

Lesson 3

Holiness

The Holiness of God

People today have varying opinions about what God is like. Some see Him as a grandfatherly type who dotes on His earthly "grandchildren." Others see Him as a celestial Santa Claus who checks His list (twice, of course) and grants the wishes of all who have been "good." On the other hand, there are many who view God as a demanding tyrant with thunderbolt in hand awaiting their smallest misstep, so He can condemn them with judgment. But in order to discover the true character of God, we must turn to His Word. Overwhelmingly the Bible describes God not in terms of His love or His justice, but in terms of His holiness. What do these verses tell us about God?

Exodus 15:11

1 Samuel 2:2

Psalms 29:2

Psalms 77:13

Psalms 93:5

Psalm 99:5

Isaiah 5:16

Isaiah 6:3

Isaiah 40:25

Isaiah 43:15

“Holiness” is a term that is often used to describe God’s actions — His love, justice, mercy, forgiveness, compassion, righteousness, and moral perfection all rolled up into one word. Everything God does is morally pure, perfect to the highest degree — holy. It is important to remember, though, that God’s actions flow from His character. His actions are holy because at the essence of His being, He Himself is holy.

Inherent in the concept of holiness is the idea of separation. The word holy, or “sanctified,” literally means “set apart.” As you read through the Old Testament passages describing the holiness of God, you probably sensed that the Israelites viewed God as separate from all His creation: There is no one to compare to Him; He is exalted in His Holy Place; He deserves reverential fear, worship, praise and glory. God’s perfect holiness (in action and character) placed Him on a different plane than His earthly creation. The concept of holiness was so important to the understanding of God’s character and plan

that God set out to teach His people Israel what it meant. And the first aspect of holiness He taught them was that of separation.

The Holiness of Israel

As God began to reveal Himself to the early Israelites, He had them construct a portable temple, or “tabernacle” (the word literally meant “dwelling place”), where they could come to worship Him. God’s presence dwelled in the tabernacle in a tangible way. Any article used for the worship of God in the tabernacle was “set apart” or “made separate” for that purpose — it became “holy” or “sanctified.” Likewise, anyone or anything that came into the presence of the Lord also became holy. In the following verses, what objects were holy?

Exodus 3:5

Exodus 19:23

Exodus 29:37

Exodus 30:26-30

Exodus 40:9

Leviticus 27:9

Leviticus 27:30

Numbers 6:5

2 Chronicles 8:11

What else was to be consecrated as holy to the Lord?

Deuteronomy 7:6

Deuteronomy 14:2

Deuteronomy 28:9

God wanted them to understand that as a people they were to be separate from the world and were to be consecrated to His service. But God also wanted them to understand the ethical dimension of holiness, that they were also to be pure and clean. In Leviticus 10:10, God required Aaron and his sons (priests) to “distinguish between the _____ and the common, between the unclean and the _____.” And so God gave to the Israelite tribes various rules and regulations concerning clean and unclean foods, mildews, rashes, etc.— regulations that touched every area of daily life. Everything Israel did and every object within the nation’s borders was to be clean, pure and holy (which also served to completely separate them from the surrounding nations). God was trying to teach them what holiness was all about. It meant being as separate from the world as God was; being as morally pure and clean as God expected them to be. What do these verses reveal about God’s requirement for His people?

Leviticus 11:44-45

Leviticus 19:2

Leviticus 20:26

For God's people, then, holiness meant being pure and sanctified — constantly separated or set apart for God's service. A holy person followed God's rules, avoided anything unclean, and, in a sense, lived every moment of his life under God's control. But it wasn't legalistic rule-keeping that made them holy. How do these verses show that a right relationship with God was a prerequisite for holiness?

Exodus 31:13

Leviticus 20:7-8

Leviticus 22:31-33

Deuteronomy 28:9

It was God who made His people holy. They were capable of being holy in their actions, but God required them to also be holy in their character. They couldn't do that by their own willpower or determination. Remember, their hearts were plagued with "original sin," an inclination to sin inherited from Adam. As long as they submitted to God's rule, they continued to be holy. But, in time, the ritual overshadowed the relationship and the Israelites found themselves struggling to be holy without God. Try as they might to follow God's commands, their hearts continually led them astray. Look up the following verses to see how the Israelites were characterized.

Deuteronomy 9:6

Isaiah 29:13

Jeremiah 5:23

Jeremiah 7:24, 26

Jeremiah 11:7-8

Ezekiel 33:31

God is holy in His actions and His character, and He requires His people to be holy. He tried to teach them through various laws that holiness meant separation and ethical purity and was contingent on a continued relationship with Him. But the inclinations of their hearts were evil and they soon forsook the Lord. The problem was sin. Remember that in Genesis 3:15 God had promised that He would send One (the seed of the woman) who would eventually crush the serpent's head, thereby conquering sin and freeing mankind from the penalty and power of sin. Israel's predicament would not be permanent. God had a plan. What promises did God make in the Old Testament that pointed to the work of Jesus Christ in the New Testament?

Jeremiah 31:31-34

Jeremiah 32:38-40

Ezekiel 36:24-27

Ezekiel 37:11-14

Ezekiel 37:22-28

Zechariah 3:9

The Holiness of Christians

When we get to the New Testament we see that God still demands holiness from His people. He had promised to give them a new heart and life, and now He fulfills that promise through Jesus Christ. In the Sermon on the Mount (Matthew 5-7) Jesus taught that we have a responsibility not just to obey the letter of the law, but to have an inward holiness of character that determines our actions. Not only are we to avoid outward sins like adultery and murder, but we are also to be free of inward sins like lust and anger. It was Christ's death on the cross and His victory over sin and death that finally made

holiness — in character as well as in actions — attainable for the people of God. What do these New Testament verses say about God's requirement of holiness?

Romans 12:1-2

2 Corinthians 7:1

Ephesians 1:4

Ephesians 4:22-24

1 Thessalonians 4:3, 7

Hebrews 12:10

Hebrews 12:14

1 Peter 1:15

In Lesson 1, you learned that when we are born again, we are remade from the inside out. We are given a new heart and a new life — and the power to *not* sin. We are able to be holy in our actions because God makes it possible for us to be holy in our character, just as He is. As God's holy people, we're expected to be pure and clean in our actions because we have been made pure and clean in our character. What do these verses say about the Christian and sin?

John 8:34-36

Galatians 5:24

Colossians 3:5, 10

2 Timothy 2:21-22

1 John 3:8b-9

1 John 5:18

What insights do these verses add?

2 Corinthians 5:17

Galatians 2:20

1 Timothy 4:7

Titus 2:11-12

It should be readily apparent to you from these verses that holiness is a rather complicated virtue. In one sense, we are made holy or sanctified (set apart) the moment we give our hearts to Christ. We have power over sin and no longer consciously choose to practice sin as a life-style. We are ethically pure and separate from the world. But, just as salvation involves a continual, daily decision to walk with Christ, there is also a process in attaining holiness. We must train ourselves to be godly and pursue holiness. There is a constant, daily growing in righteousness as we learn more about God and His holiness and strive to become more like Him.

But why is it that Christians often find themselves trapped in sin? Why do some Christians struggle with sinful habits if they're supposed to be holy? Even in the Scripture passages we just studied, why are the writers telling *Christians* to crucify their old selves and put on the new? Isn't that what happens when we're born again?

The answer to these questions varies by denomination. Some teach that we'll never be free from our sinful natures as long as we live on this earth. They teach that there is constant warfare between the old and the new natures, with the old often winning. But to

say that Christ didn't come to free us from the power of sin now or that He is unable to cleanse us from *all* unrighteousness would be a distortion of biblical truth.

Late in his ministry, when the Apostle Paul was writing a summation of the entire Christian experience in a letter to the church at Rome, he discussed this dilemma of sinning Christians and the new life we have in Christ. Stop now and read Romans chapter six. What does this chapter tell us about the old, sinful nature?

Romans 6:2

Romans 6:6

Romans 6:20-22

It is a biblical fact, then, that those who have come to Christ are free from sin and their old natures have been crucified. There aren't two natures, but one. In chapter seven, Paul explains what life was like before Christ, when he knew God's law but was unable to obey it — when he was still a slave to sin. Read Romans 7:14-21. What was life like for Paul before Christ?

The problem for many Christians is that they stop their reading in Romans at chapter 7. They read about Paul's experience and assume that it is the normal Christian experience, and so they have an "excuse" for continuing to sin. But Paul is trying to say just the opposite. He ends chapter seven with the cry, "Who will rescue me from this body of

death?" (v. 24). And he answers himself in the next verse, "Thanks be to God — through Jesus Christ our Lord!" He sums up chapter seven by telling us that, as a pious Jew seeking to follow God's commandments laid out in the Old Testament, he had been a slave to God's law in his mind (that is, he had sincerely wanted to be obedient to God's laws), but his sinful nature was a slave to the law of sin. This is the same dilemma we found when we looked at Israel in the Old Testament. Though they tried to be holy in their actions, something was flawed in their character that constantly pulled them away from God.

Read Romans 8:1-17. According to Romans 8:2, what does Christ do for us?

What do these verses say about the person who lives according to the sinful nature?

Romans 8:6

Romans 8:7

Romans 8:8

Romans 8:13

Write out Romans 8:9

Here is a vital key to the holy life: God has given us His Holy Spirit to live in us and guide us into a holy life. Just as the Israelites were unable to be holy apart from a relationship with God, so, too, the Christian must constantly submit to the Spirit in order to walk in holiness. It is God who sanctifies us and purifies our hearts through the continual working of His Holy Spirit. What do these verses say about the work of the Holy Spirit in our lives and about our holiness?

Romans 8:11

Romans 8:14

Romans 8:15-16

Romans 8:26-27

Galatians 5:16

Galatians 5:22-23

1 Thessalonians 5:23-24

2 Thessalonians 2:13

Titus 2:14

Philippians 2:13

Jude 1:24

Perhaps the problem with many Christians is that (1) they haven't completely committed their lives to Christ, and so they really are trapped in the powerless situation of Romans 7:14-21; or (2) they just haven't realized that they are truly free and have power available to them, and so they allow themselves to continue in their old, sinful habits. This is why Paul implores his readers in Romans chapter six to start living out their experience, to appropriate what has been made available to them. Reread Romans 6:11-14. Paul says that they should count themselves dead to sin (realize that they are, and start acting like it!) and not allow sin to reign. The power is there for us, but we have to appropriate it; we have to surrender ourselves to the Spirit's control and say "no" to sin every time. It becomes for us a decision of the will.

Just as God's holiness is the sum total of all His attributes, and His holy actions are the overflow of a holy character, so it can be for Christians. Holiness is more than just conforming to God's standards on the outside; it is allowing His Spirit to fill our hearts so completely that we are pure on the inside, too. When we consecrate ourselves to God (completely set ourselves apart for Him and submit our will to His) and allow His Holy Spirit free rein in our lives, we become holy in a more complete sense than we are when we're first saved. Holiness dominates our lives and becomes the overwhelming quality of our character. Some call this experience "entire sanctification" or "Christian perfection." The person who has experienced this level of holiness has a deep love for God and others, and every intention of his or her heart is motivated by that love. What do these verses reveal about the necessity of love for God and others in the Christian life?

Deuteronomy 6:5

Matthew 22:36-40

Romans 13:8, 10

1 Corinthians 13:1-3

Galatians 5:6

Colossians 3:14

1 Peter 1:22

1 John 4:16-17

From these passages it is easy to see why holiness in Christians has often been defined as “loving God with all our heart, mind, soul and strength and loving others as ourselves.” Love appears to be the overwhelming expression of holiness in our lives. In the middle of the Sermon on the Mount, Jesus cautioned that our love must be different from the love of the world. We are to love even our enemies. And He concluded with a statement that sounds very similar to several we read from the Old Testament. Write out Matthew 5:48.

God isn't calling us to absolute perfection, because only He is perfect in that sense. The word perfect means whole or complete, and God does call us to perfect love for Him and for others. Romans 5:5 says that “...God has poured out his love into our hearts by the Holy Spirit, whom he has given us” (*NIV*). The Holy Spirit enables us to love others with the very love of God, thereby making us perfect as He is perfect. What do these verses say about perfection?

2 Corinthians 13:9

Colossians 1:28

Hebrews 10:14

1 John 4:18

God's will has always been for His people to be holy. Don't settle for anything less. Allow God's Holy Spirit to control your life and keep you free from sin. "Finally brothers, good-bye. Aim for perfection, listen to my appeal, be of one mind, live in peace. And the God of love and peace will be with you" (2 Corinthians 13:11 *NIV*).