

Holy Living Today

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Holiness is a religious word we don't use in everyday conversation anymore. It's a word that has, at its root, the meaning 'to consecrate', or 'dedicate', 'to hallow', 'purify', or 'sanctify'. But what do those words mean to you and to me?

It's an idea that we tend to associate with religious things: religious places, religious people, and religious feasts — like the Ark of the Covenant, the Temple, the Priests, the Day of Atonement, those sorts of things. But is it relevant to us today when we don't really have those same kinds of religious trappings? Yes, I think so! In fact, perhaps even more so today than in Old Testament times. I'd like to share with you some thoughts on holiness, which I think has two very distinct aspects to it. And then also discuss the challenge in harmonising those two elements together.

First, holiness is about being 'separate from'. It has its origins in Genesis 1 and the separation of light from darkness.

Secondly, holiness is about being 'separated or dedicated to' — as in serving the Lord — which is illustrated by the priests, the Levites, and the Nazarites under the Law.

Lastly, how do we reconcile these two? How do we balance separation from the unclean with dedication to loving our neighbour who may be unclean? To be in the world, but to not be of the world? How can we be like priests after the order of Melchizedek, who bring out bread and wine to those who are fighting the daily battle, and who are necessarily bloodied and wounded?

In the beginning

The word 'holy' first occurs in Exodus 3, with Moses at the burning bush standing on holy ground. Its origins, however, are on day one of creation. First, God said, "Let there be light." Second, He saw that the light was good. Third, he separated the light from the darkness — it is

this combination of both separate and good that makes the light holy; in contrast, we have the darkness which was also separated, but is not holy. And fourth, God put a distinction between the light and the darkness. This is different from the separation of the light from the darkness. In English, we only have one word there translated separated, but in Hebrew there are actually two words, 'separate' and 'distinct'. This word 'distinction' is not about two complementary halves of a whole or two sides to the same coin, but about opposites that don't mix, like day and night. So the principle of holiness was established by God on day one of creation. And it is a quality of the light of the world.

How do we know that the separation on day one of creation is about holiness? The same two words in Gen 1:4 are used about the priests in the book of Leviticus. Creation was never really about literal day and night. Light and dark are symbols of life and death, holy and common, clean and unclean, pure and defiled. And the priests needed to be careful to distinguish or separate a difference between the holy and the common, otherwise, God said, "lest you die." Heb 12:14 also says, "that without holiness shall no man see God." So, holiness is not really an optional quality for God's people.

Paul addresses the same issue of holiness for us repeatedly, saying, in 2Cor 6 that believers are not to be yoked with unbelievers because righteousness has no fellowship with lawlessness. Light has no partnership with darkness and Christ has no agreement with Belial.

Why is that specifically relevant to us? Paul continues, saying, we are the temple of the living God. He dwells in us and walks among us. So we must come out and be separate and touch not the unclean thing.

And it all seems very simple doesn't it, very black and white, very holy and unclean, very right and wrong. And that is true insofar as holiness is 'separate from', which is the first aspect or the first dimension of holiness that we come to understand.

Separation as dedication

But holiness has a second equally important aspect or dimension. It is both 'separate from' and also 'separate to'. It is 'distinct from', but also 'dedicated to' the Lord. The Levites were both 'separate from' Israel, but also 'given to' the Lord. The Nazarites were both 'separate from' wine and strong drink, but also 'holy to' the Lord. The lepers, on the other hand, were only 'separate from' the camp of Israel, they weren't 'dedicated to' anything specific. So the important principle

is that separation without dedication is not holy. The light was separate and it was good. The darkness, on the other hand, was separate but not good and therefore it was not holy. Holiness is both 'separate from' and 'dedicated to' the Lord at the same time.

In fact, it was not just the priests, the Levites, and the Nazarites who were holy, but all of Israel. Deuteronomy 14 says that they were a Holy people chosen for Yahweh as a special treasure to bear His name. So what does a people 'dedicated to' the Lord look like? Is that something that takes place at a religious ceremony? Or is there perhaps more to it than that? What does holiness mean on a day-to-day basis in the lives of the children of Israel? Thankfully God leaves them in no doubt at all, through the laws of the book of Leviticus.

In Leviticus 19-22, the Lord says 35 times in various different ways: "Be ye holy for I am holy", "I am the one who sanctifies you", "I have separated you", "I will be hallowed among you." Thirty-five times over and over and over again, this refrain. Perhaps one of the most repeated ideas in all of scripture. Certainly something important that we should take careful note of, "Be ye Holy for I am holy."

So in what context does the Lord keep declaring this requirement for Israel to be holy?

Leviticus 19 is specifically about daily living and its various activities. It lists more than 25 different, and seemingly unrelated, aspects of daily life. At first glance, it looks like a random laundry list of laws. But each one of them is connected by this refrain, "Be ye holy for I am holy." Be holy with your father and mother. Be holy on the Sabbath. Be holy in your offerings. Be holy in your harvesting. Be holy with your labourers. Be holy with the poor and needy. Be holy in your judgment and your witness. Be holy in your sexual practices. Be holy with your neighbour. Be holy with your parents. Be holy with the elders and strangers, et cetera, et cetera, et cetera. Be holy every day in every aspect. Not just with priests and at feasts, but in the mundane and the ordinary. Not just in sacrifices and offerings, but also at home and at work.

In the new covenant

But what about us, who are not under the law of statutes and ordinances? Peter leaves us in no doubt that our calling is exactly the same as Israel's. As he says in his epistles, we too are a holy nation, a chosen generation, a royal priesthood, and as he who has called us is holy, so we also must be holy in all that we do. And we are living stones in a spiritual temple — our body is

the temple of the Holy Spirit. And since the world will be destroyed by fire, what manner of persons ought we to be in all holy conversation and godliness.

So if we too are to be holy, what do our lives need to look like?

Well, pretty much the same as the Israelites in Leviticus 19. Honour your father and mother, no idolatry (which is covetousness); provide for the poor, don't steal or lie, honour God's name, pay your workers fairly, care for the deaf and blind, give righteous judgment and no false witness, love your neighbour, flee fornication, don't partake in unclean practices or prostitute yourselves, respect your elders and support strangers, use just weights and measures in business, et cetera, et cetera, et cetera. Every aspect of daily life, every day, in every way, we must be holy because He is holy. Not just priests and feasts, but the mundane and the ordinary, not just sacrifices and offerings, but also at home and work.

This idea of holy living is expressed well in the following quote about Celtic spirituality,

It is crucially important that our spirituality must not be seen as a separate compartment marked sacred, whereas real life is lived in all the other compartments marked secular. If we do this, we set limits and put boundaries on God. That is, we only look for him and are ready to listen to Him when we are involved in those separate things – prayer, singing of hymns, or meditation – and if for whatever reason we fail in our doing of these things, then as a consequence we don't meet with God at all. Or worse is thinking that if God speaks to us only through the Bible, then all we have to do to shut the Bible and this effectively shuts out God.

Worship is all that we are and all that we do both inside and outside the structures of the church. Our entire lives are a search for God so that everything we are and everything we do is an offering of worship to God. Spirituality is the whole of our lives because this is not about doing, but about being, so that whatever we do, we do it as the person that we are, our whole being (mind, emotions, body, spirit, and will) as an integrated whole. We are the same person going to work, cooking a meal, reading the Bible, mowing the lawn, shouting at the kids, saying our prayers, watching TV, laughing, crying, feeling bored, excited, angry, or sad.

Awakening

I grew up a good Christian Pharisee and holiness did not look like this at all — that I was aware of. Holiness was reading the Bible. And attending church meetings that you never missed. Holiness was stuff we did for God, and the rest was just secular living. Holiness was separation from the world and its evil desires. Holy things happened mainly on Sundays and Wednesday nights. And then I had a Damascus Road experience...

And like Paul, I had to quit righteousness according to the law.

True holiness, my friends, is in the little things: the kind word, the gentle touch, the small gift, or that little moment of recognition. Holiness is our whole being and our ways.

Harmonising separation and dedication

So finally, we need to try and harmonise these two elements of holiness. The challenge of true holiness in discipleship lies in discerning when to love and when to leave. Holiness is coming out of Babylon and holiness is a priesthood of service to the lepers who are outside the camp. How do we balance being separate from darkness, with dedication to our mission to love our neighbour? To live in the world but not be of the world. To bring healing, but not become unclean? You see the wisdom to be the hands and feet of Jesus is no easy task. And so we need to ask ourselves, do we have the balance right between 'separation from' and 'dedication to'?

I think our default position as humans is to put up protective walls and boundaries around us, barriers that defend against all appearance of evil, just in case evil communications should corrupt good manners. But when we put up barriers, we cut ourselves off from the very purpose of our holy dedication. A wall of defence clarifies what is right and wrong, but it also defines who is in and who is out, and very quickly that becomes 'us' and 'them' tribalism. And shortly after that we are giving thanks that we are not like them. We fast twice in the week, and give tithes of all that we possess.

And the key point here is this: when your religion prevents you from loving your neighbour, you need to change your religion. When holiness separates us from our neighbour, we need to change our holiness from one that is only 'separate from', to also include 'dedication to' the Lord's new commandment to love one another. This is our full — our complete — mission.

Jesus, of course, told a parable about a priest and a Levite whose religion prevented them from loving their neighbour. They passed by on the other side so that they wouldn't be defiled by their neighbour, so that they could still go and serve in the temple. There was a man literally dying on the side of the road and their religious separation wouldn't let them help him.

Now don't tell me that our holy huddle hasn't similarly kept us from addressing systemic racism in society, or sexism in our community, or the massive refugee problem. Jesus had a word for this: he called it the 'leaven of the Pharisees', because it is so insidious that you don't even notice it working. When we assume that the current state is acceptable and dismiss human rights as politics — and thus not our problem — we've been brainwashed by a secular society who don't yearn for a kingdom where justice will run down as waters, and righteousness as a mighty stream. We cannot be dedicated to the discipleship of Jesus if we are separate from the needs of publicans and sinners. We have to get our hands dirty and move into the blood and sweat and tears and mess of daily life.

Remember it's not we who are holy, but God who makes us holy. And he cannot be defiled. Jesus has called us to be both the salt of the earth and the light of the world. We're pretty good at being the city on the hill, but shining from a safe distance. Now we need to mingle and flavour as the salt of the earth. Salt that is kept separate in a box is no good to anyone, but particularly, it's no good to the stranger, the fatherless and the widow.

Holy lives

Let's recap our thoughts briefly before we close. Holiness has been a fundamental divine principle since day one of creation. God separated light from darkness and the light was good and therefore Holy. And there were two words used together in Hebrew, 'separate' and 'distinct', not two parts of a whole but two incompatible things like day and night. These two halves have no fellowship, partnership or agreement with each other. So we need to come out from Babylon because ultimately it will be destroyed. And we are called to separate ourselves from darkness and uncleanness and lawlessness.

But then we moved on to the second dimension of holiness, of being dedicated to the Lord. This was illustrated in the holy dedication and service of the priests and the Levites and the Nazarites. The key point here was that separation without dedication is not holy. Light was separate and it was good, but lepers and darkness were also separate and yet they were not holy.

And we — just like Israel — are God’s holy people, chosen for the Lord, a special treasure, a dedicated people. Our dedication is to holy living in every aspect of daily life, the ordinary, the routine, the mundane things, every single day in every possible way in accordance with the laws of Leviticus 19. And as a temple of the holy spirit, there should be no distinction between the holy and the secular aspects of our lives. We cannot limit God to sacred activities and places and things, because he lives in us and dwells among us.

Finally, then we looked to try and harmonise these two dimensions of holiness. How do we balance separation from the unclean with dedication to loving our neighbour who may be unclean, to be in the world but not of the world? Not in a holier-than-thou way, like the chief priests and the scribes and the Pharisees, though that’s so much easier and cleaner to do. But rather, to be like Jesus, the friend of publicans and sinners, touching and teaching. This is messy and uncomfortable, and so much harder. We must be both the light of the world on a hill and also the salt of the earth in the valley of humanity. Lastly — and remember this! — that when your religion prevents you from loving your neighbour, you need to change your religion. When as priests and Levites we pass by on the other side, our separation is only uni-dimensional like leprosy and darkness.

Let’s close with a prayer from our hymn book (Hymn 163)

Take my life and let it be consecrated Lord to thee.

Take my moments and my days, let them flow in ceaseless praise.

Take my hands and let them move, at the impulse of thy love.

Take my feet and let them be, swift and beautiful for thee.

Take my voice and let me sing, always only for my King.

Take my lips and let them be filled with messages for thee.

Take my silver and my gold, not a mite would I withhold.

Take my intellect and use every power, as thou shalt choose.

Take my will and make it thine, it shall be no longer mine.

Take my heart it is thine own, it shall be thy royal throne.

Take my love, my Lord I pour at thy feet its treasure store.

Take myself and I will be ever only all for thee.