didn't do, but because of the things He did do. He didn't prove Himself holy by wrapping Himself in spiritual bubble wrap and focusing only on avoiding the things that endangered His soul. Instead, Jesus got out there among the wicked people of the world and worked. He taught, He healed, He worked wonders, and He did everything else that glorified God. If we are disciples of Jesus, we should do the same. If the only thing we do for God is avoid sin, we aren't truly holy. Instead, holiness calls us to be dedicated to His purposes, to carrying forward the work that He began. Sinlessness is essential to holiness, but service is too, and we honor Jesus because He is a perfect example of both.

Third, the holiness of Christ was made manifest **IN HIS OFFERING OF HIMSELF**. Read with me from Hebrews 9:13-14. One of the ideas that we've been batting around all morning is the idea of holiness as dedication to God, as wholly belonging to Him, as being devoted to His purposes alone. When we give more and more of our lives over to God, we are seeking to be holy. What, then, can we say of Jesus? If we knew nothing of the Bible, we would expect Him to be honored for His sinlessness and service. However, those things didn't lead directly to honor. Instead, they led to the cross. Jesus had made a life out of self-denial, out of offering Himself to God. Here, though, we come to the greatest possible act of devotion. On the cross, Jesus didn't only offer up His self-will. He offered up His life.

I don't know when, or even whether, the small child Jesus became aware that He was the Son of God. However, He clearly knew it at age 12, when He was teaching in the temple. From the point when He gained that knowledge, though, He must also have been aware that as God's Son, His purpose for coming was to go to the cross. For decades, He fixed His eyes on that cross and marched steadfastly toward it. All of His perfect life, all of His service, though those things were ends in themselves, primarily fitted Him for the greater end of sacrificing His own body. When Jesus cried out "It is finished!" and died, it truly was finished. He had given everything to God, and there was nothing left. He saw no earthly reward for this, but He did it anyway. In His death, Jesus represented the perfection of holiness.

Finally, we must acknowledge that Jesus expressed such holiness **FOR US**. In this regard, let's ponder 1 Corinthians 1:30. When we consider the life of Christ, it simply doesn't make sense if His love for His people is taken out of the equation. Sure, now Jesus is seated at the right hand of the throne of God, given the name that is above every

name, but that isn't a whole lot different from where He was before the world even began. His life and death and resurrection didn't change very much for Him, but they changed everything for us. His holiness made Him the perfect sacrifice. Even though nothing about Him made Him deserving of death, He took on Himself the death that we did deserve. He paid the penalty for our unholy lives so that we could become holy in Him. As a consequence, we who could only look forward to God's disgusted rejection can now anticipate an eternity of joy with Him.

Before the Lord's Supper, let's first of all contemplate this magnificent act of mercy. Second, though, let's ask what it means for us. When Jesus made us holy, He didn't merely make us into people whom God could tolerate, although that is part of what is meant by our holiness. Instead, He rededicated us to God. He gave us a fresh start on righteousness and service that we never could have gained for ourselves. Because we are Christians, we have been given a priceless second chance. How are we using it? Are we living for God, or are we wasting it on further selfishness?

Holiness in Practice

Now that we've seen how important holiness is to God, let's see what we can do to put holiness into practice. As with everything else in Christianity, this must begin with the heart. Holiness starts with **MINDFULNESS**. Consider Peter's point in 2 Peter 3:10-11. He begins here by pointing out something that people don't usually like to think about. Everything in the physical world is temporary. We aren't going to be here forever, and even the heavens and earth themselves aren't going to be here forever. Untold millions of people refuse to accept this. They regard holiness, dedicating their lives to God, like completing a paper for English class that doesn't have a due date. When I was in high school, I turned in every paper I wrote late, on the last day that the teacher would accept it for credit. I guarantee you that if some hard deadline hadn't been in place, I never would have turned in any papers at all. So it is with these people. They think they're going to serve God later, later, later, until finally the literal deadline catches them unprepared.

Peter, by contrast, wants us to think in the opposite direction. We can't act like we have an infinite amount of time to start serving God, because we don't. Instead, the end is coming for all of us, and it may well be coming much sooner than we think. The time for holiness that we have remaining to us is finite and precious. We don't dare go out there and waste it by living selfish, wicked lives. The few days that we have left must instead be dedicated to God.

Second, holiness demands **TRANSFORMATION**. Paul emphasizes this in Romans 12:1-2. This is the so-what of the entire book of Romans. Because of the greatness of the salvation that we have in Christ, this is the way that we have to live, no longer hoarding our lives for ourselves, but offering them to God. We have to be holy people.

We dare not underestimate the magnitude of the change that this requires of us. At times, we fall into the trap of believing that God only expects us to be "good people", like all the good people out in the world, except we have been baptized for the forgiveness of our sins. Brethren, that's not good enough! We must be transformed instead.

I have a pretty good idea of what I would be like if I were not a Christian because I have a brother who isn't a Christian. He's a good man in worldly terms. He works hard, he's trustworthy, he's faithful to his wife, he's a good father to his children, and so on. However, if all I am as a Christian is hard-working, trustworthy, a good husband, and a good dad, where is my transformation? What proves that I'm more than just another worldlyling who claims godliness?

Instead, I must be different from my brother. I have to offer to the Lord all the things that he refuses to give up. I have to love the word, I have to lay up treasure in heaven, I have to assemble with the saints, I have to proclaim Christ to others, I have to do the things that invite the hatred of the world but the love of Jesus. I have to rise above the things that my brother and the other good people of the world do. I have to be transformed. I have to be holy.

Third, holiness requires **CONSISTENCY**. Peter points to this in 1 Peter 1:14-16. God's expectation for us is that we must be holy in all our behavior. Not some of our behavior, not most of it, not even almost all of it, but all of it. If we want to be holy people, we have to give up our pet sins. We can't be enslaved by Internet pornography. We can't spend our working hours gossiping about our co-workers. We can't look down our noses at other Christians and draw up lists of all the ways we're better than they are. We can't spend more time thinking about a new house or a new car than we spend thinking about Jesus. We can't consistently blow up at our spouse and children. And so on.

The list of possible pet sins is practically endless, but one thing is true of all of them. Any one of them to which we surrender ourselves will wreck our holiness. We can't say, "I'm helpful to my neighbors, so that makes up for my porn habit." We can't say, "I work so hard for Jesus that I'm entitled to get all huffy about the Christians I don't see doing anything." Lust is unholy. Pride is unholy. Sin is unholy, and any sin we practice makes us unholy people. It's easy to be holy in the areas where we feel no temptation. I'm really holy about not stealing from people, for instance. It's hard to be holy in the places where a part of us doesn't want to serve God. However, our holiness or lack thereof in those difficult places shows whether we are truly holy or not. Only when we're consistent are we the people God wants for Himself.

Finally, holiness requires **SEPARATION**. Paul urges this upon us in 2 Corinthians 6:14-7:1. This is another long reading, so let me invite you to turn with me to this one in your Bibles too. As I've said many times before, there are some bad chapter breaks in our Bibles, and this is one of them. The point is that we have to perfect our holiness by

coming out from the world around us. This wasn't a literal departure for Christians in the first century, and it shouldn't be for us today. Christians are supposed to be lights, not monks.

However, this is a departure that must be conspicuous in the spiritual realm. Modern-day American culture has all kinds of rules about what is and isn't OK. Watching trash on TV is OK. Taking the Bible's stand against the practice of homosexuality isn't. Being addicted to buying stuff is OK. Inviting others to study the Bible isn't. Talking about the God who loves us is OK. Talking about the God who will condemn us to hell if we are wicked isn't.

In every one of those areas, and a million more, we have a decision to make. We're either going to line up with the world, or we're going to line up with the word. Typically, we don't want to acknowledge that things are that bright-line. We want to watch the shows that the world watches and listen to the music that the world loves and dress the way the world dresses, and delude ourselves into believing that those things don't have an effect on our holiness, that we can be holy-ish if we savor all the delights of the world. Not so. The bright line is still there. We just crossed it.

We need to ask ourselves, friends, if we would still behave the same way if Jesus were there in the flesh with us. Would we watch that movie with Jesus, and try to explain away all the filth in it to Him the way we do to ourselves? Would we invite Him to the after-Christmas sales with us, and explain to Him that the money was better spent on our wants than on His work? Would we let an opportunity to teach the truth go by, and explain to Him how we really loved Him most after all? Of course, none of this is actually pretend. Jesus is there with us, not in flesh, but in spirit. If we daily make the choice to come out of the world to Him, He knows that. If we don't, He knows that too.