

Be Holy, for I Am Holy

M. W. Bassford, 7-11-10

One of the ways that the denominational world makes our lives more difficult is by taking words from Scripture and confusing their meanings. When, for instance, most people outside the church talk about pastors and ministers, they mean something quite different than what the Bible means. One of the words that has been transformed in this way is the word “holy.” In the way that the word is commonly used, it has acquired a mystical gloss. Whether we’re talking about a holy man, or holy water, or holy ground, we can practically see them glowing and hear a choir of angels singing off somewhere in the distance. However, this very mysticism makes the idea of holiness vague and hard to understand.

In the Biblical reality, there is nothing mystical about the word “holy” at all, nor is it even a particularly hard concept to grasp. Scripturally speaking, something is holy when it has been set apart for God’s use and dedicated to His purposes. That’s why the Bible itself is called a holy book. That doesn’t mean that we can wave it around in the air and use it to drive off vampires. It means that the Bible is entirely from God and is meant only to do God’s work. Likewise, our church building is an ordinary building built out of brick and wood and concrete. We don’t come any closer to God just by entering the church building, nor does it benefit us if we’re buried beneath the parking lot. However, due to our understanding of authority, we don’t allow the building to be used for any secular or irreligious purpose. It is 100 percent devoted to the Lord and to His work. In that concrete, non-mystical sense, the church building is holy to Him.

Of course, of all the things that could be devoted to God, we are the most significant. He tells us what He wants in 1 Peter 1:13-16. If we understand “holy” here in a mystical sense, this passage becomes meaningless. However, if we put it in a Scriptural context, it has a great deal to say. Let’s look, then, at what it means to “Be holy, for I am holy.”

Separation and Purity.

First of all, this means that we should **BE SEPARATE**. Look at the bargain that God lays out for us in 2 Corinthians 6:16-18. God wants to claim us for His sons and daughters, but His offer to be our Father is conditional. For us to truly have that relationship with Him, we have to come out from the unclean world in which we live, just like the children of Israel had to come out of Egypt in order to enter Canaan. If we are genuine Christians, we will be distinct from the people of the world. This won’t be something we have to force. I know a young Christian couple that doesn’t celebrate Christmas, not because they believe it’s wrong, but because they hope their unusual practice will be a conversation-starter with non-Christians. Brethren, if we’re living as we should, we won’t need to manufacture conversation-starters. Our commitment to Christ will make us distinctive enough. People will see that we are different in our modest dress. They will see that we are different in refusing to watch trashy movies and TV shows. They will see that we are different in our gracious speech. Most of all, they will see that we are different in our love for others. If we don’t have these differences with the world, it shows that we aren’t separate, that we aren’t God’s true children at all. We need to stand out, not because of weird choices that we make ourselves, but because of what God has determined we must be.

Of course, being different isn’t going to make us popular. Our culture talks up individualism and being yourself, but many people, when they are confronted with a genuinely different perspective, aren’t going to appreciate it. This is not a new problem. Consider 1 Peter 4:3-5. Back then, many people who came to the Lord struggled with being mocked by their old worldly friends. When those friends realized that the new Christians were off the party circuit, they sneered at them. Exactly the same thing can happen to us today. Whenever we make that determination to start living godly, the people we used to sin with aren’t going to get it. They aren’t going to believe that our repentance is genuine, and they’re going to feel that we’re somehow judging them because of our new commitment to righteousness. They may mock us to our faces, but they certainly will be behind our backs. But brethren, that’s not our problem. We don’t have to answer them. Instead, as Peter says, it is they who will have to answer to God. Nobody is going to walk backward into heaven. If we want to turn toward God, we’re going to have to turn away from the wicked and accept the consequences.

However, leaving behind the sin of the world doesn’t do us any good if we bring our own sin with us. That’s why it’s equally important for us to **BE PURE**. Jesus raises this point in Matthew 5:13. If we pay particular attention to the words of our Lord here, it’ll reveal what the biggest threat to purity is. As you might remember from chemistry class, salt is a chemical compound made up of one sodium atom and one chlorine atom. Its saltiness is due to its chemical properties. You can leave it out in the sun or wherever you want and it won’t become less salty. The only way for salt to lose its savor is if you start mixing it with some other things. Once you adulterate it with enough sand or whatever, that is when it won’t be salty anymore. That’s the way that Christians become impure too. When we add enough evil thoughts to our minds and enough evil actions to our lives, we become so corrupt that we aren’t recognizable as Christians anymore. We don’t need close contact with the world to do that. With the devil’s help, we can manage it just fine on our

own. It doesn't do us any good to avoid filthy TV shows, for instance, if our hearts are filled with lust already. True holiness requires us not just to avoid the evil outside. We must purify our inward selves as well.

As part of this, all of us must keep an eye on the purity of our congregation. We need to pay attention to Jesus' warning to the church in Thyatira in Revelation 2:19-20. The Thyatirans' problem wasn't that they were doing evil themselves. In fact, judging from what the Lord says, most of the people in that congregation were devoted to love and good works. Instead, their problem was that they tolerated the evil of other Christians who practiced immorality, and the evil of a few threatened the purity of the entire church. Today, we must recognize that we too have a responsibility toward our brethren. If we see another Christian engaged in sin, we shouldn't gossip about them behind their backs nor wait for the elders to do something. Instead, God expects us to go to them and persuade them to repent. We can't do this high-handedly. We can't act as though they're wretched sinners and we're the best people in the whole world. We have to speak with gentleness and love, but we still have to speak. It's the only way to maintain our purity as a church.

Be Fruitful.

Sadly, a lot of Christians stop right there in their definition of holiness. They think that as long as they're separate and pure, they're also holy. In reality, though, holiness doesn't just have a negative component. It has a positive component too. It isn't just being set apart. It's being set apart for God's purposes. That's why holiness also requires us to **BE FRUITFUL**. Consider the two paths that Jesus sets out in John 15:1-2. On the one hand, Christians who bear fruit, God prunes so that they can bear more fruit. On the other hand, Christians who don't bear fruit, God takes away. Jesus goes on to describe the way that these unfruitful branches are piled up and burned. Clearly, Christians who don't bear fruit aren't going to spend eternity with the Father in heaven, and they aren't going to be there because they aren't holy. Each one of us needs to ask ourselves, then, what fruit we're bearing for the Lord. Where are our good works? As we saw a couple of weeks ago, God doesn't expect the same production from any of us. However, He does expect some production from all of us. If we can't point to good works in our lives right now, we need to start before it's too late.

This line of argument might lead some, especially among our denominational friends, to ask, "What about grace? Doesn't the grace of God make us holy?" Well, yes and no. Paul explains in Ephesians 2:8-10. We are created as Christians by grace, but the purpose for which we are created is good works. It's like this: Chevrolet cars all come from a Chevrolet factory, but the reason why the factory makes those cars is so that they can be driven. If some Chevrolet factory stockpiles cars, but none of those cars are ever driven, it's a colossal waste of time and money. In the same way, God's grace is the "factory" that produces Christians, but if we never get to work for the Lord, we render that grace meaningless. We make it so that Jesus wasted His blood in saving us, like a car that sits in a warehouse somewhere and is never used. I guarantee you, friends, that if that's where we stand on the day of judgment, God is not going to be pleased with the return on His investment. Instead, we need to roll up our sleeves and get to work. We need to take care of our shut-ins, reach out to isolated members of the congregation, tell others about the gospel, and practice the million and one other things that the Scripture describes as a pattern of good works. We need to be fruitful.

Nor can this fruitfulness be nothing more than a hobby to us. Instead, holiness also demands that we **BE DEDICATED**. Let's ponder the message of Romans 12:1-2. Even though this passage doesn't use the word "dedicated", dedication is precisely what it is describing. Consider, for instance, what it means when we say that Abraham Lincoln used the Gettysburg Address to dedicate the cemetery for war dead at Gettysburg. It means that from that point on, that parcel of ground was only to be used to hold the bodies of those men who had died in the battle. Nobody could build a house on it; nobody could build a road through it. It was dedicated for use as a cemetery and only as a cemetery.

As Christians, we are dedicated for God's purposes. Serving God is the first reason for our existence. It is the last reason for our existence. It is the only reason for our existence. God's will for our lives must be evident in everything that we do. We can rightfully describe ourselves as holy only to the extent that we succeed in this way of life. There are many things that clamor for our time and money and attention. All of them are things that the people of the world devote themselves to pursuing. However, we cannot devote ourselves to those distractions. We must devote ourselves to God.

If we fail in this, if we convince ourselves that God is willing to do a time-share with the things of the world, we fall into the same trap as the Laodicean church. See how Jesus describes them in Revelation 3:15-17. These were people who had lost their dedication to Christ. It's evident that unlike the church in Philippi, the church in Laodicea was materially prosperous. That was the good news. The bad news was that their prosperity had led them to be lukewarm toward God. I wonder if, like so many Christians today, the Laodiceans thought that their service to God began and ended with the money they contributed to the Lord's work on Sunday morning. Jesus thought differently.

Don't get me wrong, friends. God expects us to give of our means. However, dedication to Him isn't about our checks dropped in the plate. It's about our lives laid on the altar. There's no mystery about what that involves. God has told us what kind of people He expects us to be in holy conduct and godliness. If we have any questions about that, we can open the word, and it will clue us in. The only question is whether we are willing to live as God requires.