

Studies on Practical Christian Living

Holiness & Sanctification

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2010

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Background

No description of the character of God can ever be adequate: the subject is too vast. We want to begin to look at just one aspect of God's character that has really blessed us. Holiness in the first place defines the nature of God as 'one who is wholly other'. The word for holiness refers to a quality of God, while people, animals and objects may be considered holy by virtue of their relationship with God. Of the 842 references to holiness in the Bible, at least 830 refer to God, His law, and His people. In the book of Leviticus the term is used with reference to God some 14 times, describing His nature, His power, His majesty, and His person.

The Message

To give some specific examples, holiness is also:

A Living Force

God is this living force. (Exodus 3:5). Our encounters with Him gradually transform us into the image of the Holy One, and advance His rule on earth. It is an encounter with this Living Force that should fill us with a sense of awe and wonder. "***There he was transfigured before them. His face shone like the sun, and his clothes became as white as the light***" (Matthew 17:2). Yet so often we are like Peter, James and John who despite their zeal, through a great deal of fear, weakness, and ignorance initially failed to respond to an encounter with this Living Force when Jesus was transfigured. (Matthew 17:4 - 8). Nevertheless, Jesus was preparing them for what was to come, when they would be witnesses of His agony and of His glory.

Separateness

The root of the Hebrew word for 'holy', qadosh, has the primary meaning of 'being unique'; of 'setting apart', 'belonging to' and being 'separate from'. Anything associated with the Holy One is unlike other things, which are common and unclean. Things or persons that are not holy are classed as common or profane. Anything belonging to this sphere is always available for common use, provided it is ceremonially clean, while a holy thing, though always clean, is never available for common use. Any holy thing may be profaned by improper use. God's name, for example, may be profaned by being taken in vain.

In the Hebrew Scriptures we read in Leviticus 10:10 "***You are to make a distinction between the holy and the profane***". We read further in Exodus 19 and Leviticus 20:7,8 that then God's people were made holy by:

- i. Obeying God's voice.
- ii. Keeping His covenant.
- iii. Observing the prescribed rituals of atonement and purification.

God as holy is completely separated from human beings, and yet persons and objects may be made holy when dedicated for God's service by some form of consecration.

After the coming of the Messiah, things changed: Jesus' definitive sacrifice sanctified God's people: "***We are sanctified through the offering of the body of Jesus Christ once for all***" (Hebrews 10:10).

The status of holiness - and separateness which it clearly entails - is something which God brings about: "***God is our sanctifier***" (Exodus 31:13).

God - likeness

Holiness is not simply an experience or status. It has a third aspect, a distinctive, God reflecting quality. Holiness is a way of living that reveals the One who has called the holy nation into existence. We read in Leviticus 11:44 **“For I am the Lord your God, and you have sanctified yourselves, and you have become holy, for I am holy”**. So God as holy is the model for His people, who are also to be holy and who are to evidence a separateness from their world which separates them as people of God.

Paul Evdokimov, an Orthodox theologian, once said *“The power of divine holiness is a devouring flame that consumes all impurity; when it touches a man it purifies him and makes him holy; it brings him into harmony with the holiness of God - even to His likeness”*. Indeed, we read in 2 Corinthians 3:18 **“And we, who with unveiled faces all reflect the Lord's glory, are being transformed into His likeness with ever increasing glory, which comes from the Lord, who is the Spirit”**. This truth is so rich and beautiful, and I would strongly encourage you to reflect on it. In this God - likeness we experience wholeness in every area of our lives.

We experience Shalom, or as Mary Douglas, an anthropologist observed *“To be holy is to be whole, to be one; holiness is unity, integrity, perfection of the individual and of the kind”*. Holiness, in short, is the way things ought to be and - when the Holy City comes - the way they will be. Yet even now we get a real glimpse of this in our lives; don't you think that there is something very special when we as Christians come together in prayer and worship or when Christians truly live lives that God has called them to live?

Dynamism

Holiness is also very active, and on the move. Sanctification is an ongoing process. It is not just moral but also ceremonial. It is forward looking; the realization of God's unconditional will, His royal rule, and is reflected in obedience to God. God is glorified in holiness.

When Isaiah heard the voice of God and encountered His holiness he said **“I am here. Send me!”** (Isaiah 6:8). In Acts 10 we read of Peter's encounter with God where because of his vision he is prepared by God to be instrumental in the birth of a transnational, holy nation.

So we have touched the tip of the iceberg and had a glimpse of what holiness is. There is so much more. In future studies we may take a look at how we can respond.

Questions

1. What is the basis upon which we can take hold of victory over sin?
2. What is sin; a conscious, voluntary act or a state of being?
3. What is meant by ‘old self’ and ‘new self’, and how are they related?
4. What is the role of the Spirit in the purifying work in the life of the Christian?
5. Do you think that Christians today are ‘less’ holy than early Christians? What should our attitude towards sanctification be?
6. How would you advise a Christian who was struggling with persistent sin in their lives? What theological teaching and pastoral advice would you give?
7. The New Testament speaks about a Christian ‘not sinning’ and being ‘perfect’. How are we to understand these statements?