

Holiness

Lev 11:45, "I am the LORD, who brought you up out of Egypt to be your God; therefore, be holy, because I am holy."

Question: How does a person become holy?

Key Verses: Exodus 19:6; 1 Pet 2:5, 9; 2 Cor 7:1

There is hardly a word in the English language that elicits more religious images than "holiness." That's appropriate, I suppose, since the word is used in the Bible for all kinds of religious objects: The temple, priests, sacred vestments, anointing oil, sanctuary utensils, animal sacrifices, etc. Virtually everything that a priest touched in order to carry out his religious duties was labeled holy somewhere in the Bible. Even so, equating "holiness" with "religious purity" is a bit misleading. At its root, the word "holiness" does not primarily designate "sacred" as much as it means "selected." This is an important distinction that ultimately will affect how you view yourself as a Christian and a child of God. So let's talk about that.

The Proclamation of Holiness

What makes an object or a person "holy"? Is it the fact that it/he/she is morally superior? Is it that it/he/she is unique or otherworldly? Not necessarily. Holiness "happens" when God takes ordinary objects and claims them for his proprietary purpose. For example, an ordinary plot of ground can become sacred if God shows up there. An ordinary animal, set aside for sacrifice, suddenly becomes consecrated. A person elected by Yahweh becomes a priest or a prophet, a coin becomes a tithe, and a building becomes a temple. Why? This is important. Those objects become sacred, not because their nature becomes different but their purpose becomes different. In one moment they were ordinary, openly accessed by anyone. In the next moment, God claims the object or person for his own purposes.

There is nothing magically transformed in its physical properties. It is still the same "stuff". Holiness happens when God proclaims, not when a person performs. This is vital to understand. We must lay hold of that truth if we are to correctly assess our significance and position with God. Our holiness is God's gift to us, not our gift to him. Holiness is received, not achieved. Is holiness something you practice? Is it a description of your action? Well, of course it is. However, the practice of holiness is a result of the proclamation of holiness, not the reverse way around. When we attempt to achieve holiness by transforming our behavior, it will inevitably result in hypocrisy, duplicity, guilt, judgmentalism, and arrogance (a strange co-mixture of incongruous attributes for sure). It is only when God's declaration of our holiness—our set-apart-ness—sinks into our souls that our actions are transformed to align with his character and nature.

The idea that holiness is received not achieved should not come as such a shock. Every one of us does the same thing with ordinary and personal objects. Take a tooth brush as an example. It is an ordinary object that could have dozens of potential uses. Yet once you put it in your mouth you suddenly get all kinds of upset if anyone else uses it for anything else. Again, take an ordinary bolt of white linen fabric, fashion it into a garment, drape it on a bride, and it becomes irreverent to wear it on a morning jog. Or take an ordinary dish, paint petite roses on it, call it China, and suddenly no one feels comfortable placing it on a TV tray. Why? Because when ordinary objects are sanctified for special service, they become “out of bounds” or to use biblical terminology: “holy”.

Just to ensure we are on the same page before moving on, let me state this as clearly as I can. You are not holy because of your performance but because of God’s proclamation. You don’t become holy through religious rites or extreme sacrifices. You don’t develop holiness through sheer discipline or personal improvement. You become holy the millisecond God places his hand on you and says, “MINE”. With that in mind, let’s read our key verse: Leviticus 11:45 says, “I am the LORD, who brought you up out of Egypt to be your God; therefore, be holy, because I am holy.”

Notice that the declaration was based on God’s election, not Israel’s action. Of all the nations on earth, of all the various ethnic groups, God placed his hand on Israel and said, “MINE”. From that moment, they were set apart for his service, chosen as his people. That declaration made them holy. Due to that fact, each Israelite was sacred, thus capable to perform priestly duties. As Exodus 19:6 says, “You will be for me a kingdom of priests and a holy nation.” Were they? Not so much! Indeed, they had thousands of Priests as well as Levites, and later Pharisees and Sadducees. Nonetheless, the common Israelite was not involved in sacred service. Why? Because they expected someone “special” to stand between them and God as a mediator. Surely the average person can’t just waltz up to God and pray. Surely the commoner can’t offer a sacrifice or connect with the Divine! If holiness is based on previous action, then they were justified. If, however, holiness rests on God’s election, then they were sadly mistaken.

Israel neglected her divine calling. That was true then, it is true now. God always intended for every God-follower to have intimate access and a sacred purpose. In the New Testament, after Jesus’ death and resurrection, one of his key leaders, the Apostle Peter, repeated the ordinance of Exodus only this time he applied it to the Church—Israel under Jesus: 1 Peter 2:9 “But you are a chosen people, a royal priesthood, a holy nation, God’s special possession, that you may declare the praises of him who called you out of darkness into his wonderful light.” What does this mean? Has God *replaced* Israel with the church? NO...emphatically No. The Church has not replaced Israel but fulfilled her ultimate destiny. We who call Jesus Lord have been grafted into Israel and thereby adopted into Abraham’s lineage. Our God-given access in prayer, with the Holy Spirit, and through the blood of Jesus is merely an acceptance and

fulfillment of the original intention of God to grant sacred status to every Israelite who follows him. In many ways, this takes us back to the Garden of Eden when we could walk with God in the cool of the day. Holiness is thus central to God's plan of salvation that has been unfolding since Genesis three. Furthermore, it is the ultimate destiny of the church as portrayed in the book of Revelation: 20:6, "Blessed and holy are those who share in the first resurrection. The second death has no power over them, but they will be priests of God and of Christ and will reign with him for a thousand years" (see also Revelation 1:6; 5:10).

The Practice of Holiness

Holiness happens when God shows up. It is first his presence and then his proclamation that makes us holy. Thereafter, our actions align with God's declaration so that our lives represent the nature and character of the God who set us apart. When we get that backwards, a brand of insidious and inevitable legalism ensues. We attempt to earn God's grace rather than allowing his grace to transform us. Conversely, when the practice of holiness is a natural response of gratitude and awe at God's choosing of us, our holiness becomes an obedience marked by humility, wholeness, and liberation. Such holiness is attractive, even enviable, to a watching world. This is the heartbeat of 2 Timothy 1:9, "God has saved us and called us to a holy life—not because of anything we have done but because of his own purpose and grace. This grace was given us in Christ Jesus before the beginning of time."

So what does this kind of holiness look like? Have you ever watched a young man fall in love? Video games give way to romantic walks. Microwaved meals are replaced with candle-lit dinners. ESPN...no wait, somethings are already sacred. Nevertheless, you get the picture. You don't have to guilt trip or strong arm a lover. They alter their behavior out of affection, appreciation, and honor. Jake was one of those. He was a naturally likeable kid. Something in his personality made him a blast to be around. Unfortunately, his father wasn't around. This didn't make him bitter, just unwise. So throughout high school he always opted for the shortest route to immediate pleasure. Because he was the life of the party he opted for the party life. As one might suspect, sports came easy, girls came easy, and drugs came easy, which doesn't make life easy. Jake spent most of his high school days high with a low-grade buzz that became a raging rave on the weekends. His story is not so uncommon. His meeting with Jesus was common. Nothing in the details are dramatic – no CNN headliners. A friend invited him to a summer camp for Christian Youth. Without access to his normal paraphernalia, he heard the simple message of the Gospel with a clear head. Jake made a decision to follow Jesus. He was immediately marked and eternally sanctified. As his circle of friends changed, so did Jake's pleasures and pastimes. Again, this is not one of those crazy grace stories with a miraculous intervention. It is simply the normal process of meeting someone who wins your heart. For Jake, his choice to give up drugs, sex, and drinking was not a hard-fought struggle. It was like pushing aside a salad when the steak comes to the table—no brainer.

Paul puts it this way, “Therefore, I urge you, brothers and sisters, in view of God’s mercy, to offer your bodies as a living sacrifice, holy and pleasing to God—this is your true and proper worship. Do not conform to the pattern of this world, but be transformed by the renewing of your mind. Then you will be able to test and approve what God’s will is—his good, pleasing and perfect will” (Romans 12:1–2).

Sometimes holiness is a challenge: when we are faced with an immediate pleasure or a delayed reward. However, when an actionable choice of holiness confronts us, the difficulty is not in the decision but the delay. The decision is easy. Sex tonight or a strong marriage later? Speak my mind now or build a relationship later? Steal now and lose my dignity later? These are not hard decisions. The difficulty is in the delay—that nagging “later”. When we wrestle with holiness, it is not because we really believe what the world has on offer is better. It is because we don’t believe either the presence or the proclamation of God is reality. This bears repeating. Each individual decision we make to abandon the practice of holiness is because we don’t believe that God is present now or that he will fulfill his promise later. This is why Paul urged holiness in light of God’s promises. 2 Corinthians 7:1 “Therefore, since we have these promises, dear friends, let us purify ourselves from everything that contaminates body and spirit, perfecting holiness out of reverence for God.”

In the light of (and the heat of), our present society, the call to holiness seems somewhat prudish and over-scrupulous. From the eternal perspective, however, in light of God’s own holiness, any sacrifice we make of temporal satisfaction is trifling. True, we sacrifice now in order to receive a reward. But even more true are these two solemn truths: (1) God’s ways are better ways. They lead to the greatest happiness a person can achieve on earth. (2) We seek holiness, not because of what we gain from it, but because we are in eternal debt to God who created us, redeemed us and thus owns us with a double portion. You, my Christian friends, belong to God. Live like it in a corrupt world. Rejoice in it with a heavenly audience. Count on it for eternity comes quickly.

Key Points:

- Holiness is in your election not in your action.
- Israel was called to be a kingdom of priests. The Church fulfilled that vocation where Israel failed.
- Righteous behavior is the appropriate and natural response for one called to a noble life given to God’s purpose.

Action Step: Seek out a place to serve voluntarily so you can tap into God’s purpose for you.

Further Resources: Jerry Bridges, [*The Pursuit of Holiness*](#) (NavPress, 1978).